

Table Topics

Table Topics provide an opportunity to practise impromptu speaking skills. A table topic is a question asked without notice on a particular theme or subject. The person receiving the topic must gather their thoughts, organise them quickly, then speak for 1 – 2 minutes.

There are many occasions when, with very short notice, you may need to use the spoken word to offer an opinion on something, to convince others that a particular argument is valid, or even to persuade others about a proposed course of action.

The more clearly, the more concisely the more fluently you can express yourself, the more effectively you will be able to get your message across in such situations, then the more credible you appear to your listeners.

The table topic session is a very useful method for practising impromptu speaking. Through table topics you can learn how to present your thoughts in a clear, organised manner even though you have little notice of the subject upon which you are called to speak. Table topics can also help you to listen constructively and to think flexibly.

Although your response to a table topic will be spontaneous, you need not be unprepared. Certainly you will not know what subject you will have to address before the table topic question is asked but you can be prepared when the time comes. Preparation will also help reduce any fear and nervousness you may feel about the table topics segment of the Toastmasters meeting.

Preparing to speak impromptu

Although it may seem contradictory to talk of preparation in terms of impromptu speaking, there are certain steps you can take to ensure that you are TABLE TOPIC READY. Your preparation takes place both outside and at the Toastmasters meeting.

To prepare for Table Topics:

- Outside the meeting **keep informed** of the news, current affairs and other events; know about the latest TV hit, what's happening in sport, good books to read and so on. The more widely you read – newspapers, magazines can be very helpful – the broader your knowledge of different subjects becomes.
- At the meeting when the Table Topics segment begins **listen** closely to the topicmaster. Is there a theme for today's session? If there is you can start thinking about how you might address it. Listen carefully to all the questions as they are asked and to the answers others offer. Heed the ideas that come into your head as you are listening. You may be able to use them when your turn comes.
- As you listen to the topics and responses allow you mind to focus on things you have done, things you know, technical knowledge you possess, ideas you have had which relate to the topics. This will enable you to **draw on your own experience** when you are called on to respond.
- When your turn comes and the topicmaster chooses you, **pause**. Take a few seconds to think, try and form an opinion on the spot, consider the challenge of

the question, also the fun. Remain calm as you stand to give your response – there is no need to rush.

- Be conscious that a table topic answer is essentially a speech in miniature (a mini-speech). Just as with prepared speeches you will be aiming to **organize** your answer into an opening, body and conclusion

Organising your answer is perhaps the most challenging aspect of your preparation as you will need to do this in a very short space of time after you receive your table topic. The challenge will be greater if the topic you have been given is on a subject you know nothing or very little about or if depth of feeling makes it a difficult topic for you to address. Hence it can be very useful if you have some ideas about methodologies you might use in organising your impromptu response.

Methodologies for Addressing Table Topics

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

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.

Who, What, Where, When, Why, How

This approach is very useful for themed table topics. When the topicmaster announces the theme you can help your flow of ideas by thinking: who, what can I talk about on this theme; where, when did something happen on this theme that I can talk about?; why is it important, unimportant to this theme?; how can I organise my thoughts to talk about this theme?

Past, Present, Future

This method allows you to adopt a global approach for example if your topic is on holidays you might talk about what a holiday might have been in medieval England, what we mean by holiday now and what it could come to mean in the future.

Balanced opinion

Using this approach you may choose to offer two sides of an argument for example the case for and against playing a contact sport or to compare the advantages or disadvantages of a particular action, situation, decision for example the wearing of sneakers rather than leather shoes.

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).

Mind mapping

This is essentially association of ideas. You may be asked to speak on the topic Holidays. What immediately comes to mind? It may be surf, Gold Coast, red sunsets. Go with your ideas – all you need to add is an opening and a conclusion.

Describe a process

“What happens when I use an Automatic Teller Machine. First I usually have to wait in line. Then when my turn comes I check I have the right plastic card and I insert”

State a goal or problem and how the goal or problem can be realised or solved

“Our club set a goal to sign up at least 10 new members this year. It is now April and we have only signed up 4. One course of action to help us achieve our goal is”

State an opinion and justify it

“Primary schools must ensure that by the time children reach Grade 3 they are developing information literacy skills. In a world where we are constantly bombarded by information through the media, the Internet and so on, it is imperative that children learn from a very young age not only how to access information but how to....”

Elaborate a viewpoint

“Our local council has voted to ban circuses with performing animals. I believe this has created a dangerous precedent for our local area because”

These are some methodologies which you might use to organise your response to a table topic. Depending on the subject, some table topics will probably lend themselves to one method rather than another. Further, because we are all individuals, you will probably find that you can use other approaches that suit your speaking style.

Have some fun practising using the various methodologies outlined and others that you might come across. You may want to develop some for yourself. The more strategies you have to approach table topics the more your confidence will grow and the more you will relish the opportunities to speak impromptu.

Prepared by Marie Murphy DTM for presentation at the District 70 Annual Conference, 2000.