

8 Strategic Structures for Table Topics

1. PREP (Point, Reason, Example, Point) or OREO (Opinion, Reason, Example, Opinion)

This is the most common method for answering a table topic. Most people do this unknowingly, as it is the most natural way of answering questions.

First, make your point.

You can agree or disagree with the topic.

You can answer the question directly.

Or you can state your position.

Reason (“...because...”)

Then, tell them why you made your point.

People without basic conversational skills will just answer a yes/no question with a yes/no answer.

They wouldn’t think to expand on their answers or give a reason.

And that’s how many conversations die.

Tell them the reason you agreed or disagreed with the topic.

Example (“...there was a time...”)

Then, share an example to back up your reasoning.

It could be a story, a personal anecdote or statistics and research.

It could even be a quote by an authority in that field.

This is where the meat of your answer is at and how you could speak “long enough” to hit the 1min mark. You could even share multiple examples if time permits.

The line between reason and example is blur. They could overlap or very well be the same thing.

Point (“That is why...”)

Finally, conclude by re-stating your point.

A simple line like “And friends, that is why I agree...”

To bring it to the next level, have a Call-to-Action (CTA) for your audience to take away with.

2. Pendulum Method

Like a pendulum, you swing to both sides of the argument. This is used when you can’t decide whether you agree or disagree with a question, or when you feel that both sides have merits.

1. Start with One Side

First, you state one position.

“I agree that...” or “On one hand, I feel that...”

This brings you to one side of the argument.

2. Explain Your View

Just like the PREP method, when you state an opinion, you must give a reason and some examples.

Note: You do not have to start by deciding you are using the pendulum method. The beginning of this method is like the PREP method. Perhaps during your speech, you thought of a second view, then you move to point 3.

Or you simply have too much time left.

3. Swing to the Other Side

However, instead of concluding, you explore the other option using this method.

“On the other hand, I feel that...”

4. Explain Second View

Again, back up this view with some stories or statistics.

Of course, you do not have as much time as the PREP method to do an in-depth explanation for both views.

5. Choose One Side

Finally, conclude with a stand.

Weigh your options and decide which side you agree with more.

“In conclusion, having weighed both sides of the argument, I agree with Position A more than Position B.”

3. The Balance

Very similar to the Pendulum Method, you explore both sides of the argument, but instead of choosing one side, you take the middle path. This is used when you feel that both sides do NOT have merits.

1. State Your Neutral Point

Whether you want to be politically correct or you simply have no strong opinion on the topic, state your neutral point and take the middle path.

Bonus: Shock everyone by announcing that you disagree with both sides of the argument. Do it confidently and somewhat defiantly.

2. Explain Both Views

Instead of exploring the merits of both sides of the argument, share why you DISAGREE with both sides of the arguments.

For this to work, you better have some strong arguments or emotional reasons why both sides don't work for you.

3. State Neutral Point

Finally, conclude by re-stating your neutral point. If possible, offer an alternative and hope that you have just started a revolution.

Just kidding.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that is why I feel that both sides of the arguments will not work. Instead, we should all..."

4. Lightbulb Method (Problem/Solution)

Why lightbulb?

Remember those cartoon or comic characters getting a sudden brilliant idea and a lightbulb brightens up near their heads?

That's when they have a solution to their problem.

1. State the Problem

Start your speech by talking about the problem that the topic represents.

Although unlikely, you may have some relevant statistics on top of your mind; use them!

2. The Cause

How did the problem happen? Share it.

Many people would skip this step and go straight into the solution. How would you feel if a doctor just prescribed you a medicine without asking you questions to find the cause of your pain?

I feel that by sharing the cause, it shows your knowledge of the subject matter, boosts your credibility and segues nicely into the next point.

3. Offer the Solution

Like a doctor that has just diagnosed a patient, it is time to prescribe the medicine.

Give them the magic bullet, the holy grail, the answer to their problems.

Answer the topic, offer a solution, and urge the audience to do something. Give them a Call-to-Action!

Otherwise, what is the point of the solution if there is nothing the audience members can do?

5. Timeline Method (Past, Present, Future)

Sometimes, a topic doesn't require you to agree or disagree, nor does it require you to choose between two stands.

Or perhaps it does, but you have a different point of view at different stages of your life. Then this is a great structure to use.

Past - Firstly, share how you felt about the topic when you were a kid/a while back.

When you were younger, the world seemed so big, didn't it?

Your worldview may not have been fully formed yet.

Be vulnerable and share your kiddish opinion back then. When something is personal, it usually is more universal. Someone in the audience would have felt the same in the past.

Present - Secondly, share how you feel about the topic right now.

As you grow older, you become wiser.

Has your opinion changed? Do you still feel the same way about the topic? Why or why not?

Share what you have been through to shape your current opinion. People like to hear about the journey of transformation.

Future - Finally, share your thoughts about the topic in the future.

Do you firmly believe that your opinion will remain the same?

Have you read something that gave you some foresight about the topic in the future?

Or are you unsure about what will happen in the future?

Even if you are unsure, share why you are unsure. You'd be surprised how many people will agree with the uncertainty.

Conclude - At this point, you'd have brought the audience on a journey with you – to the past, present and the future.

Finally, wrap up your speech by bringing the audience back to the present moment and sharing your message with them. Don't forget to conclude.

The Timeline Method does not need to be your opinion on something at different stages of your life. It could be facts about someone or some place at different timelines.

For example, "Singapore in the 1950s was like a slump. Singapore now is an economic powerhouse. And who knows what Singapore will be like in the future?"

6. Zoom Method (Micro/Macro)

Imagine a pair of camera lens that can zoom in and zoom out on a subject. That is the inspiration for this method.

To put it another way, we can talk about a topic on a micro and macro level.

An example would be talking about a topic on a community, national, and international level.

Or a family, school, and government level.

You can go as big as the planet, solar system, and the Universe level – if you know what you are talking about.

You can also go the other way and zoom into the smaller picture.

For instance, "When I'm with my family, I feel that...but when I'm with my spouse, I feel this way...and when I'm alone, I feel that the topic..."

The idea is to "take a step back" (or in) and see the bigger picture and not be boxed into one perspective.

7. Triangle Method

Speaking about perspectives, here's a method where you can speak from three different perspectives.

Imagine a triangle. Each of the three points represents a point of view from three different sources. For example:

- an Engineer, a politician, and a child
- Supervisor, Worker, Customer

Put yourself into the shoes of each character and share how each character might feel about the topic.

This is particularly useful if the question has multiple characters, or you are trained in different ways/take on different roles e.g. politician with an engineering background.

8. Storytelling Method

My favorite way of tackling table topics is to tell a story that demonstrates my point, has a message and ends with a Call-to-Action.

I always tell people that the best way to get a message across is to wrap it in a story.

There are so many benefits to telling a story: engaging the audience, holding on to their attention, bringing them on an emotional journey and allowing you to apply vocal techniques as well as using body language effectively.

Instead of going through how to answer the topic step-by-step, here is what you can do to prepare for this technique.

Have a Story Bank

Sit down and think of any stories you might have with a message that you want to share. It could be a personal story, or it could be a short story that you heard from someone else.

Reading Aesop's Fable is a great way to build up your story bank. It is literally a book of "morals of the story".

Jot them down in your notes or a document. This will be your story bank. It can be as simple as:

- story, message
- story, message
- story, message

Or you can craft it out word for word and include a Call-to-Action for each story. It should be only 1 to 2 min long, so that you can improvise according to the topic you get.

A story can have multiple messages. For example, a story about your relationship with your father could be about family, love, commitment, blood is thicker than water, regrets, joy, childhood memories etc.

When you get the topic, quickly do a mental scan through your story bank and think of a suitable story. It doesn't have to be 100% relevant - you can always improvise on the spot and link the story to the topic.

To learn some of these techniques, pick one structure and focus on it for a few weeks, then move on to the second structure.

If you noticed, the structures are overlapping. For instance, you may be starting with the PREP structure, then you thought of another side of the argument, which brings you to the Pendulum structure, and to support your arguments, you use the Storytelling method.

Or perhaps you are using the Timeline method and all 3 perspectives happen to be 3 points of the Triangle method, which covers both sides of the arguments in the Pendulum method, and again, you back up your examples with the Storytelling method.

Bonus Table Topic Tips

Pause - When you are given the topic, don't start talking immediately. Take some time to think of the right structure to use, and scan through your story bank.

It's better to spend 10 seconds organizing your thoughts, than to start right away and mess it up. The time only starts when you start.

Get to the Point - You have very limited time, so don't waste it greeting everyone and introducing yourself.

Start your speech strong.

To Repeat or Not? There are different schools of thought when it comes to repeating the topic.

It may not be necessary to repeat the topic, immediately after the table topic master just read the topic. Some people say to repeat the topic to buy time, but that brings us back to tip number 1, and that is to pause before you speak. There is no need to 'buy time'.

Remember, time is precious. You only have 2 minutes plus 30 seconds.

However, if you are the type that thinks better as you speak, then go ahead.

Answer the Question - It is common to see Toastmasters speak so passionately that they go off topic. Please remember to bring your speech back to the topic.

When I use the Storytelling method, I don't answer the question at the start. After the story and sharing the message, link it back to the topic and answer it directly.

Call-to-Action – Try to have a Call-to-Action. Having a message is great, but telling the audience what to do makes them feel like they got something that they can apply in their lives. All great speeches have a Call-to-Action.

Delivery - Use your standard speech delivery techniques, like using body language and vocal variety.

Table Topics Speech Structure Ideas

Short descriptions of various Table Topics speech structures.

PREP	<u>P</u> oint Reason Examples Point or Opinion Reason Examples Opinion. This is the most common speech structure.
Pendulum	Explain two viewpoints and then choose one.
Balance	State your “Neutral Point.” Then introduce both ends of the balance. Return to your “Neutral Point.”
Lightbulb	Start with Problem, then the Cause. Now offer the “Lightbulb” solution.
Timeline	How has the topic or your viewpoint changed over time? Past, Present, Future?
Zoom	View the topic from different “distances.” Perhaps overall societal versus personal.
Triangle	View the topic from three different perspectives. Perhaps Supervisor, Worker, Customer.
Storytelling	Tell a story, personal or other, that relates to the topic and leads to a message.

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Toastmasters gives these Speech Organizational Structures

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chronological• Topical• Spatial• Causal• Comparative• Problem/Solution• Particular/General/Particular	<p>These are the speech structures taught in Pathways. They are effective for any speech length including Table Topics.</p> <p>The Table Topics speech structures are geared to short speeches with a specific topic. Several are duplicates of the Pathways structures. They can be used effectively within any of these overall speech structures.</p>
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