



How to be a great Table Topics Master

By West Herts Speakers

Love them or hate them, Table Topics are a key component of a typical Toastmasters club evening, through which club members learn how to improve their impromptu speaking skills.

If you have taken on the role of Table Topics master (TTM) then there are some important ways you can ensure you and your impromptu speakers get the most out of the evening.

1. Start by preparing, in advance, the theme for the coming session and the specific topics to be addressed by the selected club members (and, possibly, by one or more guests)
2. Ensure that the Timekeeper for the evening concerned is briefed (normally just before the start of the meeting) to announce when requested (typically by the Toastmaster of the Evening (TME): the name of each Topics speaker, the title (or equivalent) of their Topic and their time
3. Take over the floor from the TME at the commencement of the session
4. Introduce Table Topics by explaining why they are an important part of the evening
5. Set out the theme for the current session
6. Set out each specific topic in turn and select the speaker to address that topic
7. Lead the applause when welcoming and take back the floor after each speaker and provide brief “continuity comments” before moving on to the next Topic.
8. Provide a few closing words at the conclusion of the session, thanking the speakers for their participation and handing back to the TME.

1. Setting the overall theme

Often, the theme for Topics should be suitable for “carrying over” as the theme for the evening as a whole. For example, a series of questions based around travel as the central theme, should be fine as the theme for the evening, being of broad application.

But this should not prevent Topics Masters from other approaches, particularly where these offer excellent entertainment value. For example, the Topics speakers may be invited to retrieve household objects, or pieces of fruit, or an unusual word written on a card, etc., from a bag. They are then asked to present “a day in the life” of the object/piece of fruit, or to define the strange word. (In the latter case, the TTM will reveal

the correct definition before selecting the next speaker or concluding the session.) In these cases, it is unlikely that their “themes” could also apply to the rest of the evening.

The key objective must be to create a session that is likely to prove entertaining (helping both the speakers to perform and the audience to provide a positive and supportive atmosphere).

2. Briefing the Timekeeper

It is important (and professional) to ensure that immediately following the Topics session, the Timekeeper announces each speaker’s Topic as well as their time, since this provides a valuable reminder to the voting audience.

It is obviously helpful to the Timekeeper to know whether this information will be requested by the TME (most commonly at West Herts. Speakers) or by the TTM.

3. Starting the session

Find a seat near the front, since you will need to take the floor after each Topics speaker and return briskly to your seat after handing the floor to the next speaker.

This will also help to “take command” after being introduced by the TME.

Given that Topics speakers are often nervous (particularly if at the “novice” stages) it is important for the TTM to appear calm, in control and confident. This is key to creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere.

4. Explaining why Table Topics are important

The TTM’s first task is to remind everyone present (advise, in the case of non-Toastmaster guests) why Table Topics are such an important part of the evening.

Firstly, Table Topics provides a speaking opportunity for club members who otherwise have no assigned speaking or ancillary role (such as Grammarian). Although there is a real contribution to be made by being part of an audience that offers a welcoming and supportive atmosphere, from a public-speaking development standpoint there is no substitute for “taking the floor”. It is therefore essential that when selecting Topics speakers, the TTM must set the priorities accordingly.

Responding to a Table Topic calls for quick thinking: from the very beginning when formulating the start of one’s response, through to the conclusion of a brief speech that should still have a clear beginning, middle and end. The skills needed to do this have broad application, both within Toastmasters and externally.

Within Toastmasters

The best Toastmasters of the evening (TMEs) will provide a “continuity narrative” as they lead the audience through the evening’s programme. This will often call for quick thinking to incorporate events (a moving/amusing/controversial etc. speech, for example) very soon after they take place. Exposure to Table Topics provides ideal training for such “ad lib” commentary.

Some Toastmasters find it difficult to present a prepared speech without referring to notes, to a greater or lesser extent. Often, there is likely to be some leeway permissible between the original and any “replacement” wording. Using Table Topics presentation skills, there is a greater likelihood that a prepared speech can be “patched” in places without referring to notes.

Speech Evaluators have only a limited time to prepare their evaluations. Often, their presentations will therefore need a degree of “real-time enhancement”. The experienced Topics speaker has the ideal training for fine-tuning their evaluation, in this way, as it progresses.

For the Toastmaster still at the earliest novice stage, presenting a Table Topics provides an opportunity to take the floor with a “mini speech” as a stepping stone to their initial Icebreaker.

Outside Toastmasters

Being able to contribute, either in a meeting or conversation, with minimal preparation time, can be a major asset, both in business and socially. For example, when:

- responding to an unexpected question during a presentation or sales pitch
- called upon for comment, in a meeting where the point under discussion is outside one’s main discipline (because the culture is to involve people who are “not constrained by having any relevant knowledge”)
- attending a company function and having to engage in “small talk” with senior colleagues
- a guest at a social event, such as a wedding.

A further advantage of Toastmaster training is familiarity with the concepts of a) “beginning, middle and end” and b) keeping to time. In combination these are a powerful tool for giving structure (which helps the audience to follow) and imposing a time constraint (which reduces the risk of audience irritation).

5. Setting out the theme for the current session

Having developed the theme (as discussed under **1**, above) it should be presented clearly and succinctly.

Supplement vocal clarity with body language, use of the floor and eye contact, to help sustain a controlled and welcoming atmosphere.

To mark the transition from the general theme to the individual Topics, remind the audience (and the Timekeeper) that the timings are: “Green on 1 minute, Amber on 1 min 30 secs and red at 2 Minutes”

Emphasise that each speaker should hand back to the Topics Master, in keeping with the policy of never leaving the lectern unattended

6. Setting out each specific topic and selecting the speaker to address that topic

Points to bear in mind here include:

- Ensure that the questions (or equivalent) are straightforward. Topics speakers have enough challenges without also having to unravel a complex/ambiguous/confusing brief!
- (Where possible) match the “degree of challenge” to each speaker’s skill level
- Announce the name of your selected speaker without delay, after setting out their “brief”. Try to ensure that each speaker has the same “lead time” between concluding the brief and their name being called.

Guests should be offered the opportunity to participate in Table Topics (subject to members taking priority, as described under **4**, above). But where a guest accepts a Topic and provides the winning speech, this is an excellent recruitment aid! (Conversely,

respecting a guest's preference to remain a spectator, reflects a positive but sensitive club culture.)

NB In accordance with TMI general policy, guest speakers must be at least 18 years old.

7. Welcoming each speaker, taking back the floor and providing continuity

The tasks here are to:

- Lead the applause when welcoming each speaker to the floor. Shake hands and take your seat (ideally near the front, for obvious reasons)
- Again, lead the applause when rising to take back the floor, shaking hands with the departing speaker. Be prepared for less experienced speakers to head back to their seat at some speed (oblivious to the hapless TTM standing nearby with arm outstretched!)
- Add a few "continuity" comments:

Firstly to "close off" the last speech:

"I'll never be able to look at a turnip again"

"This is definitely not something to be tried at home"

"Did you notice how *Pustule* so elegantly avoided answering the actual question?"

...and so on. (NB Comments should not be such that they might influence the voting.)

- Then move on to the next Topic and introduce the speaker:

"Continuing with our theme of (insert as appropriate)." "My next question is (insert as appropriate)." And to respond to that question, please give a warm welcome to *Blemish*."

Or, perhaps (once *Blemish* has joined the TTM by the lectern)... "If you would like to draw a card/pick an object from this priceless cardboard box."

8. Closing down the session and handing back to the TME

Basking in the glory of having delivered a lively, entertaining and totally successful Topics session, the TTM will, with all sincerity, first thank all of the Topics speakers. If any guests have participated this deserves special mention.

The best TTMs will then close with a few pithy remarks, ideally highlighting any specific benefits that have emerged from the Topics session, before handing the floor back to the TME (to rapturous applause).