

Tackling TABLE TOPICS Dazzle in a minute.

In an article from the April 2006 issue of the *Toastmaster* magazine, veteran Toastmaster Rajiv Ramaratnam of Quincy, Massachusetts, shares these tricks for taking the terror out of TABLE TOPICS – or any other impromptu speaking situation:

- **Begin by greeting the audience.** Smile. This buys you time to think about the topic at hand.
- **Avoid apologies** or comments like, “I’m not good at this,” or, “Gee, I don’t have a clue.” Don’t say anything that lowers the audience’s expectations.
- **Buy yourself time.** Repeat the question or topic. “What do I think of the soccer World Cup?” Take a deep breath and speak slowly and clearly. Or include a comment like, “I never considered that question until now.” Be careful not to overdo this step, however.
- **Stay informed.** It’s impossible to be knowledgeable about every topic under the sun, but a little preparation goes a long way. Stay on top of current local, national and international news. Be familiar with issues in politics and the economy, new trends, the latest movies, plays and books. To find information, use the Internet, newspapers, the bookstore or library, and listen to TV or radio talk shows.
- **Create a repository of topics.** Build a list of topics that you are comfortable speaking about, and try to use them whenever possible. Also keep them in mind when it is your turn to be the Topics master.
- **Segue from the presented topic to one you can talk about.** For example, “I don’t have an opinion on the World Cup in soccer, but let me tell you about my recent mountain climbing experience...” Be careful not to make this one a habit though.
- **Use your imagination.** During Table Topics, you develop the necessary skills to think on your feet. For this, a fertile imagination is vital. You could use your imagination to create a tall tale, contemplate the future or formulate an opinion on any topic.
- **Connect with the audience.** Be passionate – don’t come across as a lifeless data spewer. The more alive and original you are, the better your performance will be. Use eye contact and meaningful gestures. Sell your idea to the audience!
- **Think of it as a mini-speech.** It’s more than an answer to a question. While you may not know the exact answer to the question, you probably have enough information, thoughts, feelings and opinions to develop a two-minute speech. Try to develop an opening, body and conclusion.
- **Practice!** You have a list of topics and you have an opinion on all of them. Now, practice as if you were asked to speak on one of them. Sooner or later, one of those topics may surface at a Table Topics session near you.
- **Have fun!** Relax! What’s the worst thing that will happen if your Table Topic doesn’t win an award? Remember, the audience is in the same boat as you!

Use these tips and you will become a more confident communicator – both in Toastmasters and in your career!