

Taming Table Topics

Table Topics can be the most challenging and frightening portion of a Toastmaster's meeting – but with a little preparation, everyone can be a pro at Table Topics. There are a number of ways to tame table topics. Listed below are some strategies you can practice and use.

Give The 411

We have all heard that when describing an event, we should give the basic facts – who, what, when, where, why and how. For example, given the question "Describe your most memorable sporting event," you could respond with what (soccer world cup), when (last summer), where (a party at my best friend's house), why (my first soccer party), and how (rented a big screen TV). By the time you fully described all those parts, you've given a concise 1-2 minute response.

Divide & Conquer

Organization is important because prevents communication from turning into word soup. Clear divisions are essential to an orderly arrangement. Some of the classic two or three way divisions are: past, present, future; that was then, this is now; low, medium, high; cost, benefit; financial cost, social cost; civil law, moral law; problem, solution; thesis, antithesis; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; us, them; ideal, real; what we want, what we can get; mind, body. The list can go on forever. So, pick a division as quickly as possible and stick to that one.

Narrow the Focus

Sometimes the topic is just too big to tackle as a whole. Take this example, "Describe your most memorable birthday?" Some related, narrower, topics are most memorable party or gift or card or date. To begin, acknowledge the original question and then use a bridge device to get to your narrower version. For example, "There are a lot of things that make a birthday memorable. My most memorable gift was..."

Divert Attention

This is the quintessential politician's response. Take, for example, a very controversial subject: "What is your stance on abortion?" Divert attention to a related question. "My personal views are not as relevant as why this is a divisive issue." Then talk about the related question. Sometimes, you may want to avoid the original topic entirely. You could respond, "Your question is very important, however, today I am much more interested in education." And there is always, "A very good question which reminds me of..."

Tell a Lie

What happens when you have no experience at all with the subject of the question? You can give up and sit down or use the question as an opportunity to stretch your imagination. If you are given the question, "What is the biggest fish you have caught?," and you have never been fishing, you could just make up a fishing trip. Or notify your audience that you are letting your imagination run wild, "I've never caught a fish, but I imagine that ..." Be descriptive and detailed.

Ramble On

Sometimes, you can discover something very interesting about the topic at hand by using a brainstorming or stream of consciousness approach. Start by restating the question. Then make the first comment that comes into your mind. Then say the next thing that you are reminded of. As you approach the end of your time, restate the best point you made the original question.

Elaborate

Sometimes the subject isn't the problem, it's the time. One sure-fire way to put more interest in your speech and to extend the time is to give more elaborate descriptions. Instead of "the bird" try "the green and yellow bird that took delight in singing at the first sign of dawn."