

TOASTMASTER

February 2010



The
Magic
of
Mentoring

**Overcoming
Objections**

**Leadership Lessons
of Olympic Athletes**

**Turning the Tables
on Table Topics**



e've all experienced the frustration of returning to our seats after delivering a less-than-stellar Table Topics response, only to realize how we should or could have answered the given topic.

To protect you from such encounters in the future, here are a dozen strategies you can employ when responding to Table Topics. These are sure-fire frameworks for verbalizing your thoughts. With them, your impromptu battles will be won, and your tongue untied, as you learn how to turn the tables on tough topics.

1 Bridging. *Bridging* gets you from what you *don't* know ... to what you do know through the figurative building of a bridge – a sentence you use to connect the unknown to the known. The sooner you build your bridge, the quicker you'll be on safe ground.

TOPIC: Your car didn't start this morning. How would you trouble-shoot it?

- **Problem:** You as the respondent don't have a mechanical bone in your body. You don't even pump your own gas – you're a nurse.
- **Solution:** Find a way to "bridge" from what you don't know (fixing cars) to what you do know (mending humans).

RESPONSE: "Not being a mechanic, I would imagine fixing a car to be like fixing a human. First you must diagnose the problem..."

Here's another example of bridging from the unknown to the known:

TOPIC: How would you chair a peace negotiation between a Hamas leader and the Prime Minister of Israel?

- **Problem:** You don't follow foreign affairs, aren't particularly interested in politics and haven't followed issues in the Middle East at all.
- **Solution:** Bridge to a familiar situation – a feuding family. Describe approaches you'd use with Uncle Harry and Aunt Bess. Seating arrangements, small praise, patience and humor.

RESPONSE: "This reminds me of a situation in my own family, when we had a terrible argument that nearly ended family get-togethers forever. Here's how I put a stop to the fighting..."

2 Reframing. Suppose you're hit with a topic you just don't like or one that's not right for you. Don't despair – *reframe* it as one you'd like to respond to. Redefine the topic as you believe it should be, or at least the way you'd like it to be. Keep the structure but alter the subject. Rephrase the question or even challenge

TURNING T on Table Topics



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it; explain why the question given is not the right question at all!

TOPIC: Who's better, Cristiano Ronaldo or Fernando Torres?

- **Problem:** Who cares? You don't. You don't have a clue who these people are and don't care about soccer.
- **Solution:** Find a pair of performers you believe are worthy of comparing. Perhaps it's Serena vs. Venus Williams in tennis, or opera singers Placido Domingo vs. Luciano Pavarotti, or maybe even that classic debate of coffee vs. tea.

3 Dialogue. Also known as thinking out loud, use of *dialogue* involves asking rhetorical questions of your audience as you reason together. You're also probing for areas you know well enough to continue with, as well as areas that the audience will react to. Consider this technique a closely monitored stream of consciousness.

4 Quotes, Jokes and Sayings (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.

5 The Monodrama. Take the audience into your mind as you reason, out loud, the answer to the question. Tell us how you'd accomplish something or what you'd experience as something happens to you – from your travails as a tourist in an inhospitable country to preparing for your first blind date in years. Share your thoughts on the way to the altar or relive the most embarrassing moment from your school days. Don't just recount it; take us there, immerse us in the experience and relive it with your entire body.

TOPIC: In order to get your driver's license, you must take the skeptical driving instructor for a drive.

RESPONSE: "It's hard to say which one of us was more nervous. I could taste the fear in my stomach and smell the fear coming from him. Perhaps it was the various dents, scrapes and paint colors from other cars pock-marking my vehicle. The turning point came when we strapped in and I stopped to recite the Lord's Prayer. I thought his eyes were going to pop out!"

6 The Far Side. Take your topic to extremes. By exaggerating or embellishing, you heighten the seriousness or absurdity, whichever the case may be. This might involve presenting a "What if..." question or "Just suppose..." scenario. If you're telling a story, it will

Which One Would You Choose?

Putting it all together, here's how each of the 12 strategies might work for a particular Table Topics question.

TOPIC: What is the secret to passing a class in organic chemistry?

1 Bridging
The secret to passing organic chemistry is similar to the secret to passing advanced calculus. It all falls into place the third time you take it...

2 Reframing
I can't tell you how to pass, but I can speak authoritatively on how not to pass. Cut classes, skip labs, cram the night before midterms, date the professor's daughter...

3 Dialogue
Student: Professor, I'll do anything to pass organic chemistry this term!

Professor: Anything?
Student: Anything.
Professor: Even...study?

4 Quotes, Jokes and Sayings
How can you tell I failed organic chemistry? I'm like comedian Steven Wright. I bought powdered water, but I could never figure out what to add to it!

5 The Monodrama
My moment of truth has arrived. It's final exam day for Organic Chemistry. Pass, and I become a doctor, carry on a family tradition, marry my high school sweetheart and live a life of luxury and prestige. Fail, and I become a veterinary doctor, a doggie doctor, and always wonder what could have been. I studied, prayed, ate a great breakfast and even helped an old lady across the street on my way to class. I've got my lucky-charm eraser. My heart is pounding. It's a matter of seconds before the test begins...

soon become a tall tale. If your topic has drama, you'll heighten it to melodrama. Absurdity is actually less threatening to an audience.

TOPIC: Should we raise taxes?

RESPONSE: "Absolutely. Not only should we raise taxes, but just think of the benefits we'll achieve when we raise the tax rate to 98 percent. We'll have all the money we need for programs, defense and government. We can bail out everybody! We won't need banks and investment counselors. Nobody will have money to shop, so there'll be fewer TV commercials and billboards. Won't life be wonderful?"

7 Moderator (also known as Point/Counterpoint). Rather than take one side of an issue that you may or may not be prepared to argue strenuously enough, take the middle road by representing both sides. Imagine yourself as Oprah Winfrey, the impartial moderator, airing both sides and straddling the middle position. We all know a couple of arguments for *and* against issues such as gun control, smoking in public or raising taxes.

This is a safe approach for a Toastmasters meeting and it provides great practice for outside encounters where being noncommittal is preferable. Use a few simple phrases to let the audience know where you're heading:

6 The Far Side
To pass O-Chem I channeled the great minds of science: Louis Pasteur, Madame Curie and Albert Einstein. I can hear them each exhorting me in a particular kind of science. If only they wouldn't all talk at the same time. And they all have accents! Now they're arguing with each other. This is becoming distracting...

7 Moderator
We're watching student Craig Harrison take his final exam. Odds-makers listed him at 3-1 to pass. He's coasted through most of his classes this year without cracking a book like his classmates. He's headed for a crash. He thinks he's smarter than he is. You recall earlier he blew several tiles off the ceiling with his ill-fated lab work.

8 Outer Space
Earthlings are funny... studying organic chemistry. As Arcturians, we access planetary information telepathically from vast knowledge banks. We don't need tables, calculators or charts.

TOPIC: Should smoking in public be banned?

RESPONSE: "On the one hand we all know... (45 seconds). But then again, consider the flip side... (45 seconds). Choose your ending: Do this. Do that. Do both. Do nothing."

8 You Came From Outer Space. Step out of yourself to respond to a Table Topic. Be an extraterrestrial and put an alien spin on the topic. Instead of being Joe from District 32, answer as if you're a stranger in a strange land. A corollary is pretending to be someone from another country.

TOPIC: How do you feel about special commuter lanes for carpoolers?

RESPONSE: "I'm Mork from Planet Ork, what is this thing I'm observing? People lining up and entering big moving boxes with wheels on them. They're like two-legged ants in funny roving rectangles that move in straight lines and turn at right angles."

9 Transcend Time. You needn't answer as yourself in February 2010. Assume the character and sensibilities of another person in time, real or fictional.

TOPIC: What are your thoughts on public speaking?

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9 Time Traveler
In 2010, Organic Chemistry is hard. However, in 1010 Organic Gardening was the tough subject. Many failed it and were forced to become hunter-gatherers. Never mind their GPA! They worried about a shorter life expectancy!

10 Play Devil's Advocate
For me O-Chem was easy. Leisure Sports was the real challenge. Ping pong and tiddlywinks required dexterity that I sorely lacked. I kept breaking equipment. I kept getting timeouts.

11 Mystery
Today we learn our final exam scores. Did I pass? Or not? Did I study enough? Or not? I feel like a defendant awaiting a jury's verdict. The professor calls out our names:
Adams, Banks, Carillo, Daggett, Engel...

12 Gibberish
Make it up!

Turning the Tables on Table Topics

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RESPONSE: "I'm Demosthenes and I better take those rocks out of my mouth so I can enunciate a response to that very important subject..."

Consider this perspective:

TOPIC: Freeway traffic.

RESPONSE: "Captain's Log star date 5419...investigating planet comprised of millions of multi-colored rectangular projectiles traversing established corridors. When mating occurs, infrequently, others pass by slowly, some flash lights and motion along corridor comes to a complete stop."

10 Play Devil's Advocate. This is an old favorite of authors, poets and even political candidates. It has built-in counterpoint. Take what you're given and argue the opposite of what you would normally want to express.

TOPIC: Should the government spend more money on education?

RESPONSE: "No, I say we give some money to the television cartoon producers instead! Let me tell you why..."

11 Everyone Loves a Mystery. Build suspense into your response. Leave us with a question or at least some

doubt. Paint a picture, but leave a few strokes unpainted. Or set us up to expect one picture before surprising us with another. Give us a twist. Shock us! Introduce speculation, a shadow of a doubt or an unknown element. You might even end on a question or in mid-sentence.

12 When All Else Fails ... Say Nothing (at Length). If you're absolutely, 100 percent stumped, don't give in. Speak but don't say anything. Use a string of openings, small talk, clichés or even gibberish. Remember, content is only part of the presentation. Body language, inflection, nuance and other embellishments all contribute to a successful topic response.

Repeat the question, repeatedly:

TOPIC: "To Be or Not to Be?"

RESPONSE: "I thank you for asking me that profound question.

To be or not to be. (pause)

To BE or not to BE

To be or NOT, to be. That is the question.

Or is it?

Is it or is it Not, that is to Be...determined."

Here's an alternate response to the same topic:

TOPIC: "To Be or Not to Be, that is the question."

RESPONSE: "I'm glad you asked that question. For throughout time, that has been *the* question. I've read it in books, heard it on stage and wondered it myself. To Be or Not to Be? And whether or not you know the answer, or can explain it to others, it is a question you must ultimately answer for yourself. To Be or Not to Be? Some questions have a yes or no answer. Others are multiple choice. Still others are trick questions. If ever there were a \$64 question, this would be it. To Be or Not to Be? They say that is the question, but I say it is more of a dilemma, a conundrum, a riddle, a mystery of life and a very good Table Topic. But rather than let it work me up, I remain nonplused. After all, to worry about whether To Be or Not to Be is really *much ado about nothing!*"

One contestant I know gave a Table Topics response entirely in chicken: Every utterance was a form of bawk, bawk, bawk. Unfortunately he was disqualified for fowl language! So good luck, have fun and don't run any of the timekeeper's red lights! 🐔

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