Creating Flow: Signposting

Written by: Tony Eng
Script and Art by: Jaeko Kim
Thanks to Mitchell Hwang
Brought to you by MIT EEGS
Every time I give a talk, my audience has trouble following along. Can you suggest something that I could use to guide them through my talk?

What’s this? A request for help.

Let’s see... what could we do?

The fact that you can be driving in a place you’ve never been and know for sure you’re heading in the right direction without stopping for directions or even slowing down to read a message is a testament to the power of a smart system of signs.
Aha! Why not verbal signposting? That'd help an audience navigate a talk. It can glue together a collection of talking points into a coherent story by providing structure and organization.

I'll create a signposting glue...

...made up of examples!

These talk snippets I collected will come in handy.
In today's talk, we are going to look at... and how it affects...

Let's see... Ah yes. The introduction of a talk. That's signposting.

What else... transitions from one point to the next help with flow. That's also signposting.

Having talked about X, let's see how X affects our understanding of the dynamics of... (with the conclusion being the granddaddy summary of them all).

And summaries. Signposting summarizes what was just talked about, giving your audience a chance to check their understanding so far and time to mentally breathe. Let's pause and see if we can understand this on another level.
There! Introductions, transitions, and conclusions!

Don’t forget enumerations. An enumeration does three things:

There are three properties that I want to focus on:
First, second, finally... third.

Hmm... It’s still missing something.

First, it lets your audience know how many points you are going to make.

Second, it clearly demarcates the end of one point from the start of the next

(Because sometimes it can be unclear when a speaker has moved on).

And third, it helps the audience track your progress through your list...

(And even your talk, with the outline of a presentation being an enumeration for the entire talk).
AND BECAUSE PRESENTATIONS ARE INHERENTLY “LINEAR”, A SPEAKER CAN USE SIGNPOSTING TO LINEARIZE A NON-LINEAR TOPIC BY VERBALLY DESCRIBING HOW DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE TALK ARE INTERCONNECTED AND RELATED.

LET'S TRY ADDING MORE EXAMPLES FOR VARIETY.

BEFORE WE CONTINUE, I'D LIKE TO STEP BACK AND GIVE SOME CONTEXT.

FILE IT AWAY AND LET'S DIGRESS FOR A MINUTE AND RECALL THE PRINCIPLE OF X FAMILIAR STATE THAT.

THE NEXT STEP IS CRITICAL—WE HAVE TO ADD THESE POTIONS IN A PARTICULAR ORDER.

1st

BEFORE WE CONTINUE I'D LIKE TO STEP BACK AND GIVE SOME CONTEXT.

FILE THAT AWAY AND LET'S DIGRESS FOR A MINUTE AND RECALL THE PRINCIPLE OF X FAMILIAR STATE.

2nd

3rd

ALMOST THERE, THERE'S ONE MORE EXAMPLE OF SIGNPOSTING. WHAT WAS IT?
Ah yes... Verbal Underlining! I just used it!

The next step is critical—we have to add these potions in a particular order.

Verbal underlining draws attention to the next point, explicitly highlighting it from a sea of words.

Its use can also help regain the attention of an inflected (inattentive) audience.
In short, if you took the transcript of a good technical talk, what’s left would mostly be signposting. It is a smart system of signs. It guides your audience through your talk. It helps the audience know where the talk is heading, what has been covered so far, and how the next point relates to a previous point.

It is especially important for longer technical talks.

Use it.