

## Top Ten Tips for Terrific Table Topics

- 1. You're not bovered:** If you can, just stop caring about table topics. Remember, everyone in the audience has been in your position, has probably dried up at some point and is willing you to do well, so you don't need to worry about their reaction.
- 2. Buy time:** Give yourself time for your nerves to die down and for you to think of something to say. Sit at the back of the room and walk slowly to the front. Acknowledge the audience and repeat the question. If you need to, just talk for a while about something vaguely related to the theme, or even about something totally unrelated: sooner or later, inspiration will come.
- 3. Go with your first little idea:** Sooner or later, a little idea will pop into your head. Even if it's just a little idea, start talking about it. Don't reject it in the hope that a bigger idea will come along: the little idea has to be expressed first. If you do reject it, it'll sulk, and will block the big idea from ever getting through.
- 4. Answer the question:** Unless you're a beginner, don't give a long introduction. Instead, answer the question or express an opinion, and do so right at the start. This is easier for closed questions (eg "What was your favourite holiday?"), but you can also do it for open questions (eg "Talk about holidays"), so long as you can seize your little idea and turn it into something concrete.
- 5. Remember the rule of three:** You can put some structure onto your speech by breaking it down into three main points that justify your opinion or reinforce it. (For example, "My best holiday ever was in Tibet, and there were three reasons why.") You don't need them all before you start: instead, you can think of the first point while answering the question, then think of the second point while talking about the first, and so on. It's surprising how often this works.
- 6. Know when to stop:** Try not to ramble your way through a long conclusion. Instead, recap your answer and the main points of your speech, finish with a punchy ending and hand back to the table topics master.
- 7. Prepare something in advance:** You can often use the theme of the topic to suggest a framework for your speech, a style of delivery or a direction to take it in. When your question arrives, you can fit your answer into the framework you've already thought of.
- 8. Draw on your own experience:** When you're given a table topic, you can ask yourself if there's anything in your own experience that will help you answer the question or illustrate your argument. As well as making it easier for you to answer the question, a personal reply will often sound more heartfelt than other answers you might give.
- 9. Remember the six honest serving men:** You can also develop your argument by using Kipling's six honest serving men to trigger ideas in your mind. (For example: What was my favourite holiday? Why did I do there? When did I go? How did I travel? Where did I stay? Who did I meet?) By actively looking for answers to these questions, we can give ourselves both the material and the framework to put together a well-crafted speech.
- 10. Be eccentric:** The best topics are often those where the speaker avoids a serious or conventional answer, and instead tries something unusual or entertaining. For example, you can deliver your speech in character, or deliver an unexpected or contrarian argument. By doing this, you can grab the audience's attention, and can free yourself from the constraints of a conventional approach.
- 11. Keep doing table topics.** Finally, keep practising. The more you do it, the less nervous you'll become, the easier you'll find it, and the more you'll enjoy it.