

Tips on making
the most of these
long two minutes
of Table Topics.

Dazzle in a Minute:

Conquer Table Topics Phobia

I have watched even seasoned speakers stand petrified when they are asked to speak during Table Topics in our club. In fact, I have often been one of those speakers. Table Topics has a way of making us realize how long a passing minute can be! However, over the last few years, I have amassed a sizable number of my club's Table Topics awards and have learned a few tricks along the way. Here are just a few:

1 Begin by greeting the audience: Many speakers focus so much on the topic they are given that they miss this essential step. Always remember to acknowledge the audience. Throw in a smile. In addition to making a great first impression, this strategy can buy you time to gather information on the topic from the vast confines of your mind.

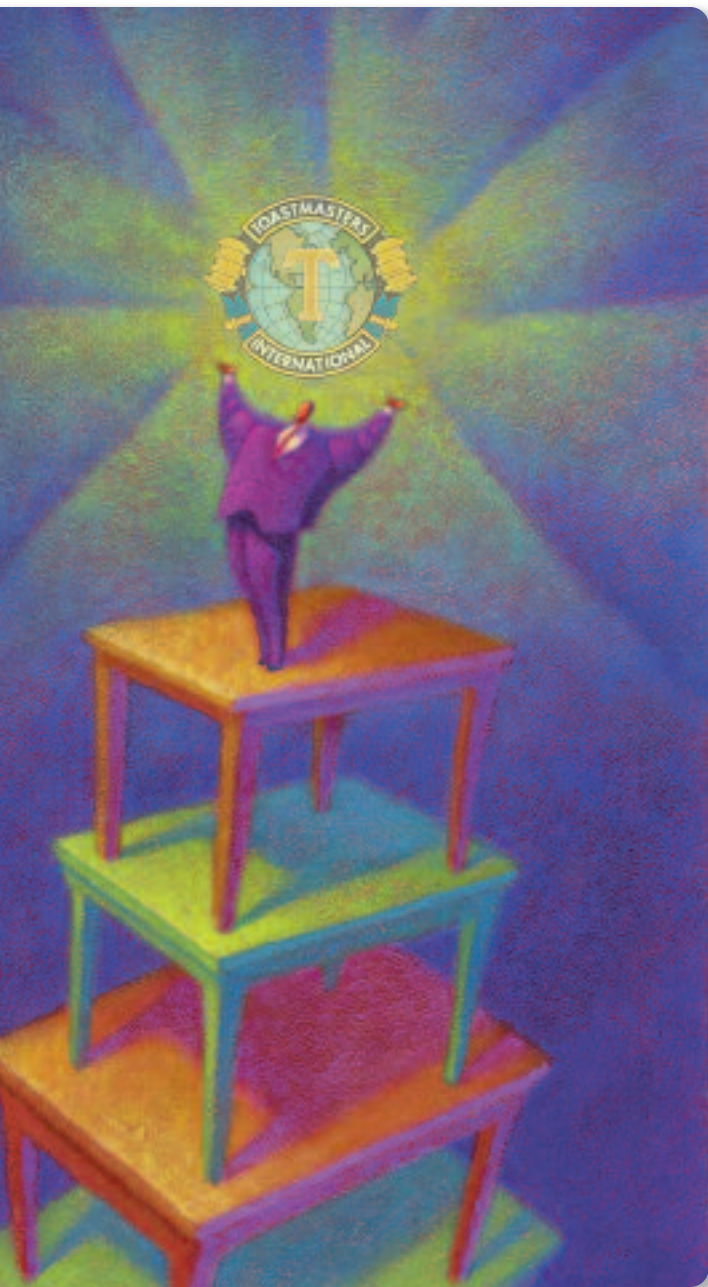
2 Buy yourself time: A common strategy is to repeat the question or topic. "What do I think of a flat tax rate?" Take a deep breath and speak slowly and clearly. Others include statements such as, "I never considered that question until now." Be careful not to get tiresome and monotonous by overdoing this step.

3 Stay informed: While it is impossible to be knowledgeable about every topic under the sun, a little preparation can take you a long way. This strategy can also make you more interesting as a person. Use the Internet, the corner bookstore and the local library to constantly build your knowledge on subjects that interest you. Even better, make it a point to find out more about subjects you are not familiar with. Stay on top of local, national and international news, politics, the economy, new trends, the latest movies, plays, music and books. I've often had the "coincidence" of being asked to speak about a subject that I recently read about. Follow this up with the next step:

4 Create a repository of topics: Build a list of topics you could use to challenge your club members when it is your turn to be the Topics Master. Then move to steps #5 and 6.

5 Cultivate a passionate opinion: Some of the most informed people can come across as lifeless data machines. Parrot-like, they use the same words they hear in a news bulletin, or they recount word-for-word an article they have read. The next time you stumble on an interesting article or even watch the news, make sure that you have not bought into the views of the person(s) who presented you with the information. The more passionate and original you are, the better your performance as a speaker will be.

6 Practice: This step is closely tied to steps #3, 4 and 5. You have a list of topics and you have an opinion on all of them. Now, practice as if you were asked to speak on one of them. Sooner or later, one of those



topics may surface at a Table Topics session near you.

7 Find Flow: With a mix of creativity and passion, a master speaker smoothly glides into a speech on a topic that has been presented to her only moments ago. She seems to have reached Zen. She gives the impression that she has somehow prepared for this topic for weeks.

For this step I have no advice. This usually happens when you diligently follow all the steps outlined here and add a lot of practice. It is the union of knowledge, creativity and experience.

8 Work your imagination muscles:

During Table Topics, we develop the necessary skills to think on our feet. For this, a fertile imagination is a vital ingredient. You could use your imagination to create a tall tale, contemplate the future or formulate an opinion on any subject. Once again, I have few words of advice for this step. It's *your* imagination. Use it any way you can.

When all else fails, use the following methods: These are strategies that have worked for me some of the time. A word of caution here: Do not use these strategies too often. Part of mastering Table Topics is to mix creativity and unpredictability. When used sparingly, these methods can be very effective during Table Topics sessions:

9 The Link Method:

Remember the game you played as a child: The person before you said 'candy.' Then you said 'candy, dragon.' Then the person after you said "Candy, dragon, car." Then the person after him said "candy, dragon, car, apple." Well, you get the idea. That was the memory game. You could use a similar strategy in Table Topics. This method has worked well for me a few times. If you are the fifth speaker in a meeting, then you create a story linking all the topics presented before your topic and make that your speech. This strategy obviously works best when you

are one of the last speakers in the Table Topics session.

10 The Segue: Table Topics are not carved in stone. You may be called upon to speak about a subject you do not wish to talk about. Then use "the Segue." It can be a subtle shift from the presented topic. It could also be a blatant statement, such as, "I don't have an opinion on the war with Iraq, but let me tell you what happened at my workplace today."

I have often seen several master speakers use this technique very effectively. This way you can speak about any subject of your choosing. Be careful not to make this a habit. Remember that one of the main goals of the Table Topics session is to get you thinking quickly on the subject that you are presented with.

11 The Roast: Sometimes you could use a topic you are presented with to make good-natured fun of one or more of the members of your club. If a topic is frivolous enough, the Table Topics master himself could be a potential victim. I must caution you that you must use this strategy only if the target of your roast is a close friend or acquaintance (with a sense of humor). Poking fun at someone you do not know well may have disastrous results. On the other hand, if used cautiously, roasting could win you a lot of applause.

There is no single silver bullet to handle a Table Topic. There will still be times when you will be baffled speechless with a challenging topic. Nevertheless, you can have a much better strike rate with Table Topics using some of the strategies outlined here and creating a few of your own.

It's your turn now. Speak up! This is your time to dazzle. **T**

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