

# Succeeding at Table Topics

*This handout was adapted by Michael Aron, ACS, CL, from various sources including material prepared by Marie Murphy DTM for presentation at the District 70 Annual Conference, 2000, and Impromptu Speaking by Kim Chamberlain, Toastmasters New Zealand.*

Table Topics can be the most challenging and frightening portion of a Toastmaster's meeting – but with a little preparation, everyone can be a pro at Table Topics. There are a number of ways to tame table topics. Listed below are some strategies you can practice and use.

Most of the talking we do on a daily basis is impromptu speaking, and so if we can learn how to assemble knowledge and thoughts on any topic at a moment's notice, we will benefit by:

- Being able to think on our feet in meetings, conversations, and many other settings
- Having greater confidence when giving prepared talks, because we know that if we 'lose our place', we can talk intelligently on an impromptu basis for a short while till we're back on track
- Being more skilled in social situations

## Impromptu Speaking Tips

### Know what is going on

Outside the meeting, **keep informed** of the news, current affairs and other events; know about the latest TV hit, what's happening in sports, good books to read and so on. The more widely you read – newspapers and magazines can be very helpful – the broader your knowledge of different subjects.

### Be Mentally Prepared

When you are in a meeting keep on top of what is going on, and every now and then think 'What would I say now if called on to give my views? What aspect would I cover? How would I phrase it?' This will help you be calm and collected when you are called on, because you will have mentally practiced many talks you've never given.

### Start with an Example

You may want to talk about an incident from your life that relates to the topic and has a human-interest angle. Ahead of time, think of four or five stories about your life each of which make some kind of point. Did you overcome some hardship? Do you do any volunteer work? Did you accomplish something significant? Was there a humorous incident you would like to share? Organize each story into a mini speech with an opening, middle and closing. When your Table Topics question comes, see if one of your stories fits the question, even remotely. Then use one of the techniques below, such as "Divert Attention" to relate your story to the topic question.

The advantages are:

- It's something familiar to you, and it can reassure you when you most need it - during your first few moments
- You won't have to think so hard about your next sentence as experiences are easy to remember
- You'll get into the swing of speaking and reduce your nerves
- You'll get the audience's attention

### Take Time

Take some time to get your ideas together - you don't need to give your reply immediately. This not only gives you a few seconds to work out your response, but also gives the impression you are making sure you'll say something worthwhile.

### Be Animated

If you are externally animated, it has a beneficial effect on your mental processes, as physical activity and the mind are closely related. If your body is animated, your mind functions at a lively pace.

### Practice

The best way to improve is to practice regularly. Effective impromptu speaking, like most skills, requires some work and practice. This is why Table Topics is such a valuable exercise!

Practice situations include:

- Trying to answer television interview questions as if you were the one being interviewed.
- Providing a short status report to your co-worker before giving that status to your boss.
- Briefly talking to an acquaintance during an elevator ride or walking on the street.
- Talking to people at a party or other social situation.

## Specific Techniques for Addressing Table Topics

There are many methods you can choose to organize your response to a table topic. Here are some that you can practice in table topics sessions:

### Give The 411

We have all heard that when describing an event, we should give the basic facts - who, what, when, where, why and how. For example, given the question "Describe your most memorable sporting event," you could respond with what (soccer world cup), when (last summer), where (a party at my best friend's house), why (my first soccer party), and how (rented a big screen TV). By the time you fully described all those parts, you've given a concise 1-2 minute response.

### Divide & Conquer

Organization is important because prevents communication from turning into word soup. Clear divisions are essential to an orderly arrangement. Some of the classic two or three way divisions are: past, present, future; that was then, this is now; low, medium, high; cost, benefit; financial cost, social cost; civil law, moral law; problem, solution; thesis, antithesis; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; us, them; ideal, real; what we want, what we can get; mind, body. The list can go on

### Narrow the Focus

Sometimes the topic is just too big to tackle as a whole. Take this example, "Describe your most memorable birthday?" Some related, narrower, topics are most memorable party or gift or card or date. To begin, acknowledge the original question and then use a bridge device to get to your narrower version. For example, "There are a lot of things that make a birthday memorable. My most memorable gift was..."

### Divert Attention

This is the quintessential politician's response. Take, for example, a very controversial subject: "What is your stance on abortion?" Divert attention to a related question. "My personal views are not as relevant as why this is a divisive issue." Then talk about the related question. Sometimes, you may want to avoid the original topic entirely. You could respond, "Your question is very important, however, today I am much more interested in education." And there is always, "A very good question which reminds me of ..."

### Tell a Lie

What happens when you have no experience at all with the subject of the question? You can give up and sit down or use the question as an opportunity to stretch your imagination. If you are given the question, "What is the biggest fish you have caught?," and you have never been fishing, you could just make up a fishing trip. Or notify your audience that you are letting your imagination run wild, "I've never caught a fish, but I imagine that ... " Be descriptive and detailed.

### Ramble On

Sometimes, you can discover something very interesting about the topic at hand by using a brainstorming or stream of consciousness approach. Start by restating the question. Then make the first comment that comes into your mind. Then say the next thing that you are reminded of. As you approach the end of your time, restate the best point you made the original question.

### Elaborate

Sometimes the subject isn't the problem, it's the time. One sure-fire way to put more interest in your speech and to extend the time is to give more elaborate descriptions. Instead of "the bird" try "the green and yellow bird that took delight in singing at the first sign of dawn."

### Point, Reason, Example, Point

This method is probably the one most of us naturally use. In opening you state a point for example, Farmers welcome sunshine after rain. In the body of the topic you outline reasons for stating this and illustrate with examples. Your conclusion restates the point you first made.

### Key word

As you listen to the table topic a particular word or words may strike you for example Humpty Dumpty. You may choose build a theme or an anecdote around the particular word(s).