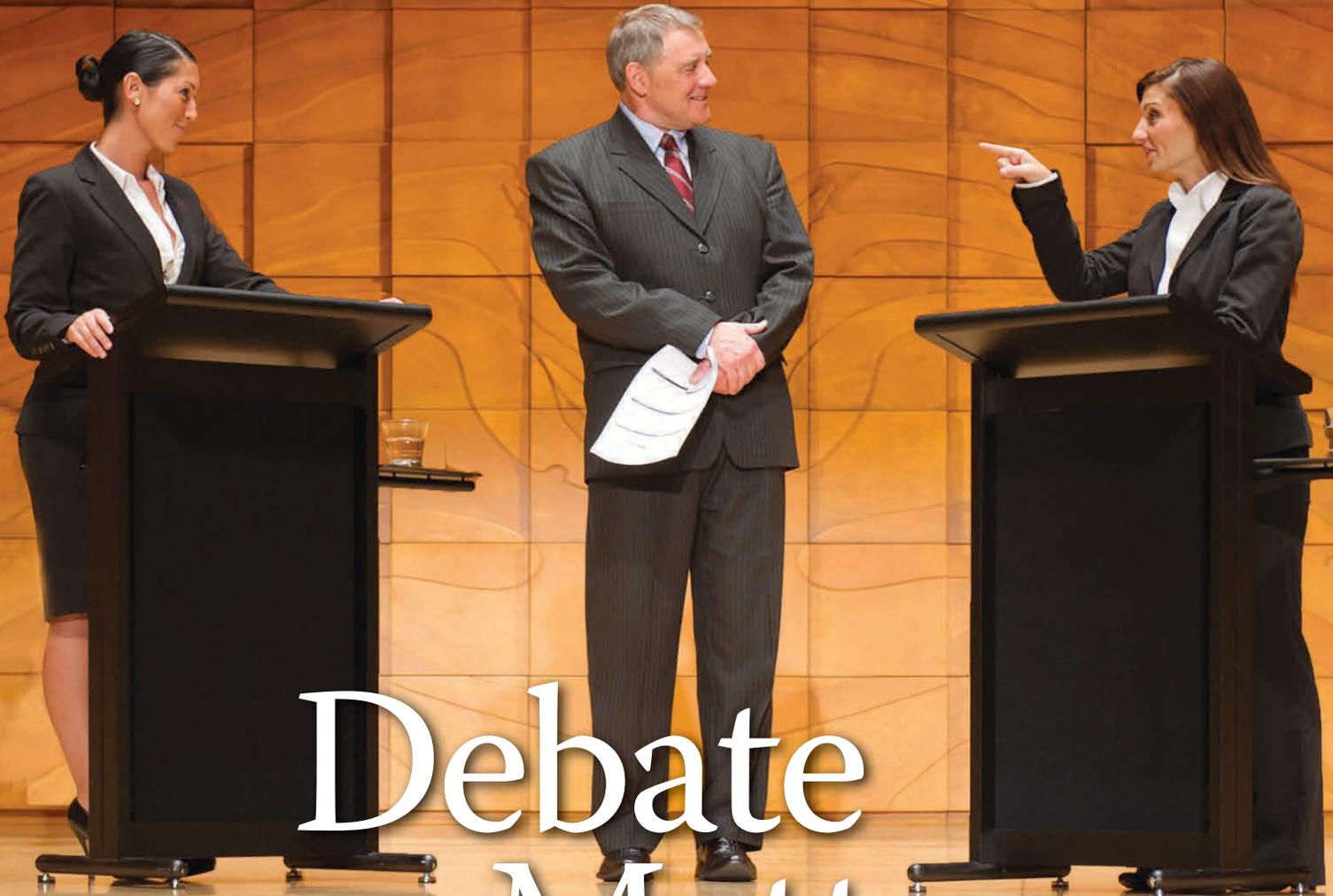


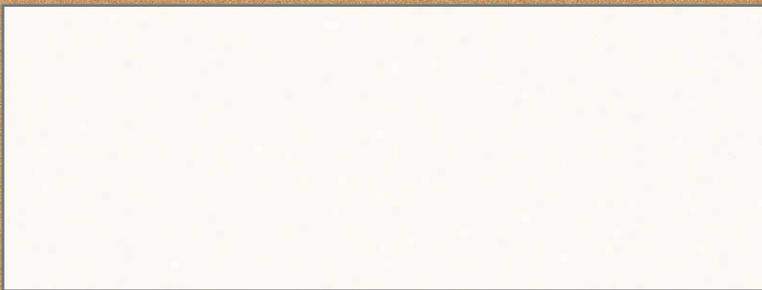
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# TOASTMASTER®



## Debate Matters

Discover the classic art of persuasion. PAGE 16



### Managing Table Topics

Heed the advice of the pros.

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## IMPROMPTU SPEAKING



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# Tactics For Tackling Table Topics

Simply put, go with your gut! Don't overanalyze the topic.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, PDG

Table Topics can be the most daunting part of the Toastmasters experience. But it can also be the most exhilarating. The key is in your preparation and perspective. Armed with enthusiasm and creative tactics, you can make Table Topics a successful experience.

Even without knowing in advance the topic you will be asked to address, you can prepare your mind and body beforehand. These strategies will help you face Table Topics with confidence at your next club meeting or contest.

## Pay Attention

Table Topics is about being “in the moment,” so it's important to mentally prepare yourself to respond to a question. Are you *present* when you're about to participate in Table Topics, or are you preoccupied? You want to be 100 percent attentive to the meeting or contest. What is happening in the room? What has been said already? Has a theme emerged? You can reference things previously said or done in the meeting and win points for relevancy.

## Be Current

Regardless of the topic or question you are asked, you can link it to current events. What's trending on social media and news sites? Think about events that occurred at your club that day, and

also about what's happening in your community, or even in your country, that week or month.

Examples of subjects you can tackle:

- Was the traffic brutal on the way to the meeting?
- Is the weather particularly strange that day?
- Is the construction noise outside the window annoying?

Talking about topical issues or events makes your response fresh. Whether you are referencing the Olympics, a holiday, a human interest story in the news or a scientific breakthrough by a local company, each is a shared experience with your audience that will resonate.

## Follow First Instincts

Our first instinct when we hear a topic is often the one we should act on. An instinct provides us with a head start. Whether your reaction to a given topic is a “gut” feeling, or one that gets your mind painting an image, your reaction suggests you have a point of view, a line of reasoning or a curiosity to be indulged. Go with it.

## Associate!

Psychiatrists use word-association activities to get patients to say the first thing that comes to mind when a word is posed to them, without self-censoring.

“In working with word associations, we measure the time it takes for someone to come up with a word or an idea,” says Doreen Hamilton, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Berkeley, California. “If there is a delay, it can indicate that the person is censoring. ... In most cases it is fear that creates this block. They're afraid they'll be judged and criticized.”

You don't need to worry about being judged and criticized in Toastmasters—it is a safe, judgment-free environment. Simply put, go with your gut! In my 22 years attending Toastmasters meetings and contests, I've seen many topic respondents overanalyze a topic. If you go with the initial response you hear in your mind or heart, listeners will likely relate to your message.

## From Foreign to Familiar

All of us approach the lectern with knowledge, experience and our own points



### When You're the Topicsmaster ...

Contrary to popular belief, the best part about serving as Topicsmaster isn't immunity from being called to answer a Table Topic. As Topicsmaster, you are entrusted with a key portion of your club meeting. The topics you choose reinforce the meeting theme, and provide drama, amusement and a sense of surprise for your meeting. It's both a responsibility and a privilege.

Try these ideas the next time you lead Table Topics.

**Can You Sell It?** George Marshall, DTM, a member of Star Search Toastmasters in Fremont, California, has each Table Topic respondent reach into a grab bag and pull out obscure objects: grandma's old kitchen implements, odd garage shop tools and other miscellaneous items. Then he asks the question "What is it?" Whether respondents give truthful or fanciful explanations, it's all good fun. A variation on this approach: Ask respondent to "sell" the item to the audience.

**Can You Define It?** At one club I regularly visited, respondents were shown an obscure word from the dictionary and asked to define it. Truthful or not, a compelling explanation always wins. How would *you* define the words *eccedentesiast*, *interfenestration* or *sgiomlaireached*? (The Topicsmaster reveals the true meaning after each response.)

(Sidenote: That club I visited—which is no longer in existence—was at a northern California retirement community where my grandparents lived. They would join me at the meetings. The club videotaped its speech contests and showed them on closed-circuit TV throughout the retirement community!)

**Presenting the Past.** Using an old newspaper, magazine or *Toastmaster* magazine from 40 to 50 years ago, issue each respondent a headline. Respondents then use their imagination to create a plausible story to match the headline.

**Interpretations.** When he has served as Topicsmaster, Doug Mills, ACS, ALS, of Dimond Talkers in Anchorage, Alaska, has displayed children's drawings and asked respondents to interpret and tell a story about each one.

**The Progressive Story.** The Topicsmaster starts the story and ends it. After the beginning of the story, each member is expected to contribute exactly one sentence. Participants co-create a story a line at a time, in one to two minutes.

— Craig Harrison, DTM, PDG

of view, yet the topic may be something we know nothing about. What to do? One strategy is to connect the topic to one you *do* know about. This is called "bridging"—as in building a bridge from what you don't know to what you do know.

An example:

**Topic:** How do you split a subatomic particle?

**Response:** I don't know about atomic particles, but I do know something about splitting things up. As a quintuplet I grew up believing everything was divisible by five. All through my childhood, food, candy and even toys were split five ways.

### Our first instinct when we hear a topic is often the one we should act on.

#### Use What You Know

Does the topic remind you of a quote? Or a joke? Or a saying? You can latch onto that to jump-start your response. Remember, you're buying time to think, brainstorm and draw the audience in, all at the same time.

#### Nature Is Your Friend

When you're given a difficult topic, try looking for an equivalent in nature. Can you draw a parallel between the topic and some process, pattern, cycle or occurrence in nature? Can you relate it to the weather, the seasons, migrations of animals or another natural phenomenon? In various Table Topics responses, I've heard locales mentioned such as Mount Fuji in Japan, the town of Katoomba in Australia, and the Grand Canyon in the U.S. I've also heard references to the march of the caterpillars, how salmon spawn after swimming upstream, and the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. Each topic response was captivating.

#### Embody the Topic

So much emphasis in speechmaking and responding to Table Topics is placed on what to say. Yet sometimes the best way to

inhabit the topic can be physical. During one of my club meetings, a member was asked whether he preferred brownies or cookies. He reflected on the topic and then pounced into action as the Cookie Monster puppet character from the famous children's TV show *Sesame Street*. By exaggerating his body movements, deepening his voice and widening his eyes, he became the character and unanimously won the award for Best Table Topics Speaker that day.

"Everything starts with your body and breath: The physical production is key to the vocal production," says theater instructor and director Jane Courant of Oakland,

## Are you *present* when you're about to participate in Table Topics, or are you preoccupied?

California. She speaks from 25 years of experience. "Many actors, in theater and film, will begin with the physicality. That's how they start to build their character's walk and talk. That's where they derive their voice from."

### In Medias Res

*In medias res* is Latin for "in the midst of things." It's a literary technique found in storytelling, books and movies. When we're given a topic, the assumption is that we will build our story or logical argument in linear fashion. But sometimes we can sandwich the topic in the *middle* of a story.

As a speaker, you can announce the topic, and then fill in how you arrived at this point by giving flashbacks or describing the story behind it. For example, if your topic is, "I was accused of plagiarism," focus on how this came to be, not on what you will do going forward from the accusation. Your next sentence might be: "It all started when I was asked how I would fill in the blanks to the sentence \_\_\_\_\_." Follow up with an explanation of the steps leading to the topic's assertion or phrase.

### The Answer to 6 Questions

Another effective framework for a response is to answer these six questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? This helps you work your way through several aspects of a topic. Patrick Donadio, ATM, a 24-year member, uses this technique for Table Topics as well as in his executive coaching practice. A member of the Online Computer Library Center Toastmasters in Dublin, Ohio, he suggests beginning your speech with: "When I think about this topic, I naturally have questions about it. For instance, why ...?"

### Structures for Succeeding

Donadio recommends additional formats for responding to topics. One technique is to address both the pros and cons of a subject, spending a minute on each. Suppose you're given the topic of "a new law mandating zero tolerance for littering." First you can speak to the advantages of such an ordinance. Next, you can address the drawbacks to it. You can remain impartial or provide your opinion as you lay out both sides of the topic.

### Talk About Time

Donadio also encourages speakers to use a three-part approach to fashioning a response, speaking to the past, present and future for a given topic. If your topic is "human rights for animals," you might compare society's past and present treatment of animals and then share your vision for animal rights in the near or distant future.

### Physical Tips for Topic Mastery

Jacqueline Wales, author of *The Fearless Factor*, speaks about overcoming fear and finding one's voice. As it pertains to Table Topics, she says, "First take a deep breath

and let it all out before rushing to answer. This deep inhalation clears the mind and gives you a moment to relax." People naturally feel nervous about making a mistake or looking foolish, adds Wales. But use that to your benefit.

"Nerves are part of the drive to succeed. It's the adrenaline rush that comes before a performance," says Wales. "Instead of thinking of it as fear, think of this as an extra boost to get you going." **T**

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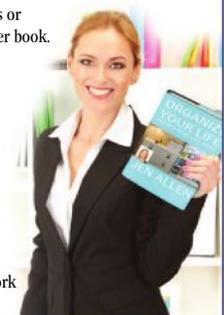


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