

Topicsmaster

The extemporaneous educator

With TABLE TOPICS™, the Topicsmaster gives members who aren't assigned a speaking role the opportunity to speak during the meeting. The Topicsmaster challenges each member with a subject, and the speaker responds with a one- to two-minute impromptu talk.

Some people underestimate the Topicsmaster role's importance. Not only does it provide you with an opportunity to practice planning, preparation, organization, time management and facilitation skills; your preparation and topic selection help train members to quickly organize and express their thoughts in an impromptu setting.

Preparation is the key to leading a successful Table Topics session:

- Several days before the meeting, check with the Toastmaster to find out if a theme meeting is scheduled. If so, prepare topics reflecting that theme.
- Confirm who the prepared speakers, evaluators and general evaluator will be so you can call on other members at the meeting to respond first. You can call on program participants (speakers last) at the end of the topics session if time allows.
- Select subjects and questions that allow speakers to offer opinions. Don't make the questions too long or complicated and make sure they don't require specialized knowledge.
- Phrase questions so the speakers clearly understand what you want them to talk about.

Remember, too, that your job is to give others a chance to speak, so keep your own comments short.

Table Topics usually begins after the prepared speech presentations, but there are variations from club to club. Ask the Toastmaster or vice president education if you're unsure of when your portion of the meeting begins.

When the Toastmaster introduces you, walk to the lectern and assume control of the meeting:

- Briefly state the purpose of Table Topics and mention any theme.
- If your club has a word of the day, encourage speakers to use that word in their response.
- Be certain everyone understands the maximum time they have for their response and how the timing device works (if the timer hasn't already done so).

Then begin the program:

- Give each speaker a different topic or question and call on speakers at random.
- Avoid going around the room in the order in which people are sitting.
- Don't ask two people the same thing unless you specify that each must give opposing viewpoints.
- State the question briefly – then call on a respondent.
- You may wish to invite visitors and guests to participate after they have seen one or two members' responses. But let visitors know they are free to decline if they feel uncomfortable.

Watch your total time. You may need to adjust the number of questions so your segment ends on time. Even if your portion started late, try to end on time to avoid the total meeting running overtime.

If your club presents a best Table Topics speaker award:

- Ask the timer at the end of the Table Topics session to report those eligible for the award. Though the times vary among clubs, generally a participant is disqualified for stopping 15 seconds prior to the allowed time or speaking 15 seconds beyond the allowed limit.
- Ask members to vote for best Table Topics speaker and pass their votes to the sergeant at arms or vote counter.

If your club has a Table Topics evaluator, ask for his or her report and then return control of the meeting to the Toastmaster.