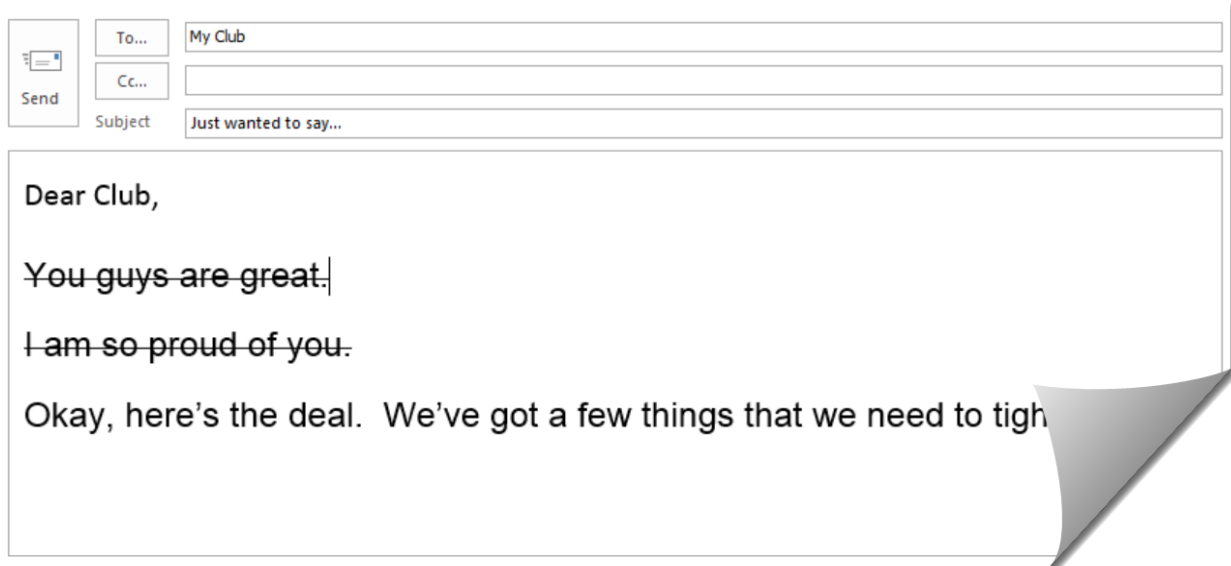


Emails...



The image shows a screenshot of an email client interface. On the left, there is a 'Send' button with a paper plane icon. To its right are three input fields: 'To...' containing 'My Club', 'Cc...' which is empty, and 'Subject' containing 'Just wanted to say...'. Below these fields is a large text area containing the following text:

Dear Club,
~~You guys are great.~~
~~I am so proud of you.~~
Okay, here's the deal. We've got a few things that we need to tigh

The text area has a grey corner graphic on the right side, suggesting it's a scrollable or partially visible area.

...to the Club

by Alex Lawes

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1. Prologue

If you...

Forget about the religious aspect for the moment, you've got to give Jesus his props. One day He was put on the spot and tested by the Scribes and Pharisees – of all the Laws given by God, which is the most important? To put this in context, there were 613 Laws to choose from. He didn't mince words. He cut to the chase – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind."

He silenced his critics. He scored 100%. Of course, never one to be satisfied with making a subtle point, He answered the extra credit question, "and the second is love your neighbor as yourself."

What is my point? Could you be as succinct when asked what it means to be a successful Toastmasters club? And, more importantly, could you do it without giving it a second thought? I can. And for the record, I am totally repurposing a well-known movie line.

If you build it, they will come.

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella hears a voice that tells him, "If you build it, they will come." Without spoiling the movie for those who haven't seen it, the remainder of the movie takes Ray on a journey to discover what the "it" is and who the "they" are.

This past year I served as an Area Director. Let's face it, it was a necessary evil on the path to becoming a DTM. It meant that I had to endure the pain of visiting all of the clubs twice, I had fill out onerous online reports, and I had to attend various grueling trainings and non-club functions. At the end of the year, I was vindicated in all of these prognostications except one – the first.

But first, let me digress. I attended a Toastmasters demo meeting at the place of my employment in 1999. The next week, twenty of us met and formed the SMS Toastmasters Club. We had a good mentor who served as President as well as spiritual guide for 20 strangers entering the sublime world of Toastmasters. I feel the need to digress a little further to give you some idea of the magnetism between this group of strangers.

In 1960, the world was an interesting place. 1960 was just 15 years removed from the end of World War II and just a handful removed from the Korean War. Little did anyone know that another war was about to begin in earnest. In a small town in England, four young men crossed paths and decided to have a go at this new fad called rock and roll. I speak of the Beatles of course. They were together only for a decade but they accomplished something never to be replicated in all the years since. I have often pondered what if just one of the four didn't come along, would the outcome have been the same? I think the answer is no. You can reduce this argument to one trite word – chemistry. Loosely defined, chemistry is something you know

when you have it and you don't know when you don't have it. You cannot will it to happen. Often times it just does.

That is what happened with the charter members of SMS Toastmasters Club. We started off on the right foot and never looked back. The irony of it all was that it took over ten years for me to realize that, in fact, we had a special club. And to further bolster this, my experience as a club mentor, club sponsor (and charter member for another club), and Area Director brought home the point that I was extremely fortunate to be part of something special...and powerful.

I don't know if there is a right way or a wrong way to conduct an Area Director's visit. The method I settled upon was to show up on the appointed day, take whatever role they needed me to fill, and then at the end of the meeting, deliver a combination General Evaluator's report and pep talk. It was during one of these early visits, where I made the off-the-cuff statement, "You know, a Toastmasters club, it's like the movie *Field of Dreams* – if you build it, they will come." I have been plagiarizing myself ever since.

Something else to consider. Toastmasters and Alcoholics Anonymous are very similar in one aspect. Both really do not need to advertise too hard for both draw from a pool of people who know deep down that they have a problem that they want to fix. As long as there are people whose jobs demand that they need to speak before large audiences, as long as there are people who suspect that they have a voice inside, as long as there are humans, there will be a steady stream of people coming in the door.

Having said that, there is some level of advertising that must be done, otherwise we would not have VPs or PR.

Here is a strawman argument that everyone can identify with. Pick a comparative shopping situation – restaurants, real estate, a job candidate, and so on. Is it too much of a stretch for me to say that in every situation, when given a choice between two stark contrasts, the better choice will always win? Getting back to my previous point of Toastmasters always having a stream of people coming in the door, if you have a poor club, you will have a stream of people leaving the door as well. When someone who knows very little or nothing about Toastmaster shows up at a meeting, you should be able to say to them, "At the end of this meeting, it should be evident what we do here and how it can help you."

In order to be able to make that claim, you have to put out a good product. People recognize a good product. They also recognize the opposite. If you build a good club, if you build a good meeting, they will come.

* * *

I have an annoying habit of offering my opinion. However, I have learned over time that any opinion is valid as long as it can be supported with sound arguments. Over the years, I have on

many occasions sent unsolicited emails to club members. “Hey, I see that this is your first time as Table Topics Masters. Here are some things to think about...,” “There is a reason why we don’t talk about certain topics at Toastmasters meetings...,” “That speech you gave today – with a little bit of tweaking, it could be a contest speech...”

When it came time to pick the High Performance Leadership project, I asked a fellow Toastmaster and friend for ideas. This person didn’t even hesitate in her response.

“You are always writing emails to people and the club. I’ve saved them all. You like to write. Why don’t you write a book with all of your advice?”

“Huhh? Interesting.” It made sense. This is the impetus of this book. It is my collective wisdom learned over close to 20 years of Toastmastering. Here is what this book will and will not be. First, it will not be a “let me print out all my emails and slap them together in a book” effort. As well, it will not be a step-by-step manual on how to run a club. What it will be is a somewhat opinionated discourse based on experience while providing rationale for what I say.

Let’s face it, we have all been to a meeting that, when it ends, you look back and say, “There was something special about that meeting.” If you have a good club, these meetings are not accidents.

If you build it, they will come.

How to Read this Book

It would be nice to think that everyone would open this book and read it from cover to cover. I am realistic. Having said that, if you are new to Toastmasters and you are starting a new club, you just may want to do so. At the very least, if you are in this position, you may want to flip through the index and cross-reference my advice against that of your Club Sponsor/Mentor. If nothing else, I may give you an alternative or a conversation starter.

If you are taking on the role of President, there is a lot of advice contained within. I was a President once, for two different clubs. However, I have witnessed the tenures of at least 25 Presidents. Some were good and some, well you know the rest. The point is I got a front-row seat from which I formulated many opinions.

If you are just a general run-of-the-mill Toastmaster, and aren’t we all, you can use this book situationally. For instance, if you are taking on the role of General Evaluator, take a look at what I have to say. It may give you some ideas.

When all else fails, you can leave this book in the bathroom and in your quiet moments, you can pass the time with me.

2. Discipline

Let me introduce you to some of my favorite words when it comes to Toastmasters meetings.

Discipline, discipline, discipline, discipline, and discipline.

If you want to have a good club, you need discipline. Let's make sure we all know the definition of this word. Here is a composite definition:

"The practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience."

Hmmm. Everything was going fine with that definition right up to the comma. However, I believe we can focus on the first part of this definition and come back around later to see if we can glean any usefulness from the second part.

One of the lessons I have learned as well as heard others expound on when it comes to raising children is that children do better in a structured environment. This means that there is order and there are expectations. Wake up at this time and go to sleep at this time; this time is for chores and this time is for play; and so on. Likewise, it should be with your Toastmasters meetings. Here is the template for how every meeting should be run:

1. The previous week's meeting concludes.
2. VP of Education signs people up for roles and speeches for the next meeting (or two). (There should be a sign-up sheet for a month out for those who are not at the meeting. The VP of Education should announce who is on the schedule for the next meeting and find people to take roles that are still available.)
3. One week out, the Toastmaster of the Day (TMOD) contacts all speakers and people with roles to confirm their attendance as well as to get information such as speech titles, project numbers, and introduction material.
4. One day out, the TMOD confirms the agenda (make sure that everyone scheduled to be there will be there). TMOD also emails out the agenda to the club. This reminds members that there's a meeting and lets them know who will be speaking.
5. 20 minutes before the meeting, the SGT at Arms and President get the room in order.
6. 15 minutes before the meeting, the Toastmaster and Board members arrive. The Toastmaster takes care of last-minute details. The Board members will be there to engage any guests and to provide support. Note: To a Toastmaster, everything we do in a meeting is "normal." Not so to a guest – standing, clapping, shaking hands, and so on. Preview what is going to happen and tell them at the end, it should make sense...oh, and give them an agenda so they follow along.

7. The meeting starts on time (every time) with two bangs of the gavel. (More to come later on the structure of meetings.)
8. The meeting is turned over to the TMOD. The TMOD runs the meeting flawlessly according to the agenda, passing it along to everyone with a contributing role.
9. The meeting ends on time with one bang of the gavel.
10. VP of Education signs people up for roles and speeches for the next meeting (or two).
11. Guests enthusiastically say, "How do I join?"

Sure, every club has a member named Murphy. Things happen. However, if you set the expectation that this is how you will do things, good things will happen most of the time. As well, an efficient and effective club will be able to manage Murphy's interruptions on-the-fly.

Doesn't this get boring?

What? Success? No, success rarely gets boring. Look at it this way; let's just say there is that rare club member who thinks constant change is good. Fine. Let that member hold his opinion. Now consider the opinion of a guest who shows up at one of the "boring, structured, disciplined even" meetings? What do you think their reaction is to witnessing an efficient meeting? It is a universal reaction, "Wow! That was fantastic! I can see how this will help me!" You see, as much as your current members are important, let's face it, if you were to forever cap membership to the current roster, your club would quickly die. Successful, vibrant clubs need to have an active pipeline of prospects.

Fear not, though. There is a remedy for those who do not like all of the discipline and structure. Refer to Special Meetings.

What is the best meeting structure?

Obviously, it is the one that I advocate. That is what I used to think-- and on most days, it is what I continue to think. Being an Area Director provided an eye-opening experience visiting other clubs. It is rare to find two clubs that do things exactly the same. So, who is to say that I am right? I will describe to you the way our club runs a meeting. I will tell you that it works best for us, in that we meet at noon, once a week for one hour. We frown upon starting at 12:01 and ending after 1:00. If you are doing the math, we have one hour and we make the most of it. Below is one of our typical meeting timelines:

12:00 President gavels the meeting open, leads the club in the Pledge of Allegiance, gives a pithy opening thought, and perhaps invites those in the room to introduce themselves, briefly answer an opening question, and then introduce the person next to them.

12:06 President turns the meeting over to the Toastmaster of the Day (TMOD). The TMOD previews the meeting, introduces the word of the day, a meeting theme (if applicable), and the General Evaluator. The General Evaluator introduces the AHH Counter, the Grammarian, the Timer, and the Vote Counter and asks each to briefly describe their role. The General Evaluator turns it back to the TMOD.

12:08 The TMOD warmly introduces the first speaker and asks the speaker's evaluator to read the speech objectives.

12:16 The TMOD warmly introduces the second speaker and asks the speaker's evaluator to read the speech objectives.

12:24 The TMOD calls for the Timer's report to see if both speakers qualified. The TMOD asks the audience to vote on the better speaker according to objectives and to pass the votes to the Vote Counter. The TMOD encourages the audience to pass along notes to the speakers.

12:26 The TMOD turns the meeting over to the Table Topics Master (Table Topics Master). The Table Topics Master conducts a lively session trying to reach the target of 7 contestants. The Table Topics Master succinctly summarizes who said what. The Table Topics Master calls for a Timer report to see if all Table Topics speakers qualified. The Table Topics Master asks audience to vote on the best Table Topics constant and instructs them to pass the votes to the Vote Counter.

12:44 The Table Topics Master turns the meeting over to the TMOD. The TMOD turns the meeting over to the General Evaluator.

12:45 The General Evaluator (GE) describes the purpose and value of evaluations. The GE calls for the first Evaluator. The GE calls for the second Evaluator. The GE calls for a Timer's report to see if both Evaluators qualified. The GE asks the audience to vote on the better Evaluator and asks them to pass the votes to the Vote Counter. The GE calls for the AHH Counter and Grammarian reports. The GE provides personal observations of the overall meeting.

12:57 The GE turns the meeting over to the TMOD. The TMOD announces the winners and passes out the ribbons.

12:59 The TMOD turns the meeting over to the President who makes announcements and gavel the meeting to a close.

1:01 Guests sign up to join the club because they were so impressed.

As well, I have determined a benchmark for determining whether a meeting was successful –17 people got a chance to speak meaningfully. Here is how I arrive at this number:

- President

- Toastmaster
- 2 speakers
- Table Topics Master
- 7 Table Topics Contestants
- General Evaluator
- 2 Evaluators
- Ahh Counter
- Grammarian

Obviously, this is just one model. You may have longer meetings. You may have three speakers in which case, you will have fewer Table Topics. I get it. There are two take-aways from this model:

1. If you run a tight meeting, with everyone conscious of everyone else in the meeting, you will be surprised at how many people get to speak.
2. If I show up at a meeting and I don't get to speak but I know that the club did everything they could to get me up there, I am okay. Besides, I will have absorbed a lot of good speaking and leadership tips.

Too Many Moving Parts

In the previous section, I gave a somewhat tongue-in-cheek response of, "Obviously, it is the one that I advocate," to the question of, "What is the best meeting structure?" I have been a member of my home club for close to 20 years. I have seen some changes over the years. The operative word in that last statement is "some." I also referred to parenting in the need for structure. In terms of my home club, we started with a format of speeches, then evaluations, then Table Topics, then General Evaluation. After about a year of this format, we decided that having evaluations directly following speeches did not give the Evaluator enough time to prepare, so we made an adjustment (as deliberated by the Board). This was a good decision that has worked magnificently. About eight years back, a Board member proposed that we introduce a new role of Table Topics Evaluator. This person would listen to the questions, fill out a quick synopsis evaluation, and pass them along each Table Topics contestant. After all, feedback is important, correct? A problem arose. Think about this. In order to evaluate a Table Topic, you need to listen to the Table Topic. In order to listen to the Table Topic, you cannot be filling out the evaluation for the previous Table Topic. In the end, this exercise, though well intentioned, fell short of its goal of providing effective feedback. The next President convinced the Board to stop the practice.

These two examples demonstrate some salient points. For new clubs, quite often your meeting format will be based on recommendations by your mentor or sponsor. Or, you may have done some research online and arrived at a format. For new clubs, I recommend the following. After a year or so of existence, evaluate your format to see if it is working for you. Just like our club, someone raised the point that our Evaluators didn't have enough time. A discussion was held and a change for the better was made. As well, take some time to visit other clubs, preferably one that is established as well as one that is similar in nature (i.e., if you are a corporate club that has one-hour meetings weekly, find another club that does the same).

Another salient point is that you should be careful when you try to make a change just because someone makes a suggestion. The thing you need to remember about a one-hour meeting is that it contains only 60 minutes. You need to make the most of those 60 minutes. You need to maximize speaking opportunities for everyone. Introducing something that takes time – that might for example, reduce the meeting by one Table Topics question – is doing damage to the club.

At some point, our club introduced the concept of an opening question. For example, the President starts the meeting with the question, "Today is the first day of Autumn. I love Autumn. We are going to go around the room, introduce ourselves, and talk about what we like about Autumn." If you were to ask me if I like this practice, I would respond, "I love it and I hate it." I love it because it is a good way to break the ice and get people talking. I hate it because the question, as asked, forgets one important admonition. How about the following reformulation.

"Today is the first day of Autumn. I love Autumn. We are going to go around the room, introduce ourselves, and talk about why we like Autumn. Now, we have a big crowd, so I am going to ask you to limit your answer to one or two sentences."

Give people the chance to talk and they will talk. All of a sudden, fifteen minutes goes by and you are still talking about Autumn. Now you have time for only two Table Topics questions.

Something else to keep in mind is that if you decide to have a WordMaster, JokeMaster, VideoMaster, and so on in addition to your other roles, you are going to have to staff these roles. I would venture a guess that most Toastmaster clubs walk a fine line when it comes to getting the right attendance. The more roles you have, the more people you require. If you can run a lean meeting, you will have fewer moving parts. If you can get a consistent format, it is easier to train new member to fill any of the roles.

A final note I will add about starting a meeting. Some clubs have an invocation, some have a thought of the day, some have the SGT of Arms open the meeting. I recommend that your club have the President open and close each meeting. As President, you have a lot to do to keep the club running. You are the face of the club for the year. You should have your moment in the

sun. In our club, traditionally the President doesn't take any roles, doesn't get called on for Table Topics, and some Presidents will even refrain from giving speeches or competing in contests for the year. The reason is that for every meeting, the President is guaranteed an opportunity to speak. Let the President have fun. Let the President be presidential.

3. The Eric Clapton Test

I have often urged members to consider Eric Clapton. But first, the reason why.

Has this happened to you? A new member joins your club. You welcome him. You encourage her. He begins his journey with his Icebreaker. It is a good speech. She receives accolades. He is invigorated. The next thing you know, she is on the speaking calendar every month. From your perspective, he has talent. Soon after, and it may be as soon as six months or it may take a year, she drops the bombshell – she wants to earn a living by speaking. What should you do? What advice should you give him? Well, you could ask her to consider Eric Clapton. I have done this on several occasions. The conversation goes like this.

“If you were to poll people, unscientifically mind you, to compile a list of the greatest guitar players in the world, the list would contain some familiar names. Certainly, anyone who came of age in the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s would not be faulted for including Eric Clapton on the list, after all, he has an impressive body of work to call upon. Now, consider this. What if it were possible to come up with some definitive test to determine who the world’s greatest guitar player was, who do you think it would be? There is a very good chance that it would be some 16-year old kid in a basement somewhere in Ohio. But the reason you will never know this kid is that he has skills but no message.

No message.

Eric Clapton makes many a list. As an individual and as a member of several collaborative efforts, he had a healthy list of songs that were hits. When pushed, you could probably list some impressive guitar solos from some of these songs. In short, his body of work is impressive. His songs are his message. What is your message?”

Here is where the dilemma lies. What is the tempered balance between encouragement and admonition, between dreams and reality. If you need further proof, how many contest speeches have you heard whose message can be boiled down to, “I did it. You can do it too.” On the surface, this is a noble sentiment. However, if you hear it enough, the message becomes cliché. A cliché that is overused becomes something else – hackneyed. It would be fair if you accused me of cynicism. I will accept that. I will also ask you this. Have you ever encountered a Toastmaster peddling their three-, four-, five-, six- and-so-on success method to other Toastmasters for the amazing fee of <insert figure here>? If so, then here is my retort. To be king of the mountain is one thing. To realize your mountain is a dung heap is another. To be atop a dung heap just means you smell more of the dung from below.

So what do you do? It’s simple. Keep on encouraging, for it is the Toastmaster thing to do. Let me pose another question. Let’s say you have two children getting ready to go off to college. One child says that he/she wants to be a nurse, the other wants to major in sociology. Let’s say you took it a step further and did some research, the results of which you present to your

children. “Here are the career opportunities and statistics for advancement for each of your chosen paths.” Do you really think the pat on the shoulder that you give each child as you tell them, “Good luck,” will originate from the same part of your intellect?

In my humble opinion, if you are making a living talking to other Toastmasters, you are making a living, not making a difference. It gets back to the question of, “So what do you do?” Encourage them but ask them if they can define what their message is. If they can, help them. People always need help on their journey. Toastmasters of all stripes understand this more than any another of segment in society with the exception of perhaps teachers. However, if their message is, “I want to change the world,” you may want to pat them on the back and wish them luck because don’t we all.

We all know who Eric Clapton is. We don’t know the 16-year old in the basement in Ohio who might have Clapton’s talent, but not his message.

4. The President and the Board

The role of President is demanding. It should be. However, it is rewarding both in terms of personal growth and the role the President plays in the continuing legacy of the club. Now, let me clarify the opening statement. Yes, it is demanding, but only until you get into the rhythm of the role. What follows are thoughts on how you can make your tenure a good one.

Get a strong, supportive Board and make them do their job. When I say, “make them,” set expectations and have them share the workload. Toastmasters is as much about leadership as it is about speaking. Lead. It helps to have regular Board meetings. In my home club, the Board meets monthly. Those who are onsite come to a conference room. Those who are not call in. Charge your Secretary with soliciting for the agenda and then posting minutes after the meeting. My other club is a community club. It is younger. We have quarterly meetings. Monthly is better but a community club has its own set of complications. The point is, meet regularly.

It helps to create a yearly calendar. Certain things happen like clockwork. For instance, there are two sets of contests, one in the spring and one in the fall (though at the time of this printing, Toastmasters International has scaled back on the number of contests). My home club has special meetings – a Love meeting in February, a backwards meeting around April Fool’s Day, Ghostmasters around Halloween, and the Pollyanna Table Topics meeting in December. Some clubs also have potluck dinners, happy hours, and picnics. During your Board Meetings, if you can look three months out, this will help you identify what needs to be planned. The single-most important thing I did when I was President was during the first Board meeting; we identified the Contest Chairs for the four contests. With the help of the VP of Education, we pinpointed members who needed to perform this task in order to get their Competent Communicator. Doing this upfront alleviated headache throughout the year. Having said that, with the new Pathways education, I am not sure what the correlation is between CC and the new curriculum.

Here are some Presidential tips:

- Start the meeting and end the meeting – I’ve said it elsewhere, I’ll say it here as well. You are the face of the club for the year, you deserve your several minutes of fame each meeting. Don’t just start the meeting. Set the tone. Inspire; don’t preach.
- Treat new members like royalty – When the President before me did his turnover, he gave me some boilerplate emails. They were good, but they weren’t me. When the first new member joined under my watch, I pulled up the email template that was given me...and then I closed it. I had remembered a snippet of a conversation or two that I had with the new member when they were a guest. I crafted an email, embellishing a little, all the while incorporating some of the snippets. It was well received. And then another guest joined. I thought, “Well, I guess I did it for this person, I should do it for

that person too.” I realize that writing comes hard for some folks. I write for a living so it is easier. However, with each personalized welcome letter I sent, the process became easier. There were two big pay-offs to this approach. The first was that new members felt welcomed...as they should. Second, I had people tell me, “I actually read your emails.” I think the key is that if people know that a template emails is in their inbox, they already know what it says.

- Reach out to keep them coming – A member skips a meeting. This happens. When a member skips two meetings in succession, this is unfortunate. When a member skips three meetings in a row, there is a chance that they have talked themselves out of the fourth, fifth, and every meeting after that. Toastmasters is very similar to diet and exercise. People take up all of these activities because they know they need to make a change. Change is a hard thing to sustain. Once you have given yourself an excuse to quit, it is hard to fight the urge for complacency. When you see that a member has skipped two meetings, reach out to them. You just may be the impetus for them to recommit. There is also a less altruistic Presidential angle. Every March and September, there is an unfortunate aspect to Toastmasters that must be attended to – renewals. Show me a club that renews all of its members each term and I will show you an imaginary club. As President, you need to hustle for a dime. Every member is important.
- Reach out to lift them up – Imagine getting an unsolicited email saying, “Hey, not for nothing, but you did a really good job tonight. I like the way you did A, B, and C.” This costs you very little and the payoff is immense.
- Don’t spam – Keep your emails concise and infrequent. Just like anything else in life, you are competing for inbox time. If you are someone who is long in the electronic tooth, you may find yourself saying frequently, “Didn’t you read my email?” “No, I didn’t”.
- Find the next woman/man up – Soon after your term begins, you should have your eyes set on the next President and future Board members. Officially there is an election process. However, I think most Toastmasters club suffer from the same issues trying to find folks to take on the responsibility. Therefore, start looking early. Identify members who are ready to take on the responsibility. Plant the seed in their mind. Not only that, ask them directly. If you have a good club, it is easier to convince folks to help out. The Catch 22 is that you need folks to help out to make it a good club.
- Work toward the Distinguished Club Program – I am not a metrics type of guy. You either got it or you don’t. When I became President, I told my Board, “I could care less of about the DCP. Let’s just do our jobs.” Having said that, there was a little bit of indifference but there was a little bit of confidence. If you do a good job and you have a strong club, you are going to get 8, 9, or 10 goals without trying. It is like the quote from *Field of Dreams* – “If you build it, they will come.” We got 9 out of 10 that year. I will

now tell you this. I was in an awkward position. I could have been derelict in my duty and gotten those 9 points. We have a club that runs on autopilot. I realized that this is an anomaly. I am now a big proponent of the DCP. You should review it monthly with your Board. Like anything else in life, goals can be fun as well as motivating.

5. The VP of Education and Volunteering

It took 14 years for me to realize something – a lot of clubs are poorly run. I just assumed that the way we did things was the way all clubs did things. I was wrong. It wasn't until I ventured out beyond our club and helped charter a community club that I was exposed to the ugly truth of Toastmasters – the failure rate of clubs is staggering. I don't have statistics to back this up. I will just say, become an Area Director or higher and you will see it first-hand. To some extent, being a President of a Club is the same as being the Director of a District. You constantly have to add new members to replace the ones that fall off. You constantly have to charter new clubs to replace the ones that disappear.

But there is a secret to making sure that your club not only survives but thrives. It revolves around how you view the role of VP of Education. Back to the success of my home club. I don't recall the details but since the very first Board, we had our VP of Education create a monthly calendar one month out. During the previous month, VP of Education would send out an email asking if any member had a special request for roles or speaking slots, or if any member did not want to be scheduled. A non-response was interpreted as "I have no preferences." The agenda was then posted. If you couldn't make it to a meeting that you were scheduled for, it was your responsibility to find a replacement. Two-speaker meetings were the norm though if there were lots of people looking to speak, we would schedule three-speaker meetings.

Note: The reason why a two-speaker meeting was preferable is that it allows for a longer Table Topics session. Table Topics are vital. When members know they have a chance of speaking, they will show up. Of course, this is predicated on one-hour meeting with hard start and stop times. If you let your meeting run on, shame on you for not respecting members' time. If your meetings can accommodate more than two speakers and a healthy Table Topics session, ignore this aside.

This method became the norm. This became the expectation. True, this puts a little bit of a burden on the VP of Education. However, the payout is enormous. When you have a fully-stocked meeting, there is no scrambling. As well, members enjoy showing up because they know, regardless of whether they are participating or observing, they will witness a complete meeting. However, there is a more important and perhaps esoteric reason for doing things this way.

The lifeblood of any sales organization is the pipeline – the steady rhythm of upcoming sales. The lifeblood of any club is the pipeline – the steady influx of new members. Before you can be a new member, typically you are a guest.

I frequently meet guests prior to the meeting in the lobby of our building. As I am walking them to the meeting, I go through my routine – "How did you hear about us and what do you know about Toastmasters?" As for the first question, it is usually a result of an internet search born

out of a desire to improve. As for the second question, I have a short spiel prepared about the structure of the meeting, how it has three parts – formal speaking, impromptu speaking, and a feedback loop vis-à-vis evaluation. Then, almost as an afterthought I add, “At the end of the meeting, you should have a sense of how a meeting runs and how it can help you.” In order to be able to make this claim, you need to be able to back it up with a quality meeting. And this brings me to my point.

Many clubs deal with filling the schedule based on volunteering, be it through a FreeToast website or through a more shotgun approach of whoever shows up, signs up. The inherent problem with these methods is that it relies on good will and a hope against human nature prevailing, namely, give a person a reason to not show up and the slightest of excuses will make this a reality.

Back to my little chat with guests prior to the meeting. It is not uncommon that a prospect is shopping clubs to find the one that suits their needs. Imagine showing up at a meeting with roles not filled and no speakers. If there are no speakers, there is no Evaluator. Right there, two thirds of your “combat effectiveness” is gone. What are the chances of getting a second chance with the guest? This is a rhetorical question.

My advice then is this. Be proactive in your club’s scheduling. Do not rely on members volunteering out of good faith. Create a schedule. Create a commitment.

Speaking of new members, there are two prevailing schools of thought concerning journeys. There is the first school that says everyone is on their own journey and thus, everyone should be on their own timetable. I have walked this earth long enough to understand the weaknesses of the human condition. I advocate a second school of thought – assist in that journey. To that extent, I recommend the following.

Schedule a new member’s Icebreaker within two months of the start of their TM journey. Once they begin their journey, they begin their journey. Once one speech has been delivered, the second one becomes easier. Simultaneously, you should start them down the path of taking roles. Here is the progression I suggest:

- Table Topics Master (they will have participated in it by now, Table Topics that is...it will be fun for them to be on the other end.)
- Minor roles – Timer, Vote Counter, Ah Counter, and Grammarian are all easy to do. Get them invested.
- Toastmaster – After they have seen a few meetings (and with the help of a mentor), it is time for them to get invested. The secret is to have a good agenda which serves as a script.
- General Evaluator – Again, with the help of a mentor and after several months of observing meetings, it is time to take the leap. I think that, next to the role of Evaluator,

that of General Evaluator is the most demanding. It requires the planning of the Toastmaster role with a little bit of insight of what constitutes a good or bad meeting. This takes time; however, you have to start somewhere.

- Evaluator – This is the toughest role by far. It requires personal delivery skills such as when delivering Table Topics. It also requires good listening and deciphering skills as well. The best preparation for this role is to witness other club members delivering excellent evaluations.

6. General Speaking Advice

Prepare Yourself for Failure

No, the glass isn't half empty, but what follows is advice for what you should do in the event the glass tips over.

A while back I had an email exchange with a Toastmaster who was representing the club in competition. For the sake of generalities and anonymity, let's call the speaker Bob and make his speech a humorous one about the trials and tribulations of raising children.

Bob had a good speech that had potential to advance in competition. Bob's speech was well received when it took top honors at the club level. Bob, in the Toastmaster spirit of constant improvement, solicited advice from club members. As can be expected the speech changed a bit, but the original content remained true to its original intent. So, with the final draft in hand, Bob set about the arduous task of polishing his delivery.

A funny thing can happen in competition. When you are delivering a speech for the first time, it is the first time you give it and consequently, the first time it is heard. I have found that although you have the least amount of practice, there is something special about the first presentation – it is delivered with raw, unbridled enthusiasm. When you give it the second and third time, you have more time to think about it. That is not to say that subsequent efforts cannot be better than the initial attempt.

Speaking from personal experience in competition, I have experienced various levels of achievement. I have also experience various levels of failure, not so much in the outcome (though since you have never seen me holding the trophy on the International stage, you can read between these double-spaced lines). I am referring to failures in my delivery. These failures can be categorized as follows.

Deer in the headlights – You have practiced, you have deemed yourself perfectly prepared, your name and speech title are announced, you take your spot in the front of the audience, and you can't remember the first sentence of your speech for the life of you. It can happen. It can also happen midstream. In the event that this occurs, you should have two presentation techniques at the ready. First, and foremost, you should have a copy of the speech nearby. I tend to keep a copy folded in my pocket. Another option would be to inconspicuously place a copy on the podium or lectern before the competition begins. There are some who would consider looking at a speech during competition to be a faux pas from which you cannot recover, but that is why you need the second technique – the well-rehearsed ad lib line. Take Bob and his speech about his children. In the event that Bob forgot his opening line, he could sit there looking like a fool until he remembered (a fool and the prize are soon parted), he could go off script and hope to correct himself later (not recommended), or he could take a moment and recalibrate. I see no problem with the third option, considering the alternatives. However, as Bob is reaching for the speech, Bob should be wooing the audience with his wit, reciting the aforementioned ad lib line like, "My wife just called and told me three things I needed to pick up on the way home tonight. I remember what they are, but now it seems I forgot what my opening was." When handled with grace and poise, the audience (and judges) show a great propensity for forgiveness.

I forgot to add the Paprika – As with memorized speeches, you know every paragraph and sentence with intimate detail. Unfortunately, this sometimes becomes apparent most when you are cruising

along delivering your speech when your brain runs a quick diagnostic exam. As you brilliantly cross the half way point, you shur inside as you realize you left out an entire paragraph. What makes matters worse is that in your heart of hearts, you assess this paragraph to be chock full of juicy points. In that split second, your brain ponders stupidity – inserting the paragraph later in the speech. This is akin to making a complicated dish that calls for ingredients to be added in a certain order and fashion. As you open the oven door to insert the dish, you realize you left something out. My advice with both the recipe and the speech is the same – drive on. Ultimately, you are the only one who knows the content of your speech and consequently, you are the only one who knows what wasn't said. True, you run the risk of leaving out a supporting detail, but I believe you run a bigger risk of losing points when you try to make adjustments on-the-fly.

In the end, there is no substitution for preparation, but you should always be prepared to handle Murphy when he is sitting in the front row.

[That was a nice gesture...](#)

There are times when a friend says, “What’s eating at you?” and I respond, “What do you mean? I didn’t say anything.”

“It’s your body language.”

I am sure I am not the first person in a relationship to be accused of this. I offer this up as proof positive that there is more to communicating than spoken words.

If you have been through the Competent Communicator manual, you are well aware of Speech #5 – Your Body Speaks, aka, the gesture speech. This is a fun speech to deliver and from an Evaluator’s perspective an easy one to evaluate. But what about the other 9 speeches and any that may follow in the advanced manuals? I don’t recall ever seeing in the objectives the admonition, “Ensure that NO body language or gestures are used to enhance your point.”

Let this serve as a threefold reminder:

- **Speaker** – Speech #5 is where gestures are on display. Every other speech, however, should include a mental deliberation as to how gestures and body language can be incorporated. There is plenty of low hanging fruit to harvest. For instance, if you are giving a speech about a personal journey (physical or metaphoric), why not start off on the left side of the room and slowly work your way to the right. One of the biggest impediments to incorporating gestures is preparation. Just as you need to prepare for what will be said, you should also prepare for how it will be delivered. If you are finishing your speech the night before, you have the “what” but not the “how”. You need to practice gestures as you practice your speech delivery. [Advanced technique – We are hardwired to think of progress in a left-to-right fashion. However, when you are presenting, if you move left-to-right, your audience sees you moving right-to-left. Factor in the mirror effect and reverse your presentation polarity.]
- **Evaluator** – Make sure you include gestures in your thought process when crafting your evaluation. The speech evaluation may not warrant it, but if there is room to do so, comment on what was done and what cards were left on the table. I have learned over the years that some people naturally know how to use gestures while others don’t. As an Evaluator, if you can

demonstrate a part of the speech that cried out for a gesture, you will be doing a great service to the speaker and the club.

- **General Evaluator** – Your purview encompasses the entire meeting. And if I am not mistaken, there are lots of opportunities to speak. If there are lots of opportunities to speak, there are lots of opportunities to use gestures. I think you know where I am going.

In the end, if you tell someone that you are going to tell them three things, that's one thing. If you do so while holding up three fingers, you are reinforcing your message. Tell me, who is not interested in being an effective communicator?

I look forward to hearing you...and seeing you...communicate.

7. Meeting Roles

Meetings do not run themselves. They rely on special people – volunteers. Volunteers fill roles. There are many resources available to learn about these roles. They are valuable, for sure. However, the best resource available is a capable Toastmaster in action, fulfilling one of these roles. The strongest clubs are those whose members are competent in all aspects of a Toastmasters meeting. They teach by doing.

Having said that, bad habits are also learned or passed along. As well, not all clubs do things the same. Case in point, we had a seasoned Toastmaster move in from out of town. On his first time as General Evaluator, he spent precious time evaluating the Evaluators. Whereas there is value in this, our club does not have the luxury of time to incorporate this into a one-hour meeting. Passing comments along is the way we give feedback.

Further, all new members should have a mentor assigned. A good mentor will take note of when their mentee is on the agenda filling a role for the first time. The mentor should reach out to their mentee before the meeting and talk it through. As well, after the meeting, there should be a recap with the mentee.

Over the years, I have passed along a lot of advice on roles. What follows is some of that advice.

President

The manner in which meetings are opened vary. I have seen the SGT of Arms call the meeting to order. Some clubs have the Toastmaster open the meeting. By far, the method I prefer is to have the President open and close the meeting. The reason is for one year, the President is the face of the club. They should get their pound of speaking flesh each meeting. They have earned it. Traditionally in our club, the President will not take any roles in the meeting so as to ensure that speaking opportunities are spread around to as many people.

It is also good for a President to put his or her signature on their Presidency. Some Presidents issue a challenge to club members. My personal favorite technique was to introduce a pithy, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes whimsical opening thought. As well, I would often pose an introductory question to members. For example,

“Today I saw a can of paint sitting on the table in the living room. It has been there for one month. It serves as a reminder that I need to paint the room. My opening question to you is, ‘what task is awaiting you?’ Please stand, state your name, AND IN FIFTEEN SECONDS OR LESS, tell me what task you have been putting off. Then introduce the person to your right. We’ll start with Bob.”

Take note of the following. The item in all caps is important. If you put no time constraints on people, they will turn it into a table topic. Sometimes you will need to stop midstream and

remind people to be mindful of the time. After all, everyone is responsible for the time. The other nice aspect of this is that club members are introducing others. Introductions are an important part of speaking. Finally, introductions give the Table Topics Master an opportunity to write down names. Of course, if the agenda is tight, you may want to curtail the opening question and have people stand, state their name, and then introduce the person to their right.

The President should also be given a minute or so at the end of the meeting for announcements. One final bit of Presidential business. When using the gavel to open and close the meeting, the official way is to issue two gavel bangs to open the meeting and one gavel bang to close the meeting.

Toastmaster of the Day (TMOD)

When you are TMOD, your first and foremost responsibility is to manage the agenda. This means keeping to the schedule. If you can do this, you have run a successful meeting. Club meeting durations vary. Unless you have a club with open-ended meeting times, it is essential to know when each part of the meeting ends. I like to refer to our meetings as a three-act play. The first act is the formal speaking portion – speeches. The second act is impromptu speaking – Table Topics. The third act is the review – General Evaluation.

The key is to give the second act as much time as possible. When the meeting starts, your first and third acts are known entities. Let's say you have two speeches in the 5-7-minute range, you can factor in the maximum time which should allow for introductions and the reading of the speech objectives. That should take 16 minutes. If you have more speeches, increase this number accordingly. For the third act, you can figure in 3:30 per evaluation, 45 seconds each for Grammarian and Ah Counter, and 3 minutes for the General Evaluation. Do the math and everything should be left for Table Topics. Of course, you need to factor in the opening and closing of the meeting. The point is, whatever your club's meeting timeframe is, the TMOD should be aware of the parameters under which you operate. Obey them.

Speaking of time management, you need to be aware of the rhythm of the meeting. Murphy is a member of every club and from time-to-time, he speaks too long. As a clock manager, you will need to adjust. For instance, you may need to cut introductions short even if you have planned for something special. If you start the General Evaluation portion late, you need to tell the General Evaluator to expedite things. For instance, they may need to tell their Ah Counter and Grammarian to just hit the highlights. As well, the General Evaluator may have to send meeting comments via email. The bottom line is that no member has a right to infringe upon the time of other members.

But why stop at time management?

Any emcee must be adept at welcoming guests. There is no better way to do this than to make them feel good. You should never, for example, say, "Our first speaker is Bob. Please welcome

Bob with his speech titled..." Sure, Bob would not be offended by such an introduction. However, Bob will have a pep in his step if your introduction is, "Our next speaker is someone whom we all love to hear speak. In his last speech, he wowed us with..." Make it personal. There are many different ways to do an introduction. At the very least, you can ask for personal information ahead of time. If you are having a themed meeting, you can ask the speaker a question ahead of time relating to the theme. However, the best introductions are ones from the heart. In order to do this, you must keep a running mental tab of everything notable the person in question has said or done previously. If push comes to shove, if your club uses an opening question, you can extract some detail out of it and parlay it into a witty introduction.

As well, you should be aware of things that other might have missed. For instance, if at the end of Table Topics, the Table Topics Master forgot to call for votes, without calling attention to this miss, you can remind the audience to pass their votes to the Vote Counter. Similarly, don't forget to ask the Timer if everyone qualified after speaking. Speakers who did not qualify should be excluded from the voting. (Note that not all clubs do voting.) Speaking of speakers, before you introduce them, you should always have the Evaluator announce the project number and read the speech objectives. This helps the audience calibrate what they are hearing.

Just as warm introductions are nice, comments on the way out are nice flourishes. This applies to speakers and hand-offs from people with roles. For example, "Now we know why Table Topics help us so much. Thank you, Mary, for the stimulation." One word of caution. Say the first speaker does a great job. You do not want to say something like, "That was such great speech. What a treat for the club!" The problem is, what if the second speech was only so-so. What are you going to say then? If you repeat the comment you made for the first speaker, everyone in the room will see through this. If you are going to comment after each speaker, extract something from the speech. For example, "You know, after hearing that speech about bee-keeping, I will never complain again about being stung. Speaking of being stung, our next speaker's speech is titled, My First Love. Let's see if there was a sting involved. But first, can we have the objectives." You will notice two things in this comment. The first was that it was warm, but innocuous. The second was that there was a direct transition into the speaker. As a Toastmasters, always keep your ear open for "the little things" that you can use to bridge gaps. Now, after all speakers have finished, if you can find a way to complement each while maintaining parity in your praises, this is a wonderful thing to do. If you cannot, a simple thanks suffices.

Finally, your last duty is to end the meeting and hand out the awards. [I understand that some clubs do not hand out awards. Some don't know to, others operate under the egalitarian model in that they don't want anyone's feeling hurt. I can tell you that knowing there is a prize at the end spurs people on to do better. Conversely, I have never witnessed anyone

complaining, “Poor me, I didn’t win.” Order ribbons today. It is a good way to recognize achievement.] You should hand out ribbons in the order of importance, least to most. Thus, hand out Table Topics first, then Evaluators, then Speakers. As well, there is a ribbon available for anyone who gives their Icebreaker. This is a nice touch. Also, awards help develop the listening skills of members who vote.

Once the awards are given, provide a positive comment on the nature of the meeting. Like a speech, this comment should be a bookend to the nice, pithy introduction. Speaking of introductions, this reminds me of a warning. Over the years, I have witnessed what I call the David Letterman effect: the TMOD feeling the need to perform an opening monologue, especially when there is a themed meeting. The problem with this is that as the TMOD, your primary mission is to keep the meeting moving with a secondary mission of ensuring that as many people get an opportunity to speak. Toastmasters teaches us to speak effectively, not just speak. If your monologue effectively takes the time away from, say having one more Table Topics contestant, then you have done a disservice. There is nothing like the feeling of coming to a Toastmasters meeting and not being given the opportunity to speak.

General Evaluator

The role of General Evaluator is the single-most important role for the long-term health of the club. However, I am baffled by the number of times I have heard this in the General Evaluator report:

“We had a really good meeting. We started on time. I didn’t see anything wrong. Good job.”

At the very least, if there truly was nothing wrong, then point out all that was done right for the benefit of new members. Having said that, there is always something to improve. Meetings are not flawless.

Before I continue, I must add a caveat. In order to have a successful General Evaluation program, you must have a club that is open and eager to receive feedback. If not...

Let’s go over a day in the life of the General Evaluator. The day starts early for the General Evaluator. Under the purview of the General Evaluator falls several other individuals: Ah Counter, Grammarian, and speech Evaluators. Your club may have other specialized roles included in with the General Evaluation portion.

Before continuing, I must comment on some disturbing aspects of club culture that I have encountered. I have seen clubs that do not use the General Evaluator. I don’t understand this. Such clubs either inherited this laissez-faire model or found it difficult to fill this role. Show me any business model, academic rigor, or athletic pursuit that does not have a feedback loop built into it and I will show you the definition of lackluster. So, not only should you have a General Evaluator, you should empower the General Evaluator by giving him the last third of the meeting to lead the club in a retrospective.

Let's return to the day in the life. At the beginning of the meeting when the Toastmaster provides a preview, he or she should introduce the General Evaluator. The General Evaluator should then provide a one or two sentence umbrella statement of what a General Evaluator does (this provides an opportunity for the General Evaluator to practice compressed messaging and as well, it serves to help guests and new members understand the various roles). The General Evaluator should also ask the Grammarian, Ahh Counter, Timer, and Vote Counter (and whatever other role your club may have) to briefly describe their roles (for the same reasons as listed above). The General Evaluator then turns the meeting back over to the TMOD.

The General Evaluator continues to watch, observe, and take notes.

After Table Topics, the TMOD turns the meeting over to the General Evaluator. The General Evaluator is now in charge of the most crucial part of the meeting and as such, it is fitting that he or she preview the next segment of the meeting. "Fellow Toastmasters, now is the time for us to look back so that we can move ahead in the right direction. We will now examine what we did well and where we can improve. First up are the speech evaluations..."

As with all things Toastmasters, if you provide a warm introduction to the speech Evaluator, more power to you. At the very least, you need to do the minimum, "Our first Evaluator is Joe X. He will be evaluating Suzy Y's speech. Please welcome Joe." When Joe is finished, thank him and bring up the next Evaluator. In keeping with the parity in comments theme, do not comment on the first Evaluator's evaluation because it will be expected for you to do the same for the second one. What if the second one is terrible? Rather, wait till both are done and comment appropriately.

I mentioned earlier, that our club does not evaluate the Evaluators. However, it is highly appropriate for the General Evaluator to highlight key points that would benefit the club. Don't make it a love fest, though. Offer up tangible comments.

Don't forget to ask the Timer if both Evaluators qualified and then call for votes for the better of the two (or best of the three or more).

Next call on your Ahh Counter and Grammarian Reports. As mentioned elsewhere, everyone is responsible for time management. You cannot cut the Evaluators short. They are allocated up to 3:30 minutes. When the evaluations are finished, you should have a sense of how much time remains. You may have to preface your introductions to the Ahh Counter and Grammarian with an admonition to keep it under 45 seconds. In terms of club culture, some clubs have everyone come to the front of the room to speak. In our club, when the General Evaluator calls for the special reports, the individuals stand in place and report. This helps with time management.

Finally, it is time for your comments to the club. How much can one find to comment on? Read the next section and you will find out.

General Evaluator Personal Comments

Your job as General Evaluator begins in advance of the meeting, when the first email arrives. Preparation adds a lot to the flow. You will be able to contrast the outcome of the meeting with the preparation. You should have a pen in hand with the crack of the gavel. The purpose of any General Evaluator is twofold: – to critique the meeting and to teach others to be an excellent General Evaluator.

Things you should never hear: “I think we had a really good meeting. Everyone pitched in. It was fun.” In my 20 years of Toastmaster, I have seen very few exceptional meetings. Just as you can spend time critiquing a flawed meeting, you can spend the time dissecting a flawless meeting. Pointing out the exceptional is equally beneficial.

Time management is one of the big areas to track. The following is what I consider the timeline of a perfect one-hour meeting from 12:00-1:00:

11:55	The room is set, agendas are laid out, ballots in place.
11:59	The President, having conferred with the TMOD, who in turn, has conferred with staff, holds the gavel in hand.
12:00	Two authoritative bangs of the gavel start the meeting.
12:03	President concludes opening remarks, terse comments, does not steal the thunder of the TMOD. If an opening question is given, the answers are equally terse with no one member speaking for more than 15 seconds.
12:05	A thoughtful introduction is given to the TMOD.
12:06	TMOD previews the meeting.
12:07	Reading of Objectives, speeches commence, verify speeches qualify for voting, call for votes.
12:23	Meeting is turned over to Table Topics Master.
12:43	Table Topics Master summarizes Table Topic speakers and calls for votes.
12:44	Meeting turned back over to TMOD and then handed over to General Evaluator.
12:45	General Evaluator gives a brief introduction and leads speech evaluation portion of meeting.
12:51	Grammarian and Ah Counter give their reports.
12:53	General evaluation is provided.

12:57	Meeting is returned to the TMOD. Ribbons are presented.
12:59	Meeting is returned to President who adjourns the meeting.
1:01	Guests take out their checkbooks and sign up.

Obviously, these are not rigid and as well, they are based on my club. The larger point is that your meetings should have organization and consistency.

Another metric to evaluate a meeting by is how many people get to speak in a meaningful manner. Again, in an efficiently run one-hour, two-speaker meeting, seventeen people should have been afforded the opportunity to speak.

1	President
1	Toastmaster
1	General Evaluator
2	Speakers
1	TableTopics Master
7	TableTopics Contestants
2	Evaluators
1	Ahh Counter
1	Grammarians

Commenting on roles, considering the following:

- Comment on roles as necessary
- Don't hold back
- Don't go overboard
- Don't comment for the sake of commenting
- Comment on the really good and really "not so good"

Commenting on the President:

- Start the meeting on time?

- Opening Thought was thoughtful?
- Stole time from the rest of the club?
- Did opening question take too much time?
- Quality of introduction of the TMOD

Commenting on the TMOD:

- Prep work via emails prior to meeting
- Agenda preparation
- Introductions
- Stole time from the rest of the club?
- Opening thoughts and themes are appropriate/mini speeches are inappropriate
- Called for votes?

Commenting on the Table Topics Master:

- Were questions answerable?
- Stole time from the rest of the club?
- Set up of question too long?
- Factored in time when summing up who said what?
- Called for votes?

Commenting on other roles:

- General Evaluator – Any “mia culpas”
- Sgt of Arms – preparation for the meeting
- Evaluators – Any exceptional performances. Be sure to maintain parity when introducing and summing up.

Commenting on appropriateness/inappropriateness:

- Religion, Politics and Sex
- Bias
- Peanut Gallery chatter

When time will be a factor, you should:

- Scale back introductions
- Eliminate any set up “verbiage”
- Instruct Grammarian and Ah Counter to limit their evaluation to only the egregious and exceptional (this may require you to quietly pass them a note during the meeting)
- Hit the important points.
- Send a follow-up email to club when points were left out

I will make one final and important note. An unspoken tenet of Toastmasters is that it provides a safe environment for individuals to learn, practice, and grow. As a result, we don’t tell people that they did something wrong; rather, we offer suggestions for future speaking opportunities. From time to time, someone will step out of line, perhaps during an evaluation. When this happens, you as the General Evaluator need to diplomatically correct the offending party while assuaging the offended party. The last thing you want is to lose a member because of another member’s insensitivity. This can be difficult for some people (that is, they don’t like criticizing or calling people out). If the General Evaluator misses this, it falls on the shoulders of the TMOD to make the correction. If the TMOD drops that ball, then the President needs to step up. If none of these individuals step up, you just might lose a member, unless of course, a seasoned member with moxie makes the correction after the meeting.

Table Topics Master

In the early days, the term “dreaded Table Topics” entered into our club’s lexicon. Perhaps I was guilty of loosely using this term, but no more. Fortunately, this term has found its way into the arcane.

This topic deals with what I think is one of the genius inventions of Ralph Smedley. Like many other tools, Table Topics is a tool for good that can be misused or in many cases, not used to its fullest potential. I would like to start with an email I sent to the club concerning the topic. I felt compelled to comment on this portion of the meeting after seeing some Table Topic sessions that were not used to their fullest potential. As with much of my commentary, this should be read within the context of a sixty-minute meeting. Though having said that, clubs that hold meetings longer than an hour should not work under the assumption people like giving up their time to an inefficiency. Said differently, show me an inefficient club and I will show you a club that has problems with sustaining membership.

So, what is the purpose of Table Topics? It is to teach and then train members to speak cogently and succinctly on a topic they may or may not know. Answers should be structured and thought out, as much as time provides of course. Therefore, as Table Topics Master, your responsibility is to ask questions that lend themselves to this purpose. Said differently, your job is not to stump a contestant. When you do this, you are making it about you and not them.

True or False - *The job of the Table Topics Master is to come up with questions for the Table Topics session.*

Some might be inclined to say, “True.” I am inclined to say, “FAIL, NO, WRONG...and then False.” If the statement was, “Part of the job ...,” then my answer would be the affirmative.

I have observed new Table Topics Masters taking the inaugural plunge. I think it is great. However, I have seen some things that an astute mentor would (and should) caution against doing. In our club, there is a manner in which we conduct Table Topics. I will explain our way of doing it and why.

Do not channel your inner Johnny Carson, meaning, do not have an opening monolog. It is okay to set up your Table Topics with a quick explanation but the operative word is “quick.” If, in the time that it takes you to set up your theme, you could have squeezed one more person in, then shame on you for stealing their time.

As for questions or topic selection, we don’t care – this one is one for you. Having said that, we do care a little. There is obviously some decorum to consider. If you have made it this far in life, you should have some sense of what passes muster.

For your first time, go vanilla. Don’t try anything elaborate. Get one session under your belt before you try trickier techniques. And while we are talking about “tricky,” remember that Table Topics are meant to challenge, not to stump. Another way of looking at that is that if you ask a question, and then walk away with a smirk on your face, could it be that you are making it about you and not them? More information is provided below in the Techniques section.

Who do you call on?

1. **Make a list** – People take notice of when they attend a meeting and see someone speak twice while they don’t speak at all. If this happens for two meetings in succession, you run the risk of not seeing that person again. So, Table Topics Master, make a list of everyone in the room. An effective technique is to draw a map of the room and write names by position. One of the benefits of having an introductory question at the onset of the meeting is that the Table Topics Master can write names down. Remove all people with major roles (TMOD, General Evaluator, speakers, Evaluators). Place an asterisk by those who have minor roles (Grammarians, Ah Counter, Timer, etc.). If time permits, call on them after you have exhausted those without a role. And then there is the question of guests...
2. **Guests or no guests** – The corporate club I belong to is a vibrant club with membership in the 40-50 range. Our meetings tend to have 20 plus in attendance. On a good day with a tightly run meeting, we can give 17 people an opportunity to speak meaningfully. That means some folks don’t get to speak. For this club, my philosophy is “no guests speak.” The reason is this: if I am a dues-paying member and I have taken time out of

my schedule, I want my opportunity to speak. I am willing to forgive the club if, at least, I almost had a shot but time ran out. The second part of this philosophy is that a guest will be so impressed with an efficient and effective meeting, they will want to join up. The community club I belong to, I have a different philosophy. Our membership base is under 20. Typical attendance is 12. If a guest shows up, you better believe I am going to give them an opportunity to speak. Then, after the meeting, I am going to say, "You did well. Come back next meeting and we will do it all over again." There you have it. My philosophy and my other philosophy.

3. **Are there any volunteers?** – There is a three-word answer to this question, "No, No, No." There are some people who live for and excel at Table Topics. These are the people who will raise their hand every time there is a call for volunteers. These are also the people who need it least. As well, such people can already be filling two other roles and they will raise their hands without shame. The flip side of this is that the people who need Table Topics the most tend to be the ones who volunteer the least. Your job as Table Topics Master is twofold – come up with good questions and call on members who need it the most (or who don't otherwise have speaking roles).

Getting Table Topics Started

I like to call on an experienced member first. For example, you may want Table Topics contestants to go into character when answering. If you ask a new member first, "You are running for President on the platform that people should abandon their dryers and hang clothes on a line to dry. Give me your stump speech." You may get an answer like, "Thank you for the question. I was asked about being a candidate for President and that I want people to use clothes lines..." Ask a seasoned member this same question and he or she will bang their fist on the lectern and say, "My fellow Americans! We are at a crossroad..."

Next, start calling on members using the following rough proportions:

- 50% new members (joined within the last 3 months)
- 30% "young" members (joined within 3 to 12 months)
- 20% seasoned members

Now, on the outside chance you run through the pool of folks with no speaking parts, then you can call on the Timer, Ah Counter, and Grammarian. If you get through these folks, then yes, you can all on a guest.

[A Caveat: I belong to another club. It is a community club. I helped start it. In the early days, if five people showed up, we were lucky. My rule, was that no matter how many people showed up, we ran a meeting with all of its parts. And, as numbers were few, if a guest showed up, we put them to work. They were called on for Table Topics. In such cases, though, I would be sure to lob them a softball question like, "Tell me about a favorite childhood memory.]

Other Table Topic Tips:

- No segues – I have heard some Table Topics Masters say, “If you can’t answer this question, feel free to segue into another answer.” I say, “Wrong!” Imagine being on a job interview and deciding that you don’t want to answer the question that was asked. I understand that new members sometimes have a hard time answering questions. Guess what? They get better with practice. I would rather have someone crash and burn then go off script. Do you know why? You better believe they will spend the next week answering that same question in their mind a dozen different ways. Giving people a way out does just that – it gives them a way out.
- Softballs – Speaking of segues, I will now use one appropriately. Always have softball questions at the ready if you sense a member is hesitant to speak. For instance, if you have a new member who is reserved, ask them a question about themselves. “Tell me about a favorite summer memory.” People have an easy time talking about themselves.
- Start with success – My philosophy is that Table Topics should be slanted towards newer members, for they tend to need the most help. However, I always like to start with a very seasoned member. Seasoned members tend to have good form and offer a good example. As well, if you are doing something creative, like having members go into character (e.g., “Pretend you are a politician advocating for...”), a seasoned member should know what to do. They will go into character immediately instead of responding like, “Well, you asked me if I was a politician, how would I...”
- Voting – Some clubs vote. Some don’t. I think for the ones that don’t, the thinking is, “We don’t want to hurt feelings.” I’ll just say this. I have never seen anyone’s feelings hurt in my 20 years because they didn’t win. I have seen the positive effects of competition. So, in short, vote. It also gives meeting attendees something important to do. Listen critically.
- Call on someone twice – If time permits and you have a newer member who bombed the first time around, encourage them that it will get better, and then call on them again. This time, set them up for success with a softball question.

I will end by transitioning from the last point. We have between 59 and 60 minutes to run a meeting. People are coming to better themselves. Watching as someone else takes your time does not add to this cause. People recognize efficiency and reward it accordingly. People recognize inefficiency, and then join other clubs. Everyone has a role in maintaining our membership base and keeping our club great.

Wrapping-up Table Topics

What can I say about wrapping up? Ask the Timer for a report. Anyone who didn’t qualify should be excluded from your wrap-up.

Do it quickly. Your job is not to creatively reinterpret answers. Your job is to quickly remind people who said what. For instance, consider the two versions. 1) "Suzy talked about her first dog," or 2) "Suzy talked about the day she woke up not knowing what was going on. Her father came in and told her that he had a surprise, and then...I'm sure we've all had days like that." One of the reasons you need to wrap up quickly is that if you don't, you are then stealing time slated for the General Evaluator.

Techniques for Finding Table Topic Questions

There is a plethora of options available for coming up with questions. After running through them, I will reveal my favorite technique.

- The Internet - Search on "table topic questions" and you will come up with a list of questions that will take until next century to exhaust. A popular find on the internet is a list of 365 questions. I know that it is popular because I recognize the questions. A caution is this: Although there are 365 questions there are many that are reformulations. As well, they tend to be on the "If money was not an issue, where would you travel" line, meaning, they are not original.
- Fortune cookie – Contestant opens a fortune cookie and waxes eloquently on it.
- Coins – Contestants pick a coin from bag and talk about the year on the coin. I like this technique. I have seen positive results. Two caveats, though. Number one – older members (and this is an age thing, present company included) have a hard time with small numbers – be prepared to read the date for them. Number two – older members (and this is an age thing, present company included) can regale you with tale of bicentennial celebrations for the year 1976. A millennial will have a hard time recalling the year in which they were not born.
- Bag of household objects – Pick one out and describe it...talk about it...etc.
- Show a picture and illicit response – This works best if you have AV equipment where you can display an image so that everyone can see. Contestants can either tell a story or speak to an inspiration from it.
- This or that – Offer an either/or option. Have the contestant pick one and expound upon it. For example. "Where would you rather vacation – the beach or the mountains?"

I prefer good old fashion, unrelated questions. Often when I am Table Topics Master, I will keep pen and paper handy at my desk and jot down questions as they come to me. For example, "Today, I noticed my grass was getting high. I have been putting it off. What is a task that you routinely put off and why do you think you do it?"

Evaluator

I have found the role of Evaluator to be the most challenging and at the same time, the most rewarding. It is challenging because you don't know the cards you are dealt until the speech you are evaluating is over. It is rewarding because it is more effective than Table Topics for teaching structured spontaneity.

First, let us define the primary purpose of the Evaluator. It is to give effective and timely feedback to the speaker. To be effective means to deliver actionable feedback. To be timely means to do so in a manner that is close to the delivery of the speech. To this extent, it is no different than delivering a rebuke to a toddler or a dog in the proximity of an offending action. Now, lest you think that a speaker should be compared to a child or a dog, you would be misinterpreting my intent. Immediate feedback, close to the event, is more readily digested than feedback delivered after the fact.

Whereas Table Topics (Table Topics) answers are delivered on the spot, there is generally a delay of twenty or so minutes between the time when the speaker finishes their speech and the evaluator gives their evaluation. You would think that this would favor the Evaluator, but not so. In that twenty minutes, an Evaluator must dissect all of their notes and organize them in a cogent fashion. As well, the time allotted to the Evaluator is longer than Table Topics. Woe be to the Evaluator who is finishing up as the light is turning green.

In effect, you are delivering an extended Table Topic answer. To this extent, you have longer to consider the question asked. However, you are tasked with giving a non-whimsical answer, all the while, using as much of the time allotted to you as possible. Your answer should include the good that was presented as well as the suggestions for future speeches. You will notice in this last juxtaposition, it did not mention, "the bad." In Toastmasters, and with evaluations, there is no bad, only opportunities for improvement.

There is a secondary purpose with evaluations, and that is to impress your club with your acumen and delivery (or is it to give you another opportunity to hone your speaking skills). Let's face it, it is about you as well. So, all of the skills you learned with speaking – pauses, vocal variety, gestures, organization, etc., are on display.

There are two fatal delivery techniques that I see often in evaluations. The first is the "stream of consciousness" approach. In this technique, the Evaluator starts off with an idea and moves to the next and the next, and the next. There is no clear structure to the evaluation and Evaluator usually quickly wraps-up when they see the time has been met. True, advice and critique may be doled out, but when done in a pell-mell fashion, the evaluation loses gusto. It is average at best.

The second fatal technique is the "blow-by-blow" delivery. With this bad technique, the Evaluator rehashes what the speaker said, occasionally interspersing advice. Spoiler alert – the speaker and audience already know what was said.

There is another technique, not necessarily fatal but annoying nonetheless. I speak of the flowery evaluation. In this technique, the Evaluator heaps praise after praise on the speech with very little substance. Sometimes at the end, they may say something like, "If I had to offer a tiny bit of advice, I would say maybe add a pause or two." Wrong! There is always something that can be said.

Keep in mind that even though I said the evaluation is primarily for the benefit of speaker with a secondary benefit for the Evaluator, there is actually someone else who benefits – the audience. Every once in a while, you pull the short stick and evaluate a “perfect” speech. What do you do in this case? How about, “Loretta, I can die now, for I have seen the perfect speech. Now, as you are the cause of my death, I am going to get my revenge and ignore you entirely in the evaluation and dissect your speech for the benefit of the audience. It will be my last will and testimony. One thing, among the many that you did well, was your opening. You got us immediately engaged by asking a question that we all can relate to about upcoming summer vacations.” By pointing out the areas that were done well you help the whole audience take their game up a notch.

Also, when evaluating a very good speech, where criticism is sparse, it is okay to offer alternatives. As long as you add the caveats that what they did was perfectly acceptable, offering alternatives is good for the audience. For example, “Loretta, your ending was good, but you may want to consider tying the ending to your opening about summer vacations.”

If you are lucky, you will see a theme unfold as you watch the speech. If not, I suggest drawing a line down the middle of a sheet of paper with a plus and minus column. The former will contain good things that you witnessed. The latter will include areas for improvement. Jot down quick notes as the speech is being delivered. (You don’t want to make in-depth notes because if your attention is on the notes, it is not on the speaker). After the speech is over, get another piece of paper and start assembling your thoughts in an orderly fashion. It helps if you can group things together, for example, “I noticed you used vocal variety well. Here are some examples.”

Keep in mind the performance aspect that I mentioned earlier. Don’t feel you need to give the speaker **all** of the observations that you wrote down. Focus on what you can include given the timeframe. Also, a speaker can usually incorporate only about two areas of improvement into their next speech. Offering them feedback: to make better eye-contact, use more gestures, not sway back-and-forth so much and use more pauses will overwhelm them. Remember there are no prohibitions for giving further notes after the meeting. Speaking of notes, typically there is some fashion of evaluation form. I tend to fill this form out as an afterthought. The real value is in the notes. When you are done, give these notes to the speaker. Some Toastmasters actually review notes when preparing for future speeches.

Formulaic speeches are boring. Formulaic evaluations are not. Developing a template or formula takes a lot of pressure off of you and it helps with time management. Here is a simple and effective formula:

“Sandra, thank you for delivering your speech on <topic>, it was <insert a platitude or observation>. I noticed some things that jumped out at me in the ‘job well done’ category. As well, I have some ideas to help up your game.

(Optional – if you can give a preview of your evaluation, this is good. Sometimes a metaphor will present itself that you can incorporate. For example, “Your speech was on sailing and for my evaluation, there will be several ports of call.”)

First, let’s look at items in the ‘job well done category.’ <touch on two or three key points>.

Now, as well as you did, I have some ideas for making future speeches even better <touch on two or three key points>.

So there you have it. First, keep on doing what you are doing, namely <list good things>. Also, consider including some of the suggestions I offered, such as <list improvements>. In no time, you will be killing them on the TED stage.”

I added some flowery language. The salient point is that there is a structure and as well as time devoted for reminding them what they did well and time devoted for improvements.

Here are some other points concerning evaluations:

- **What I would like to have seen** – When I hear an Evaluator say, “What I would like to have seen...”, I have two reactions. The first is, “Actually, it is ‘what you would like to have heard’.” The second is, “Well then, you give the damn speech.” A speaker picks the topic and writes the speech. Your job is not to evaluate what they didn’t write. Stick to what they did write. Now, as a caveat, speakers will sometimes include items that are not fully baked or that dangle. It is appropriate to comment on this. For example, “I need to point this out. While you were making your third point, you mentioned the death of your father and then moved on. You have to be careful. The death of a loved one is impactful. As the audience, we want to know more. You either need to tell us more, or cut this out entirely.”
- **Keep an eye on the time** – As with all things Toastmasters, there is a time limit. The biggest mistake I see with Evaluators is developing their last point as the light is turning red. Inevitably, with five seconds left, they blurt out, “And I look forward to seeing your next speech.” As with all things Toastmasters, finishing strong is important. “And I look forward to seeing your next speech,” is not strong. Having a script that focuses on several points as well as volunteering to evaluate whenever possible will help train your internal clock. When the light turns green, you should be starting your last point. When the light turns yellow, you should be starting your conclusion...
- **Closings are important** – “And I look forward to hearing your next speech” is not a conclusion. A conclusion should summarize the salient theme as well as provide hope for the future. As well, good Evaluators will find a theme or a metaphor and weave it throughout the evaluation. When you can end with such a theme or metaphor, you leave everyone with a smile. As well as your stock increases. By the way, this is good practice for evaluation contests. He or she who ends with a laugh scores extra points.
- **Parity** – Another term for parity is being well-rounded. When I evaluate a speech and let’s say it has three main points, I look to see that the speaker devoted equal time is spent on all three points. Otherwise, this suggests that you realize the power of three, but you threw one in just to cover the spread. Make sure equal time is given to all.
- **The old standbys** – If you are stumped, you can always go to the well and look for vocal variety, gestures, pauses, and movement. Very few speakers master all of these points. If they do, then you can turn around and point out the specific instances for the benefit of the audience. Some clubs have evaluation tips sheets that list common areas for giving feedback. You may want to create one for your club and distribute to your members, especially the newer ones.
- **Show us whenever possible** – If you have an idea for how a speaker could have done something different, don’t tell us, show us. Pick out a specific instance in the speech and demonstrate. This is more impactful, in particular with the items mentioned in the previous bullet. A picture is

worth a thousand words. A demonstration is worth a thousand-and-one. “Tom your description of the wall was good, but if you outlined it in the air for us as you described it, well we could almost have seen it.”

- **The sandwich** – I am not known for being Mr. Sensitive nor am I known for being a jerk. When I give an evaluation, I want to dump out every last bit of Toastmaster knowledge that has been captured and donate it to the cause. When done correctly, your evaluation can be critique-laden. However, I recognize that not everyone is comfortable being forthright (and I don’t fault anyone for this). So, another softer technique is the sandwich method – good/bad/good. Of course, when I say bad, I mean “constructive criticism.” If you feel comfortable with this, this is a perfectly valid technique.

Ah Counter

Your job as the Ah Counter is to keep track of the ahs, umms, so’s, you know’s, and other filler words. Your tools are a pen, paper, and a discerning ear. Write down the name of every person who speaks and make note of the filler words. This is the easier part (though it takes diligence not to let the mind wander). The hard part is the reporting. You have several options:

- **Every last detail** – Report on every transgression from every member. Sometimes this works, sometimes it gets tedious. “Malcom had 2 so’s, 4 ahs. Kevin had 12 ahs, 4 you know’s and 6 umms...”).
- **Totals** – Report the total for each member. “Malcom 6, Kevin 22, ...”)
- **The offenders** – If, for the most part, most speakers’ diction was clean, you can just make note of the those with noticeable issues.
- **Trends** – In certain meetings, particular transgressions bubble up. For instance, there may be a dearth of so’s. You can highlight the trends.

Whatever method you choose, don’t sugar coat. People generally want to know if they are using filler words.

A note of caution for members for whom English is a second language. Sometimes such members, not raised in the laziness of American speakers, speak flawlessly. Sometimes, they are walking Ah machines. It is okay to call out the latter; however, do so in a diplomatic fashion. “Jorge, I know that English is your second language so there is a tendency to translate on-the-fly perhaps. When you do this, you tend to say ‘ah’. Keep an eye on this.”

As well, have at the ready a pithy but effective description of the Ah Counter role in case you are called upon at the beginning of the meeting to explain your role.

Note: Periodically, one of my clubs will have light attendance. In such cases, we combine the Ah Counter and the Grammarian roles. Whoever is put in charge of this combined role has discretion as to what to report on.

Grammarian

Your job as the Grammarian is to keep track of the good, bad, and ugly usage of the spoken word. Your tools are a pen, paper, and discerning ear. Write down the name of every person who speaks and make note of transgressions of items of note. Some examples of the bad and ugly are:

- subject-verb agreement
- using the wrong word
- using a word incorrectly
- laziness with pronunciation (e.g., truncating “ing” to “in”)
- slang used inappropriately

Some examples of the good are:

- alliteration
- metaphors and similes
- triads
- words that are not typically used
- phrases that are striking
- slang used appropriately

As for the latter, some Grammarians go overboard reporting on things that make them happy. Don't do this. Your job is to call out the exceptional.

As with the admonition mentioned above for the Ah Counter, speakers for whom English is a second language, be diplomatic with your reporting. Some people from other countries join Toastmasters because they have heard it is a good way to improve their English. In some cases, such individuals are lucky if they get one subject-verb agreement correct. It does no good to call out each instance. Rather, give highlights.

As well, have at the ready a pithy but effective description of the Grammarian role in case you are called upon at the beginning of the meeting to explain your role.

Note: Periodically, one of my clubs will have light attendance. In such cases, we combine the Ah Counter and the Grammarian roles. Whoever is put in charge of this combined role has discretion as to what to report on.

Vote Counter

Your job is to count the votes. It's pretty simple. Some clubs recognize the better/best while others might ask for first, second, and third places. A pet peeve of mine is when there is a tie. When I am the Vote Counter, I use my vote to break the tie. Nobody knows but me.

In my club, the TMOD awards the ribbons at the end of the meeting. It is one of the perks of being in charge. So, to this extent, our Vote Counter tallies the votes and passes the results to the TMOD before the meeting ends. Your club traditions may vary.

As well, have at the ready a pithy but effective description of the Vote Counter role in case you are called upon at the beginning of the meeting to explain your role. Be sure to let guests know that they

too can participate in the voting. Something else to include is that if your club uses official Toastmaster ballots, there are segments of those ballots used for jotting down notes for the various speakers. In your description of the role, you should also encourage members to pass along notes of encouragement or critiques to the various speakers.

Timer

Your job is to time the various speaking roles – speaker, Table Topics, and Evaluator. Some clubs have timing devices, others have paddles or colored cards. Your first task is to ascertain the time limits for the speeches. There are some subtleties to this role which are listed below:

- **Position** – Seat yourself in place that is visible to the speaker from every position of the front. Sometimes being in the front row is not a good place especially if speaking area is wide and the speaker is off to a side. Preferably, you should be positioned far enough back so that you are always in an advantageous line of sight.
- **Indicating time** - Once you display a color, display it prominently for the duration (until the next color). When the last color is displayed (red), keep it displayed until the speaker finishes speaking, even if the speaker goes over.
- **Show a little compassion** - For garden variety club speeches, I give a few seconds latitude once red has been reached (no more than four seconds). This is just my philosophy. However, for competition, there is no compassion.
- **Reporting** - Clubs vary how they do the Timer's report. I favor the report being given at the end of each portion of the meeting. In theory, at the end of each segment the person in charge should ask, "Madame Timer, did everyone qualify?" Again, it is a club preference as to whether the Timer announces individual times. Our club just reports on who qualified. Those who did not qualify are not eligible for voting.
- **Describe your role** - As well, have at the ready a pithy but effective description of the Timer role in case you are called upon at the beginning of the meeting to explain your role. To this point, you don't have to explain the timing for each event, just that there will be a green, yellow, and red indicator to keep you on track. A good Toastmaster will inform the audience of the time constraints of each portion of the meeting at the onset of that portion.

Other Roles

I am aware that there are other roles. Our club has only used the ones mentioned above. Feel free to research other roles to see if they fit into your culture. I will offer this caution, though. The more roles your club has, the more members you will need to take these roles. Too many moving parts for a volunteer organization can get you into trouble.

8. Table Topics

I wrote the following Table Topics-related articles for our club newsletter. They contain some themes already touched on but perhaps expressed differently.

Table Topics – A Winning Ticket

Rare is the person who buys a lottery ticket actually thinking he or she has a statistically good chance of winning. Still, we all do it out of the fantasy of being the lucky winner. In the end, parting with a buck to buy a ticket is more of a capricious whim than a financial investment.

There is nothing capricious or whimsical about someone making the effort to attend a weekly Toastmasters meeting. As a club, we need to ensure every attendee has a statistically legitimate chance of a payoff – an opportunity to speak – because for many, Toastmasters is a financial investment. If you improve your communication skills, you become more marketable.

The focus of this article is on Table Topics since this part of the meeting gives Toastmasters without a role a shot at speaking. In a typical 2-speaker meeting, there are 10 individuals who have a guaranteed opportunity to speak: President, Toastmaster, General Evaluator, Table Topics Master, two speakers, two Evaluators, the Grammarian, and Ah Counter. Our average meeting attendance ranges between 18 and 25. Take a round number of 20 attendees and factor in a well-run meeting – that leaves time for 7 Table Topics, and the result is 85% of the attendees get to speak. Said differently, 85% of the attendees get an opportunity to improve.

Two factors decrease this percentage – more attendees (which is a good reflection on the health of the club) and/or fewer Table Topics (which is a poor reflection of time management). These two factors are related in that we only have one hour, so it is incumbent on everyone with a role to be conscientious of how much time he or she uses.

This brings us to the role of Table Topics Master. For a 2-speaker meeting, the Table Topics Master should have 10 questions prepared. If there is a theme, do not spend more than 2 sentences explaining it and then get right into the questions. When it comes to who you should call, deference should be given to those who need help most – newer members. Having said that, part of learning how to deliver a good Table Topics answer comes from observing someone else do it well.

Here is a useful approach. Start off by asking a senior member, who in theory, will provide a good example by delivering a well-structured, effective answer. Next select someone who has been a member for 6-18 months. At least half of the people selected should be newer members 1-6 months. Just as you don't want to call on all seasoned members, you don't want to call only on newer members. If you pay dues, you should be afforded a chance to speak.

Further defining who should be asked, here is more guidance. Unless attendance is extremely low, never call on the Toastmaster, General Evaluator, Evaluators, or speakers. These individuals are already speaking. The same goes for Grammarian, Ahh counter, and President, but to a lesser degree. Again, if attendance is low and you have cycled through all attendees, you can call on these three individuals next.

As for guests, it has been the unofficial policy of the club that guests should not be called on. The reason comes down to the argument laid out in the opening of this article. Our time is limited so we need to focus on dues-paying members. The counter argument is that if we give guests an opportunity to speak, it may entice them to join. My response is that we don't have a problem attracting members and we have an obligation first to our dues-paying members. If our meetings were longer, we could accommodate guests, but we don't have this luxury. Instead, the efficiency and quality of our meetings should be an effective enough marketing tool.

Go ahead and buy a lottery ticket the next time the jackpot is large...just be realistic in your expectations. However, if you want better odds at increasing your fortunes, come every Wednesday at noon to our meetings.

If money was not a factor, where would you vacation?

My answer to this question is, "I would go to the vomitorium and barf." The reason this is that I have heard this question a million times. Let us discuss the caliber of questions and some techniques.

First, let's be fair. Everybody has to be a Table Topics Master for the first time and as such, especially if you are a newer member, you might be inclined to think this is an original question. As you can see from my answer, it is not. Nor is, "If you could meet anyone in history, who would it be?" I could list off half a dozen such questions without thinking. The point I am trying to make is be creative. Oh, if you could meet your earlier self, what message would you give yourself...

Be creative!

Having said that, I understand that creativity is not everybody's strong suit. Having said that, there is no reason why you cannot develop this. I will give advice based on things I have done and seen.

Themes work. If you are near a season like spring or a holiday like Thanksgiving, then by all means, use this to your advantage, but remember the earlier advice about being predictable. For instance, "What is your favorite Thanksgiving food?" Why not ask, "You have been tasked by the White House to eliminate either cranberries or sweet potatoes from the Thanksgiving menu. Pick one and give your reasons."

The coin trick works. Have a handful of coins at the ready. Ask the contestant to pick a coin and talk about a memory from the year in question. However, just be aware that a Millennial will have very little to say about the year 1965.

Fortune cookies work. Pick a fortune cookie and expound upon the fortune.

Project a picture on the screen and ask the contestant to tell the story behind the picture. (See Caution with Creativity below.)

Creativity aside, a technique I recommend is that if you know you are going to be Table Topics Master next week, put a piece of paper by your desk (or if you are electronically inclined, create a document). I recommend the sheet of paper because it is physically present. Let the events of the week trigger ideas for questions.

If you can't answer the question, then you can segue into another question...

How about no, you answer the question that was given. Sadly, many clubs offer this as an option. To me, this is offering up mediocracy as an option. I have a better idea. Tell people to take a moment and formulate an answer. May I also offer up that if people are having a hard time answering a question, then perhaps the problem lies in the question.

Let me put it another way. We often hear that Table Topics is good practice for job interviews. Can you imagine conducting an interview and upon asking a candidate a question, being told, "I am going to answer another question instead." I frequently interview candidates for jobs and I will tell you that if I ever got that for an answer, I would smile politely, listen, and then end the interview as soon as possible. If you give people an opportunity to take the easy route, they will.

I will be honest. Answering Table Topics is a skill. Watch a Table Topics contest at the Area or above level and you will see people who have honed that skill. Some people have a knack for it, others have to develop it. Show me a person who has had to work at it and I will show you a person who, after a year or two, can hang with the best naturals. To this point, I have seen newer members who freeze their first time up, awkwardly waiting for the green to come or the world to end. Sometimes, they say something along the lines of, "I'm sorry, I can't think of anything," before sitting down after 30 seconds of self-inflicted agony. It happens, but it is part of growing. I have never seen anyone quit because of this.

In the event that something like this happens, you have three things that you must do as a club. First, the Table Topics Master must soften the blow by immediately giving reassurances, "Joe, I guarantee that in a matter of months, you will be able to answer any question given to you. It just takes practice and guess what, you are at the right place!" Second, after the meeting, you again give reassurances by talking about a time you bombed or pointing to another member who answered with alacrity saying, "You should have seen Suzie her first time up and look at her now!" Third, the very next meeting you make sure the person is called on and given the softest of softball questions. The most successful softball questions are those that allow people to talk about themselves.

Caution with Creativity

Just as I mentioned that not every Table Topics Master is gifted with innate creativity when crafting questions, the same holds true for those answering questions. Having "to think outside the box" questions help expand people's minds. However, if not pulled off correctly, they can bomb. Here is some advice if you are going to be tricky – set yourself up for success! Another way to describe this is to call on a seasoned member. They should know what to do. You can even go so far as to get with a seasoned member before the meeting and tell them what you are planning and what you expect from their performance. You don't have to tell them the question, just the parameters.

For example, you may want Table Topics contestants to go into character when answering. If you ask a new member first, "You are running for President on the platform that people should abandon their dryers and hang clothes on a line to dry. Give me your stump speech." You might get an answer like this from a new member if called upon first, "Thank you for the question. I was asked about being a candidate for President and that I want people to use clothes lines..." Ask a seasoned member this same question and he or she will bang their fist on the lectern and say, "My fellow Americans! We are at a crossroad..."

Table Topics Contests

The following is advice for the Contest Chair.

Our club has a strong mentoring program that pairs new members with seasoned members. The job of the mentor is to acclimate the neophyte to the structure of the meeting, provide guidance when the new member is assigned a role for the first several times, provide feedback on performance, and be available to assist in any other related activities. My newest protégé, Alice, took full advantage of my experience and along with her drive to excel, made great leaps in a short period of time.

One day during her freshman year, Alice asked me if I thought it was too early for her to take on the role of contest chair for the club-level Table Topics contest. I told her “Not at all. We keep records from previous contests. All the forms are on file. You can look at the scripts. A lot of the work has already been done for you. All you need to do is recruit some folks to help you out with roles and do some organizing. It will be a great experience. Go for it.”

“Oh yeah,” I added. “You also need to come up with a question.”

I couldn’t blame Alice for thinking, “I’ve been the Table Topics Master before. I’ve come up with dozens of questions. How hard can it be?” I have discovered after many years of attending competitions, the answer to this last question is potentially “very hard.”

During any given meeting, the Table Topics Master has plenty of leeway in crafting questions. He can experiment with themes. She can craft questions with certain people in mind. He can be romantic. She can be whimsical. But not so during a competition. There is a fine line between a good question and a bad question. The end product is a few simple words strung together, but getting these words together is a result of a refining process. When crafting a question, it’s important to take into consideration the judges as well as the contestants. The question must be challenging, stimulating, but answerable in such a fashion that those tasked with judging can evaluate apples against apples. What follows is a partial list of suggestions based on years of experience hearing good and bad questions asked during competition.

Riddle me this...no, don’t. Your goal should not be to stump the contestants. Table Topics is meant to be an intellectual exercise, but it is not meant to prove one’s intellect. The challenge for the contestant should lie in formulating and delivering an answer. The topic should not presuppose a level of knowledge of things sublime. For example, “Tell me whether you think the String theory of physics is true or not” presupposes that contestants have a knowledge of science.

Avoid a lengthy setup. If you have to educate the contestants on a topic, there’s a good chance that your question has pitfalls. A savvy contestant will be trained to listen to the question. With lengthy introductions, you run the risk of confusing the question with extraneous facts. Again, the purpose of the question is to elicit the best answer, not to force the contestant to sift through data for relevant clues. Having said this, a short introduction may be appropriate. For example, “Last year, such-and-such team won the World Series in a spectacular fashion. What do you think this championship means to the people of this city?”

Ask only one question. I have often seen questions posed that are actually a series of questions or ones that contain embedded questions. This puts the contestant at a great disadvantage. An ideal response

will contain a mini-speech with the following elements: introduction, thesis, preview, body, and conclusion. It's difficult to accomplish this in the short timeframe allotted when more than one question is posed. Here is an example of such a question, "What are your views on gun control and do you think there should be limits on gun purchases as well as stricter punishments on people who commit crimes with guns?" Keep it simple. Ask one question, like "Do you think there should be a limit on the number of guns a person can own."

Consider your audience. Our club is sponsored by an international company. As a result, our membership boasts a strong international membership base. Thus, some members may not be familiar with all of the culture and history of this country. Therefore, a question relating to how the 1960s changed the political or socioeconomic landscape of this country may have no context for a person born and raised in India.

Challenge, but don't provoke. As with Toastmasters in general, the club should be a safe environment. Questions relating to "hot button" topics must always be handled delicately. Though it is possible to effectively entertain a topic dealing with sex (e.g., "What do you see as the main difference between the sexes?"), politics ("Do you think the country would be better served by a viable third party?"), or religion (e.g., "What do you think the role of religion is in today's society?"), there are so many other topics to explore. Why risk it?

Be unique. Avoid questions based on what is currently in the news or popular today. A question should be based on a unique topic that applies no matter what is going on today. Nothing is worse than hearing a contestant say, "Oh, we had that question last week at our club meeting!"

I mentioned earlier that you should consider the judges when crafting a question. This is important and often gets overlooked. Judges are provided with a set of criteria that is meant to level the playing field by removing subjectivity. This criteria forces the judges to examine each answer for certain qualities such as speech development, effectiveness, physical appearance, voice, and language. A well-crafted question will further remove subjectivity by guiding all contestants' answers "into the same zip code" so to speak.

As an extreme example, for illustration purposes only, say you were given the following question, "Evaluate which team is the best - the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Montreal Canadians, or the Pittsburg Steelers." On one hand, they are all professional sports teams; however, the glaring defect of this question is that each team plays an entirely different sport. What criteria would be used to arrive at any given conclusion - number of championships, box office draw, or cumulative record? While still subjective, a better question would be "Evaluate which team is the best: the Los Angeles Dodgers, the New York Yankees, or the Philadelphia Phillies."

What about this seemingly mundane question, "Tell me about your best day?" Each contestant is speaking from personal experience and each answer is confined to the same timeframe. On the surface, this would seem like a plausible question.

Now look at it from a judges' perspective. What if one contestant woke up in the morning, rescued a group of orphans from a raging fire on the way to work, found a way to save his company millions of dollars by lunch, met the love his life at the water cooler, and then before going to sleep that night,

turned on the TV in time to see that the lottery ticket he purchased at lunch hit the jackpot? What if the next contestant had a fun time with his family at the amusement park? What if the third contestant finally came to peace with the cancer that she had been battling for years. Sure, you could say that it ultimately comes down to the judging criteria, but judges are human. Might they be wowed by contestant one's unbelievable tale? Might their hearts go out to contestant three's resolve? And might they be tempted to think of contestant two's answer, "I've done that a dozen times. That's nothing special."

In the end there is no magic formula, there is only this guidance. Put a lot of thought into the construction of the question. Better yet, come up with three questions. Let them sit for a while. Come back to them with a fresh set of eyes. Run them by some trusted and wise associates and see if they can find fault with any of them. The ultimate goal should be a killer question, but not because it kills the chances of those who will be answering it.

The following is advice for when you are competing in a contest.

Rule Number One – Don't get stupid all of a sudden. Go with what got you there so far, namely, your ability to formulate a coherent answer. Having said that, the higher you go in Table Topics competition, the stiffer your competition will be. Also, you can never count on the judges to be, well, non-swayed by theatrics. Assuming the judges are not, here is some more advice that will take you far into competition...

Rule Number Two – Practice, practice, practice. There are many forms of practice. The simplest is to sit in your seat at a Toastmasters meeting and when you hear a question asked to another club member, start formulating how you would answer it. As well, pull aside a seasoned member and ask them to grill you with several questions. It is best if it can be done in person, but this isn't an absolute requirement. If you can do it in person, have them ask you a question, time you, and then give you immediate feedback. Then do it again and again, and again. As well, you can have them give you questions and you can practice while you are in the car...or in the shower. I remember one member of our club told me that her kids were sick of having to quiz her during dinner. Good for her.

Rule Number Three – Structure, structure, structure. Toastmasters are hard wired to look for structure. While it is true, a passionate answer that does not have a discernable structure can carry the day, it is also true that rare is the person who can pull this feat off convincingly. Think about this. If you can begin your answer with, "Madame Contest Chair. For me, that is a very easy question to answer. Why I think my city is the greatest in the world. It is an easy answer and although I could give you one hundred reasons, time dictates that I limit it to three." Right away, you see that this answer is structured in that you just broadcast that there are three reasons.

Continuing on with structure, something else Toastmasters are hardwired to look for is an opening, and body, and a close. As an added bonus, if you can give a preview of the speech, that is a bonus. "I hope to convince you that Philadelphia is the greatest city because of its food, its sports, and its history. Let's start with something that everyone can agree on – food." That little preview told the judges what to expect. As an added bonus, there was a transition in to the first point.

“So Alex, is a three-point answer the only formula?” No, however, it is a successful one. There is nothing wrong with telling a story. “Madame contest chair, you asked if addiction is a problem in society today. I can answer yes. I am familiar with its devastating effects. Let me tell you the story of...” Tell the story. Make sure, however, you leave enough time to summarize. The difference between this summarization and one from a structure is this. In a structured answer, your answer should touch on the three points (or however many, no less than two and no more than four). When you have a story answer, you need to provide a universal sentiment that all can relate to.

Rule Number Four – When you are done, you are done. Let’s say you give an answer, you are wrapping up, and it is still green. What do you do? It is simple, you say, “Madame Contest Chair,” and then you take your chances. My observation is that answers that end promptly when red is shown are better. The judges reward acumen as it relates to the clock. However, a mistake I often see is that someone answering a question sees the green and feels compelled to speak for another 45 seconds. Those 45 seconds seal your fate. You do not win. When you decide that you need to speak more, you panic. Panic is recognized.

Rule Number Five – Go big! As with all speaking, I urge speakers to speak at a level/pitch/rate/etc. that almost feels uncomfortable. These are subtleties that somehow resonate. A well thought-out but plainly delivered Table Topic will always lose out to a slightly lesser answer that has pizzazz. So, remember pauses, remember vocal variety, and use the space that is allotted you. Oh, and don’t forget to lock in on audience members. I will add this one caution, though. When I judge, I subtract points for over-the-top theatrics. It is a fine line. It gets back to practice, practice, practice...and feedback from mentors.

Rule Number Six – Laughter always carries the day! If you can find a way to make the audience laugh, the judges will reward you. Be careful, though. If your whole delivery is a standup routine, then you might not fare as well against other, well-thought out answers. Having said that, if you can get laughter on the way in and the way out, this goes a long way towards appeasing the judging gods.

9. Meeting Etiquette

“Elbows off the table, this is not a horse’s stable.” I don’t know how many times I heard that as a child, but as an adult, I try to monitor where my arms are while dining. There are no official rules saying I mustn’t have my elbows off the table, it is just considered proper etiquette.

Speaking of etiquette, with the influx of new members into a club (and as a refresher for some of the old Timers), here are some Toastmaster etiquette guidelines:

- **Coming and Going** – A goal for every meeting should be to begin promptly at a pre-determined time and end at a pre-determined time. In my (corporate) club, if you show up after the last guest escort has left the lobby, there is a good chance that security will not allow you to enter the building. If you do arrive late and you catch security on a good day and they let you in, you will potentially disrupt the flow of the meeting upon your arrival. If circumstances prevent you from arriving on time, quietly enter and sit towards the back (if possible). If you arrive during a formal speaking role, such as a speech, remain outside the room until the next break in action. If you must depart early, situate yourself near the exit and depart during a break in the action.
- **Peanut Gallery Chatter** – My club is a fun club to belong to, but the fun must be tempered. In general, the person occupying the front of the room is and should be the center of attention. Often, a speaker will elicit laughter or minor spontaneous banter. This should never be stifled, but it should be monitored. Unless the speaking occasion calls for audience participation, chatter that resembles heckling should be avoided.
- **Side-bar Conversations** – Similar to the previous comment, side-bar conversations have the potential to distract speakers. Occasionally, such conversations are necessary for the flow of the meeting (e.g., a scheduled Evaluator does not show up and so the person filling in must confer with the speaker). When they are unavoidable, show restraint, show respect.
- **Correcting something that is Missed** – This topic is subjective, but should be put forth for consideration. Say the Toastmaster introduces a speaker without asking for the objectives to be read. When the entire club spontaneously shouts out “you forgot to read the objectives,” this amplifies the faux pas. In a perfect world, the President would make a subtle correction without calling a lot of attention to the misstep. Similarly, if the General Evaluator commits a faux pas, the Toastmaster should make a subtle correction, and so on down the food chain. Also, some missteps do not need to be corrected on the spot. Perhaps a note to the perpetrator would allow that person to rectify the error with grace.
- **Note-passing can be good, note-passing can be bad** – We encourage the audience to pass notes of encouragement and critique to the speaker. We ask you to vote for various events. Notes are necessary at times to convey meeting-critical issues (e.g., Toastmaster to the General Evaluator). These are all good instances of note-passing. These very same scenarios would be considered bad when they interrupt the flow of the meeting. Imagine a novice speaker looking for signs of encouragement from the audience, only to see someone leaning over the table during his or her speech, passing a note or a vote to someone else. When you do this, you are conveying the message “what you are saying is not important.” Pass notes during breaks in the action.

- **Everything Else** – Cell phones off. No sleeping or slouching. No working on your laptop. Enough said.
- **Etiquette Infractions** – Finally, when you are in the role of General Evaluator, it is appropriate to call out any egregious violations to club etiquette. Doing so may be awkward, but it is beneficial to the club. You may only occupy that role for the meeting, but your feedback can go a long way to ensuring the health of the club remains strong and vibrant.

As I mentioned earlier, I belong to an exceptional club. Part of the success is attributable to our dynamic membership and part is attributable to the efficiency of the meetings. Remembering proper etiquette will help you stay on top.

10. Time Management

If you visit the Toastmasters International website, you will find a description of what Toastmasters is all about expressed more eloquently than I can. When it comes to our club, we have two additional parameters under which we operate – one being noble, the other being necessity.

The noble parameter of which I speak is, or should be, a commitment to getting as many attendees to speak as possible. We do this through an opening question/introduction, formal speeches, meeting roles (major and minor), and Table Topics (Table Topics). However, meeting the goal of this noble parameter is contingent on how well we do with that other parameter, the one of necessity.

We have 60 minutes to hold a meeting and we need to make the best of it. The good news is that this has been a defining parameter of our club since the very first meeting, so we tend to stay within the boundaries. What concerns me is everything that goes on between the sounds of the gavel. What follows is guidance based on many years of experience and observation regarding time management at meetings:

- **Opening Question** – In our club, the Opening Question falls within the purview of the President. Whereas it gives everyone an opportunity to speak, the President must weigh the time spent on an opening question vs. time taken away from Table Topics. In terms of speaker development, Table Topics provides a better opportunity for growth. As a general rule, the Opening Question should be used sparingly in a two-speaker meeting. For meetings where there will be no Table Topics, an Opening Question is appropriate. However, the President should factor in the number of people in attendance. Finally, the President should ask a somewhat closed-ended question (What is your favorite meal?) rather than open-ended question (What makes you hungry?) and should discourage long-winded answers.
- **Introductions** – Introductions also fall within the purview of the President (i.e., “Please stand, say where you’re from, and introduce the person next to you.”). Introductions help us get to know each other better and they help the Table Topics Master prepare a list of names for Table Topics. The only stipulation I would add is that if the agenda is tight and there are a lot of people in attendance, the President might want to forego introductions.
- **Toastmaster as overall Timekeeper** – The TMOD’s job is to keep the meeting flowing. It is understood that you will be providing introductions. Keep them brief. Often, there will be a theme for the meeting. You should spend no more than one minute introducing the theme. Finally, keep an eye on the time concerning the hand-off from Table Topics to General Evaluation. If time is going to be a factor, inform the General Evaluator and consider asking him or her to skip planned introductions. During the meeting the Toastmaster must work with the President, the General Evaluator, and the Table Topics Master to ensure that the meeting stays on track and make adjustments-on-the fly if needed
- **Speakers and Evaluators Watch your Time** – Both roles have an allotted time, which varies based on speech. Use it all if you need to; however, when you go over, you are using someone else’s time.
- **Table Topics Masters Watch your Introduction** – If you are the Table Topics Master and have a theme for your Table Topics session, spend no more than thirty seconds explaining the theme. Also, your summary should be very concise (e.g., “Mary spoke on her favorite color blue. Joe

talked about his fear of heights. Sam talked about his dog Fido.”). Work with the Toastmaster and President as to how many questions should be asked. Look for non-verbal signs from the Toastmaster to wrap-up your session. Keep an eye on the clock too.

- **General Evaluator Needs Time Too** – The General Evaluator has some latitude but at the same time, the General Evaluator is often shortchanged because of the other parts of the meeting that run long. At the beginning of the meeting, if there are no visitors or you know time is going to be really tight, the General Evaluator should simply refer everyone to the meeting role descriptions on the back of the agenda rather than verbally describing time. This gives the General Evaluator team more time at the end of the meeting to give proper reports, which are more important than simply describing the roles. A good General Evaluator will be able to use all of the time allotted to point out good and not-so-good qualities of the meeting. At the very least, when time is tight, the General Evaluator should instruct the Ah Counter and Grammarian to be extremely concise. If time is really tight, it is perfectly acceptable, though regrettable, for the General Evaluator to send a report to the club via email, which includes the Ah Counter and Grammarian Report.
- **Ah Counter and Grammarian Keep it Brief** – Keep your report between 30 and 45 seconds. Like with any evaluation, simply provide the highlights, whether critical or complimentary. You don’t have to say it all and you can always speak to members after the meeting to address anything in particular.
- **Everything Else** – Introductions are appropriate and brief. Quite often, there will be a theme to the introductions (e.g., “I asked all of the speakers what their favorite movie is. John said...”). You don’t have to read verbatim the six-paragraph answer that John gave you about his favorite movie. Simply edit or paraphrase to capture the gist of the answer. When time is tight in a meeting, these introductions become superfluous and should be cut. Also, if you forget to give a planned introduction, then consider not giving it all. It’s awkward giving the introduction after the person already spoke and it exposes something you did wrong. Let it be in the past.

In the end, the more people we get to speak during any given meeting, the more successful the meeting will be and the more personal growth your members will realize (not to mention, the more guests you will get to sign up). Sixty minutes is not a lot of time, but in my club, we’ve learned to make it work. Everyone speaking owns a part of the 60 minutes. When you are not cognizant of your own part, you are stealing from someone else’s part.

11. Sensitive Topics

Toastmasters strives to provide a safe and welcoming environment that fosters the development of public speaking skills. This environment extends equally to those in the audience. To this end, your club must adhere to the standards of conduct laid out by Toastmasters International (available on their website). As well, corporate-sponsored clubs have an obligation to adhere to corporate policies governing standards of conduct.

The goal of every Toastmaster meeting is to help members develop their communication skills in a welcoming atmosphere. You must strive to create an inviting, supportive, non-threatening environment where members can feel free to speak on a wide range of issues and topics. However, the following topics should be approached with caution:

- **Sex** – Content that describes sexual acts, either committed, observed, or thought about should be avoided. Content that talks about differences between the sexes is permissible, though it should be presented in a non-derogatory fashion.
- **Religion and Politics** – Content that describes and informs the audience about religion and politics is permissible. Content that attempts to persuade, influence, or degrade is not permissible.

From time to time, we recognize that members feel passionate about subjects that may contain elements of one of the aforementioned topics. In fact, some speech objectives require you to “persuade your audience.” Members should not shy away from topics they feel passionate about. However, if you are unsure whether or not a speech would stray into a gray area, seek guidance. Below are some general tips for all members:

- **Take it Easy** – When you are speaking about a controversial topic, focus on information sharing. Avoid persuasion or advocating particular positions on controversial issues.
- **Get Speech Input** – If you believe that your speech topic may be controversial, seek input. Ask a Board member to review your speech content as well as any visual aids/props or handouts.
- **TMOD Review the Agenda** – When you are the Toastmaster for a meeting, review speech titles and the Table Topics theme. Request a board member’s input on potentially controversial topics.
- **Evaluators Listen and Feel** – When you are a speech Evaluator or the meeting’s General Evaluator, be sure to observe whether speakers have helped create a congenial environment that is comfortable for all.
- **Mentors Step-up** – As a mentor, review this issue with your protégé(s).

12. Special Meetings

Who doesn't like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Independence Day, and so on? These holidays give us something to look forward to. These holidays are fun to celebrate. These holidays make us grow stronger with those we celebrate them with (typically family)...

...but these holidays take a little effort to plan. But you knew that.

So it is with Toastmasters. Special meetings break up the calendar year, they give club members something to look forward to, they are fun to participate in, and they increase the esprit de corps of the club. And as a bonus, can you imagine the look on a guest's face showing up at one of these meetings?

This chapter will describe some special meetings you can incorporate into your schedule to add a little zest to your club. It should be stipulated that these are the ones in which I have participated. I encourage you to seek out others.

Valentines Meeting

This meeting is as simple as it is fun and heartwarming. It is a meeting dedicated to love. This meeting should be loosely structure. In our club, the "Toastmaster" for this meeting is given the moniker of Dr. Love. He or she is responsible for soliciting speakers. The only stipulation is that speeches must be on the topic of love – good love, bad love, first love, enduring love, puppy love, and yes, even the love of a sports fan for his city's teams. In our club, Dr. Love is a mantle that is worn year-after-year until the bearer feel he or she can no longer effective carry on the tradition. A new Dr. Love is then chosen.

This meeting can also feature love-themed Table Topics. Speeches should not be timed, though based on the number of participants, general guidelines should be provided. A love-themed word-of-the-day is optional. The meeting should not feature a General Evaluation/evaluations portion, though nothing prohibits a speaker from receiving an offline evaluation if a speech fits the objectives of a project.

Additionally, you can break up speeches with reading of love-themed poetry. Finally, Dr. Love may choose to go the extra mile and dole out candy and roses to those who serenade the club. I once was awarded a red pipe wrench from a creative Dr. Love. It has come in handy with many a plumbing job.

It goes without saying that this meeting should be held as close to Valentine's Day as possible.

Backwards Meeting

Ah yes, the Backwards Meeting! The most difficult meeting to pull off yet the most rewarding meeting when pulled off correctly. If attempted, this meeting should be held as close to April 1 as possible. (For those not aware of the American tradition, this is April Fool's Day, a day set aside for practical jokes). So what is a backwards meeting? In essence, it is a meeting that is run backwards. However, it is more complicated than that. It is a meeting that requires good listening skills. Very few people in the club should know what is going on ahead of time. If pulled off secretly, it is fun to watch the look of perplexity on the faces of members as they wonder what the heck is going on...until they catch on.

Here is how it works: The Toastmaster for the meeting is the organizer. He or she hand-picks several key roles and lets them partially in on the joke. These people plan just enough. Their job is to provide clues for everyone else.

The meeting starts with the Toastmaster gaveling the meeting closed.

The Toastmaster makes a closing remark commenting on some interesting general observation about the meeting.

The Toastmaster hands out awards for Speaker, Evaluator, and Table Topics.

The Toastmaster hands the meeting over to the General Evaluator.

The General Evaluator gives general observations about the meeting. Included in these observations are cues. For instance, "Joe, I don't know how many times we have to tell you, do not take cell phone calls while giving a speech." At this point Joe makes a mental note that he needs to pretend to answer his call during his speech.

Next the General Evaluator calls on the Grammarian and Ahh counter. These individuals will drop clues. For instance, "Suzy, your speech is normally impeccable but I was surprised at how often you used 'dang' as a filler word." The Grammarian, might say something like, "Bill, I am impressed that you used the word 'germane' in your speech." Suzy and Bill will now need to follow these instructions.

The General Evaluator calls up Evaluator 2. Evaluator 2 gives evaluation. This is the fun part. This is the first time that Speaker 2 has any idea what his or speech will be on. The job of the Evaluator is not to stump the speaker but to lay enough of a framework for the speaker to quickly craft a speech. For instance, "Joe, I knew right away with your speech title 'Why I think there is life on the moon' that I was in for a great speech. I am going to talk about your organization, and you had 3 good points, as well as your body language...The only thing I was disappointed in was with your call to action – we all should be building our own space ships to go to the moon...it wasn't strong enough..."

General Evaluator calls up Evaluator 1 who does the same thing.

General Evaluator turns it over to the Toastmaster.

The Toastmaster "receives" it from the Table Topics Master.

The Table Topics Master gives a quick summary of who spoke on what (this is a cue for the people whose names are called to start thinking of a response that fits the description). The Table Topics Master then calls up the last person who gives their answer. If the Table Topics Master is sharp, after the answer, he or she will come up with a funny question that fits the response.

The Table Topics Master proceeds back through all of the other contestants. When the Table Topics Master is wrapping up, he or she should "create" a question that is ironic/humorous that dovetails with the answer provided by the contestant. For instance, if the clues given the contestant were, "Joe talked about the time he spilled 5 gallons of chocolate syrup on a female coworker," the question stated after the answer could be, "Joe's question was 'how I met my wife'."

The contestants as well, need to listen to the cues that may or may not be given by the Grammarian or Ah Counter.

Here is something to consider. When someone is over zealous with their role and goes "over the top," they are making it about themselves and not the other. For instance, if the Grammarian says, "I want to

congratulate you Bob for saying the word of the day 200 times...”, this is getting a little ridiculous and serves to dampen the meeting. The same is true for Evaluators. If you say, “Suzy, I like the way you ran around the room 5 times pulling your hair out,” again this does not translate well. The speakers have the hardest part. Your job is to give them just enough so that they can cleverly think on the spot.

Tall Tales Meeting

A Tall Tales meeting is a nice juxtaposition to the April’s Fools Backward Meeting. Our club typically alternates years on the meeting closest to April 1 so that members do not get too familiar with the routine. As well, there are always new members filling the ranks who get to see things afresh.

A Tall Tales meeting is centered around extreme fabrication. It should feature a variety of speeches, preferably falling within the 5-7-minute range. The speakers should be admonished to lie, cheat, and steal in their delivery. Speeches can be evaluated, but only if they fit in the construct of a project speech. Evaluations should be delivered offline. More on this in a bit.

Table Topics are a nice pairing for this type of meeting. Of course, the questions should be based on non-reality, such as, “Tell me about the time you summited Mount Everest...of by the way, I understand you did it in a tuxedo.” As with other topics mentioned elsewhere with Table Topics and “outside-the-box” questions, make sure you start with a Toastmaster whom you know will embrace the challenge.

For such meetings, I suggest that you dispense with roles such as Grammarian, Ah Counter, and Evaluators. Rather, pick a seasoned but salty member to run the General Evaluator session. He or she should be able to provide a quick evaluation of each speaker with the appropriate wit, sarcasm, and cynicism. After all, one of the tenets of the Tall Tales meeting is laughter. I should also mention that the Toastmaster for the meeting should be someone who can “carry the show.”

Summer Picnic

Have a summer picnic. Everyone brings something. It is better if you can have it at someone’s house. It is more inviting.

Having said that, in recent years, I have advocated that our club remove this from the calendar. Too many moving parts on the calendar. As with all special events, especially those after-hours, you do not want to tax the base. Another piece of advice I will give is that if you have an annual event that starts to lose its draw, get rid of it.

Happy Hours

Happy hours, strategically placed, especially if your location is in the after-hours vicinity of everybody, are effective esprit-de-corps type events. Again, too many of them and they become stale.

Pot Luck Dinners

A Pot Luck dinner, especially around the holidays is a great way for members to talk to each other for an extended period of time, more so than after the meeting lets out. One caution is this: The Christmas season is a logical time to host such an event. However, keep in mind that you are competing with a plethora of other Christmas parties. Consider doing it after Christmas but before New Year’s.

Ghostmasters

Ah yes, Ghostmasters! I consider this to be the crown jewel on our club's calendar. Quite simply, it is a meeting held right before Halloween (after Halloween it loses some appeal). It features scary ghost stories. If you can pull this off, you will have a good meeting. Now, if you really want to have a great meeting, do the following:

Hold it after hours at a member's house who lives in a wooded setting. Have folks bring food for a potluck dinner. When the eating is finished, move it to the outside around a raging bonfire. Club members can sit or stand. This meeting demands the services of a highly competent, endearing, and theatrical individual to serve as the ultimate emcee – the GhostMaster. If you can put all of these pieces together, there is nothing like hearing a suspenseful, scary tale while loitering on the perimeter of a blaze, with the cold to your back and heat to your front. Actually, there is something better, and that is recounting your tale on the ultimate stage – with a fire to your back and smoke wafting through the air. Too throw a little more kindling on the blaze, add table topics to this event to warm-up the crowd before the prepared speeches.

And to add a little extra spice, our club has “trophies” that get handed down and over each year to the champions of the fire pit. People never get tired of coming to this meeting. More importantly, the coveted first place accolades are bragging rights that last the entire year.

Pollyanna Table Topics meeting

If you are familiar with Pollyanna, Cut Throat Pollyanna, and White Elephant events, then you know the basis of a Pollyanna Table Topics meeting. Everybody brings an inexpensive gift. The gifts are put on a table. Numbers are drawn. The person with number 1 goes up to the table, picks a gift, and then delivers a Table Topic on the gift. Number 2 then comes up, picks a gift off the table, delivers a Table Topic on the gift, and then keeps it or steals. This continues onto the end.

Typically for such events there are rules on how many steals, whether a gift can be retired, and so on. You can come up with these based on experience. In our club, the person who is number 1 gets to steal at the very end if he or she chooses. When it is all done, we vote on the best Table Topic answer and the winner gets the last opportunity to steal.

One last tip. If you are running this meeting, bring a few extra gifts. That way, if someone forgets or if a guest shows up, they can be invited to participate.

The DTM Meeting

The Distinguished Toastmaster Award is the highest achievement a Toastmaster can attain. As such, it should be recognized. In our club, we dedicate the entire meeting to the individual. We ask the individual for a guest list and we send out invitations. Former DTM for the club are invited. Special toasts and roasts, if appropriate, are given. You can even have Table Topics relating to the honored individual. We also have a tradition of filming “dramatic” recreations of the honoree's more memorable moments. Of course, there should be refreshments. Finally, the DTM should be given their moment to address the audience followed up by an official presentation of the award. Another nice touch is to find out where the person works and lives and send letters of commendation to their boss as well as a write-up to the local newspaper.

Once during my Area Director tenure at a club visit, I was taken aback when at the end of the meeting, the President called up an individual and recognized them for receiving their DTM. Everyone clapped and the individual sat down. As it was my custom on such visits, I addressed the club giving them quasi-General Evaluator report as well as offering encouragement. But then, in a diplomatic way, I said, “Shame on you. Suzy just received the highest achievement you can receive, something only 2% of Toastmasters achieve, and a round of applause is all she gets.” I later learned that after the meeting that night, the club decided to take “Suzy” out for dinner. “Suzy” thanked me.

Let’s face it. Achieving DTM is a big deal...so make it a big deal!

General Themed Meetings and General Comments on Themed Meetings

There is no reason why a regular meeting cannot have a theme to it. Quite often, there are natural themes, such as a meeting that falls right before a holiday. Take for instance, the meeting before Thanksgiving. The Toastmaster for the meeting establishes the theme for the meeting. Whatever ancillary parts of the meeting your club uses (word of the day, quote of the day, etc.) should revolve around this theme. The opening question (if your club uses this) could be a simple request of, “Stand, state your name and where you are from, and tell me your favorite Thanksgiving side dish, and then introduce the person to your right.” The Table Topics Master can ask related questions. As well, the Toastmaster can ask all individuals who will be speaking or performing a major role a question that will be used in introductions. “Our first speaker today is no stranger to tradition. When I asked Joe what is his favorite Thanksgiving tradition is, he said ‘Playing a game of football with all 15 members of his extended family.’”

Themes can also be whimsical. If you are a movie buff and it is the week of the Oscars, you can organize the meeting around this event using some or all of the techniques mentioned above.

A few cautions are necessary. There is nothing like being the Table Topics Master, preparing a series of questions relating to the theme, and then having the Toastmaster ask an opening question that ruins your surprise. The moral of the story is to communicate.

If every meeting is a themed meeting, then they lose their appeal. Likewise, if you have a lot of themed meetings, newer members might be inclined to think that this is what is expected. Requesting an answer to a themed question to use for introductions is a good technique but it is a poor substitute for reality. Think about it. If you are called to emcee an event, you are not going to use themed questions to introduce your speakers. The best personal introductions are the ones that show thought.

If you introduce a theme and use it on a yearly basis, if it starts losing its appeal, get rid of it. People don’t come to Toastmasters to be entertained. If they happened to be entertained along the way, that is a bonus.

For newer clubs, slowly experiment with “themed” or “special” meetings. They take a lot of coordination to pull off. The more you are comfortable with basic Toastmastering, the easier it will become to deviate from the norm without deviating from the essence of why people come to meetings.

Finally, themed meetings provide opportunities for leadership growth. Something like a Pollyanna meeting takes a lot of coordination and communication. You may be able to use this as an opportunity to get credit for your Competent Leader award (or equivalent Pathways award).

13. Mr. Etiquette

Over the years, a mystery man, Mr. Etiquette, who concerns himself with the finer details of Toastmasters, has made guest appearances in our club's newsletters. He has a penchant for tackling touchy as well as sublime Toastmasters questions. Heed his advice.

English as a Second Language

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

Our club has a member for whom English is a second language. The individual is vigorously pursuing her DTM. One concern I have is for her spoken language. When speaking, it is as though she is not finishing thoughts, interrupting herself with other thoughts. Her speech comes out as if with too much punctuation. Sometimes it is hard to understand. I have evaluated this individual several times and have provided mentoring on the side. Still, I haven't seen much progress. I am wondering if you have any advice or tips.

Sincerely,

Concerned for the Spoken Language

Dear Concerned for the Spoken Language,

I hear what you are saying and I understand. Now, before moving on, analyze what I just wrote, in particular “hear” and “understand.” People for whom English is a second language have a harder burden to bear and should be judged on a slightly different scale. To some extent, it is no different than any other Toastmaster's. Everyone begins their journey at a certain point and ends at a certain point (as an aside, no journey should ever end, but for explanation purposes, we'll assume one). Some enter very polished and end very polished. Some enter not polished and end somewhat polished. Each member's measure of success is different. As to the individual in question, grammatical nuances can be difficult and should not be dwelled on too much from an Evaluator's purview. In theory, you could fill up a Grammarian's report on said individual's faux pas. Let me ask you this. Imagine living in another country having to learn and communicate in their language.

Something else I will point out is an oft-overlooked aspect of Toastmasters. It is not just about communicating – it is about communicating and leadership. From what you have told me, said individual is excelling on the leadership track. How great is that? Don't let that fact get lost.

Now, circling back, I have found that people who speak English as a second language often write English as a second language. I think a good technique that you should try is to have the individual in question write their next speech verbatim. Then, you can correct any grammatical issues. But remember, this may only be partially successful. Don't forget that progress is progress.

Good luck on your journey and good luck on being part of other members' journeys. After all, Mr. Etiquette has been part of your journey, now hasn't he?

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Wrapping Up

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I am getting better at delivering evaluations. However, I find I have a difficult time wrapping up. I feel like the teenage boy walking the girl up to her front door at the end of the first date – it is awkward. Any tips?

Sincerely,

Trouble with Closing

Dear Trouble with Closing,

It should come as no surprise that I am qualified to discuss all matters concerning conclusions, including dating situations. However, I suspect that you were being metaphoric and not issuing a cry for help. Thus, I will confine my comments to evaluations.

The first things you must realize is that an evaluation should be approached the same as any other Toastmaster speaking opportunity. The introduction and body should both be complimentary and well-conceived. To this extent, a speech, answer, or evaluation that has a framework often works best. The conclusion should be complimentary to the other two parts as well.

It has been my experience that people get into trouble when they see the red light illuminate. This can be problematic if you are still delivering content. When this happens, the Evaluator tends to blurt out something along the lines of, “That was a great speech. I look forward to seeing future speeches.”

This statement in and of itself is fine, but it is a like a movie that ends abruptly, leaving the audience feeling like they were gipped. My recommendation is to start with the yellow light, or for the purist, the amber light. When you see yellow, you should tie up all existing comments and forgo starting any new threads. The red light is always quick on the heels. Next, use the structure that you previewed your evaluation with (of course, you did preview your structure, didn’t you?). For instance,

“Bob, congratulations on your wonderful presentation, and of note, the way you structured your speech and used good transitions. I hope that you can use the advice I gave on having a concise conclusion in future speeches...”

Before I continue, here is a technique that can be used for just about any speech, in particular the speeches in the Competent Communicator series – know what the next speech topic is. Let’s pick up on the wonderfully-crafted concluding statement.

“...in particular, Speech # 4, How to Say It. This speech will build on the previous ones but will also challenge you. I look forward to seeing your journey continue.”

Sadly, I am telling you to be a little formulaic. However, as long as your formula has value, you win and so does the person you are evaluating.

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Eye Contact

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

When I speak in the front of the room, who should I look at?

Sincerely,

Eye Contact

Dear Eye Contact,

The obvious answer is the audience, but with many things, the obvious is not always so obvious. Before I venture into the answer, I should stress that eye contact with the audience is a powerful attribute for any speaker, and we should strive to improve this skill.

Now, let's talk about the subtleties. In all Toastmasters speaking situations, you will be introduced by someone such as the Toastmaster, the Table Topics Master, or General Evaluator. It is a good practice to directly recognize this person with a glance or gesture and a comment before turning your attention to the general audience. For example, "Thank you, Mr. Toastmaster."

Let's discuss the subtleties of Table Topics and Evaluations.

For Table Topics, you will be asked a specific question by the Table Topics Master. As mentioned above, you should first face the Table Topics Master and exchange some pleasantries such as, "Thank you Madam Table Topics Master for that question." Then face the audience and proceed with your question. You do not need to make eye contact with Table Topics Master until the end, when you wrap up the question.

For Evaluations, it is a little trickier. You have two audiences – the person you are evaluating and the general audience. With any luck the person you are evaluating will be nicely positioned in the room so that you can divide your contact equally. Remember, your feedback is meant specifically for the speaker but generally for all. The more you evaluate, you will get a better feel as to how to divide your eye contact between the two audiences.

As always, it is a good practice when you have finished speaking to turn and address the person who introduced you. If nothing else, this will inform them that you have finished.

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Providing Feedback

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I had an embarrassing experience. After a recent meeting, one of the speakers asked me for some candid feedback on his speech. Unfortunately, I had another role in the meeting and I was not listening with a critical ear. I felt bad because I know our club prides itself on giving feedback. Yet, I was caught off guard and could only cobble together what I perceived to be a few inconsequential remarks.

Am I a bad Toastmaster?

*Sincerely,
Crestfallen*

Dear Crestfallen,

Chin up! Mr. Etiquette is here to inform you that you did nothing wrong. While it is true that feedback is the means by which we improve, one must accept that there are times in a meeting when certain individuals are preoccupied with the mechanics of the meeting. Therefore, let us turn a new page, or in this case, start a new paragraph, and put the onus on the speaker.

For almost every speech given, the speaker is assigned an Evaluator. The job of the Evaluator is twofold: provide feedback and learn evaluation skills. Advanced speakers, however, have learned who in the club is adept at providing critical feedback. Often, he or she will ask such individuals ahead of time to pay special attention during the speech for overall commentary or specific techniques (e.g., let me know if my vocal variety has improved from my previous speeches). And as Mr. Etiquette is not known for holding back his opinions, this form of communication should always be occurring between protégé and mentor.

In our club, one should always be prepared to give feedback, but more importantly, one should never be shy in asking for you to give it...ahead of time.

Sincerely,
Mr. Etiquette

Ending Speeches

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I know you have definite opinions about etiquette, so maybe you can help me out with another problem I have. I have a hard time signaling the end of my speech. Can you give me some tips?

Sincerely,

New Speaker,

Dear New Speaker,

It just so happens that I have an opinion on just about anything you can think of, so of course, I can help. Let me first say that this is a problem that many speakers have, so don't feel alone.

Speaking would be easy if we had a red light on our head that signaled when we are finished. Unless you are a robot, we'll focus on two other techniques, which can and should be used in conjunction with each other.

The first technique is the "strong finish." By this I mean you should build into your speech a solid ending that leaves no doubt that you have wrapped up and by this, I don't mean you need to insert phrases like, "in summary," "in conclusion," or "to wrap up." Rather, you should have a concluding paragraph that mirrors the topics or themes and that you introduced in your opening (which, should be a "strong opening"). Also consider restating your thesis statement. However, when using this technique, make sure your conclusion is worded differently enough so as not to make it sound the same as the opening. As for the denouement, consider ending with a pithy sentence, perhaps a quote, that encapsulates the point you were trying to convey.

The second technique is all about speaking mechanics. Say you are in the front and center of the room and you just delivered the aforementioned pithy statement. You should then stop, pause and smile (if the topic warrants a smile), and then turn in the direction of the Toastmaster and say, "Mr./Madam Toastmaster." Wait for the Toastmaster to come to you and graciously accept that applause for a job well done.

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Reply All

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

When is it appropriate to use the Reply All button when responding to an email?

Sincerely,

Overflowing Inbox

Dear Overflowing Inbox,

I think your name sums up the problem succinctly. In the last decade or so, email has become an integral part in most people's work environment. When used correctly, it can be an efficient way to resolve issues, but like anything else, too much can be overwhelming. So, to respond to your question, I believe the answer is ***almost never***. Take the following situation. I am scheduled to give a speech next week but I found out that last-minute work obligations will take me out of town so I send an email to the club soliciting a substitute. I, the sender, am the only one who needs to know if you can fill in for me. I also do not need to know that you can't fill in for me – a nonreply accomplishes the same thing.

Further addressing the overflowing inbox problem, when drafting an email, consider whether it needs to be sent out to the entire club. For example, you are scheduled to evaluate a speaker next week but you will not be able to attend the meeting. You should consider emailing (or calling) someone you know asking them if they can fill in for you. If you are a mentor in this situation, you should as a matter of course, offer this opportunity to one of your protégées so he or she can further their development.

So remember, when contemplating pressing the **Reply All** button, ask yourself "Is what I am sending vital to all club members?" If not, the **Reply** button will suffice.

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Time Management

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

Today was my first time as Toastmaster. I prepared well (at least I think I did). I had detailed introductions and a theme. However, the meeting started late and the General Evaluator session was cut short. I feel bad because I really wanted to run an efficient meeting. Was I at fault? Could I have done something differently?

Sincerely,

Wanting to Make a Good Impression

Dear Wanting to Make a Good Impression,

The short answers are “yes” and “yes.” The longer answers are “but only partially” and “you will learn with time.” Fear not, for I will elaborate.

Ultimately, as the Toastmaster, you own the schedule. For any given meeting, we have 59 minutes to play with. On a good day, the Toastmaster will be responsible for 51 of those minutes. I suspect you did not have a good day.

Though you own the time management of the meeting, you are at the mercy of several other individuals with speaking roles. Often, your job is to react. I will address a few areas that you can control as well as areas that anyone speaking that day should be cognizant of.

It starts with the gavel. If the meeting does not start on time, it is the responsibility of the President to adjust. It is within the President’s purview to do introductions or an opening question. Opening questions are fine but they take up time. They should not be used when the meeting is crowded and/or when there are Table Topics.

When the meeting is turned over to you, remember, be efficient when previewing the meeting. If you have a theme, announce it and let it develop throughout the meeting. You should not be giving a mini-speech in your monologue.

Keep your introductions of speakers and individuals with roles manageable. If time is getting tight, prepare to abbreviate them or jettison them entirely so that no one is shortchanged.

During Table Topics, be conscious of when you need to turn the meeting over to the General Evaluator. For a 2-speaker meeting, factor in 7 minutes for the Evaluators, 2 minutes for Grammarian and Ah Counter reports, 3 minutes for the General Evaluator report, 2 minutes for the Toastmaster wrap up, and 2 minutes for the President wrap up. That means at the latest, you should be turning the meeting over to the General Evaluator at 12:44. If you can give the General Evaluator an extra minute or two, all the better. This will come into play when determining how many more Table Topic questions can be asked, factoring in, of course, time needed for the Table Topics Master to summarize and wrap up.

If it looks like time will be an issue, it is certainly acceptable to publicly admonish all participants to tighten up.

Remember, time management is everyone's responsible – it's just that when you are the Toastmaster, you are in the best position to manage it.

Sincerely,
Mr. Etiquette

Introductions

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I have a "friend" who was once a Toastmaster at a meeting and this "friend," although he prepared, had a hard time introducing the speaker. He forgot to read the objectives before calling up the speaker. It was an awkward moment. Is there any advice you can give me so I can pass it along to my friend?

Sincerely,

Friend of a Friend

Dear Friend of a Friend,

I do have advice that you can pass along to your friend. And feel free to use it yourself if you'd like.

Short of writing every last of word of your introduction out and reading it verbatim, there is no guarantee that you will not fumble the hand off. Being proficient is a function of practice, practice, and then practice. I can't think of a better place to practice than at a Toastmasters meeting. Platitudes aside, I do have some targeted advice to offer.

As a Toastmaster giving an introduction, you set the stage. What if the speaker you are introducing is highly professional and has his or her act together and you don't. You start them on the wrong foot if you give a bad introduction. What if the speaker is extremely nervous and your incoherent introduction makes them more nervous? As you can see, a bad introduction has a potential to produce bad unintended ripples.

To help with introductions, I suggest employing a four-step formula.

Step 1 – Introduce the speaker by name

Step 2 – Introduce and call for the Evaluator

Step 3 – Embellish the speaker introduction

Step 4 – Introduce the speech title

By memorizing the formula (or having a cheat sheet), you will have the process down. Learning how to polish the embellishment in step 3 will come with time. This is where you earn your money as a Toastmaster. However, as good as your embellishment is, if you forget the other steps, you will look unprepared.

Here is an example of the four-step process put into action.

"Our next speaker is John Doe. John will be evaluated by Jane Smith. Jane will you read John's objectives. [objective read] Thank you, Jane. John has been a member of the club for the past six years and has work tirelessly on the club's behalf. His sense of selflessness goes beyond the walls of this room for he also volunteers with the Acme organization for Kids. Please join me in welcoming John Doe with his speech 'Where Eagles Fly.'"

Short, crisp, and to the point, but more importantly, it follows the formula.
So, the next time your friend is a Toastmaster, see if he follows the formula.

Sincerely,
Mr. Etiquette

Touchy Subjects

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I want to give a speech on a topic that is important to me – politics. Can I?

Sincerely,

Politically Passionate

Dear Politically Passionate,

The answer is yes.

But when have you known Mr. Etiquette to leave it at that? For the sake of discussion, let's lump the topics of sex and religion in with politics. My answer of "Yes" needs a thoughtful deliberation as will any speech (or Table Topic question/response for that matter). One of the goals of Toastmasters is to provide a safe environment for members to discover and develop their speaking skills. Generally speaking, the Toastmasters manuals you receive provide objectives for you to meet, but leave the topic selection up to you. Having said that, you must always remember your audience. Consider the following examples.

You are a believer in the god Mombo. It would be perfectly acceptable to give a speech on Momboism, its tenets, and history. However, you venture into a gray area when you start discussing how Mombo will strike down non-believers who eat spinach on Fridays.

You are passionate about the Idealism of your political party. It would be perfectly acceptable to give a speech on the core principals of the Idealism party while honestly contrasting it to the principals of the Reformer party. However, you venture in the gray area when start talking about the wonderful qualities of the Idealism party and/or criticizing the Reformer party's candidate.

You are a single guy who has had a lot of interesting dating experiences. It is perfectly acceptable to give a speech musing on these experiences. However, you venture into the gray area when you discuss "grown up" situations or when you start denigrating the opposite sex. To this last point, I add this caveat. The "differences between sexes" is a common speech topic. In fact, you will hear this speech topic in many Humorous Speech contests. It is understood that there are differences between the sexes, just use your better judgment.

To sum up, if you are passionate about something, tell us. Just don't shock us, offend us, or attempt to convert us.

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Mentoring

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I am a new mentor with my first mentee. When I asked him about preparations for his Ice Breaker, he told me that he was going to create some bullets and speak to them. Something didn't sit right but I told him that that was "a technique." Was I wrong?

Sincerely,

Learning to Mentor

Dear Learning to Mentor,

You will find that in life sometimes the direct approach is required, so I will demonstrate – you were wrong. Having said that, I will stipulate that this is purely my opinion and others may take umbrage. I will therefore attempt to persuade you to adopt my point of view through persuasive arguments.

First of all, speaking from a bulleted list is another form of speaking extemporaneously. Toastmasters in its infinite wisdom, realizes that this is a valuable skillset to have and thus has created an entire segment of the meeting dedicated to this. It is called Table Topics.

Each speech has a set of objectives that a speaker must master. You are in control of what you say. The objectives should dictate how you say it. I have a hard time believing someone can formulate a speech and incorporate a framework effectively at the same time in front of a live audience.

Rod Stewart once included a line in one of his hits that struck a chord, pun intended - her ad-libbed lines were well rehearsed. When you write your entire speech, you get to control the meaning and intended effect of every word. The better you get at this (and you get better by practice and repetition), the easier it is to step in front of a room and say, "I own you."

There is another inherent flaw in speaking off-the-cuff and every Evaluator can attest to this. It is called the "red light rat hole." When you prepare your entire speech, you know how long it will take to deliver. This allows you to trim items not germane to your thesis. When you formulate a speech on-the-fly as with evaluations, boy that red light comes pretty quick and when you are far down in the rat hole, you have to scurry like mad to get out. Walking away with the ribbon is out of the question. Not only that, you blew a chance to master a skill.

Over the years, I have encountered several individuals highly skilled in speaking on-the-fly. They dazzle their audiences. The problem is, they possessed this skill prior to becoming a Toastmaster. They tend to use Toastmasters as a stage to practice and refine those skills. Everyone who signs up for the Toastmasters program should enter one level and exit at a higher level. If you enter great but exit without becoming greater, what did you accomplish?

So as not to waste any more of your time, learn the lesson of Rod Stewart – be prepared. Then you can be prepared for success.

Sincerely,
Mr. Etiquette

Themed Meeting Etiquette

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

I love Christmas! It's my favorite holiday, but I have a dilemma. I am to Toastmaster in December and I so desperately want to have a themed meeting around Christmas but between my meeting and Christmas, there is another meeting. Can I do a themed meeting?

Sincerely,

Don't Want to Steal Thunder

Dear Don't Want to Steal Thunder,

In my humble opinion, your name sums it all up. As humble as my opinion is, it does not prevent me from opining. First let me state that I look at themed meetings with a wary eye. If the club has too many themed meetings, they lose their luster. However, there are certain calendar events that dovetail perfectly and quite frankly, I would be aghast if a club, for example, did not have a themed meeting, say on love, right before Valentine's Day. In this case, it is a matter of the luck of the draw. If you are scheduled to be Toastmaster for a meeting that falls right before holiday, you should own the theme.

Not all is lost. You do have options. If it means that much to you, you could switch with the other scheduled Toastmaster. If that doesn't work, you can coordinate to see if you can still do your theme without stealing the other person's thunder.

Ultimately, I recall someone once saying something that speaks to your question – do unto others as you would want them to do unto you.

Sincerely,

Mr. Etiquette

Voting for Objectives

Dear Mr. Etiquette,

In today's meeting, I was moved by a speech like I have never been moved before. The speaker opened his speech with a rousing rendition of Luciano Pavarotti. Throughout the speech, he interspersed many famous opera moments. The conclusion was to die for. I felt like I was in Tenor Land. The thing about it is that I was the Vote Counter at the meeting. I saw the ballot of someone whom I respect and he didn't vote the way I voted. Is there anything wrong with the way I vote?

Sincerely,

A Fool for Opera

Dear Fool,

It may surprise you to learn that Mr. Etiquette can wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Today was one of those days. On such days, Mr. Etiquette does not suffer fools. So, to answer your question, there is nothing wrong with the way you voted if either of the following two statements are accurate. 1) You are a fool. 2) The speech objectives stated something to the effect of "Demonstrate your ability to sing opera as much as possible in your speech." Now, Mr. Etiquette, though curmudgeonly at times, will always defend his position.

As for the first point, perhaps I was harsh, but let me ask you this. Let's say you are the hiring manager with two candidates in front of you. Candidate A is knocked-out gorgeous but possesses the aptitude of a piece of rope. Candidate B is homely in appearance but is smarter than Einstein. Which one would you hire? This is a rhetorical question and if you have to take some time to consider the answer, your problem may be a little deeper. You would hire the person who is best qualified. It is fair to assume that the job in question has a set of criteria/qualities that the applicant must possess.

Each speech has objectives. These objectives are the benchmark by which the speech should be evaluated and judged. At any given meeting, you can have a speaker giving speech number 2 and another giving speech number 39. The latter should only beat the former in voting if the latter met the objectives better than the former.

As for the second point I brought up, over the years I have seen just about every type of Toastmaster speech that can be given. Never have I heard a reading of the objectives include anything about singing. Speech is a powerful thing. A good singing voice can be powerful as well. In fact, I wish I had one. Can you imagine an America Idol contestant, starting his or her song with a 45 second monologue? Again, rhetorical. The reason being is there is a difference between a singing contest and a speech contest.

In Toastmasters, we are judged on our message. Delivery is the means by which we convey this message. When you deviate too far from what is asked of you, you run the risk of trying to influence the audience with unfair tactics. People who do a lot of singing in their speeches tend to want have a lot of notes passed to them after saying, "what a lovely voice you have."

Mr. Etiquette is by no means saying you cannot include limited singing in your speech. However, if you do and Mr. Etiquette is in the audience, know that your singing must pass a two-part litmus test. 1) Did it effectively support the objectives of the speech? 2) Was it situationally appropriate? If not, know that you will not be getting Mr. Etiquette's vote.

Now, if you don't mind, I had a terrible night's sleep. I need to take a nap so as not to run the risk of offending anyone with my opinions. A sure-fire way of not being offended by Mr. Etiquette's opinions is to always vote on the better/best speaker based on which speaker met their objectives.

Sincerely,
Mr. Etiquette

14. Final Gavel

Have I covered everything possibly related to Toastmasters? No. Perhaps there will be a second edition in the offing. I think, though, that I have given a good foundation for creating a healthy and happy Toastmasters club all the while, sufficiently expressing my opinions. They are just that, though - opinions. However, I hope I have backed them up.

I have seen many club Presidents. I have seen very few bad ones. As well, I have seen my share of adequate ones. I have seen many good ones. The problem with the adequate ones is that they are a shade off from being a bad one. Having two adequate ones in a row can do as much damage to a club as a bad one.

So, what do you do to be a good one? Put time into it. Some people are natural leaders and/or organizers. Some folks have enough panache to carry the day. Those who don't – work harder. Put time into the club. Stay on top of things. Make sure that every meeting is fully stocked with roles and speeches. Ultimately, Toastmasters sells itself. The problem is that it either sells itself effectively or poorly. The difference between the two is in the quality of the meetings.

I wish you luck with your journey. I wish your club great success. I wish most of all, that you build it...
...so that they will come.

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