

## JAZZIN' UP YOUR TABLE TOPICS

BY KATHRYN HANSON, ANDREW ALLISON WALLACE, AND JEAN DICKSON

**T**able Topics is the jazz of public speaking. Table Topics is all about improvisation, making it up on the spur of the moment, saying something coherent, and perhaps even beautiful as you make a melody of words. No chance for repairs. No time to retrace your steps.

Improvisation can be a daunting challenge but in Table Topics, as in music, there are methods we can use to greatly improve our chances of success. A good jazz musician does not just blow into her horn hoping that something good will come out the other end. She has a template for how she approaches her music, a schemata that ensures that even if something great doesn't happen, something that sounds all right will. And once she knows she can consistently produce something "all right," then her imagination is set free to create something wonderful.

To get our riffing underway, the first thing we need to remember, is that like all speeches or jazz solos, a Table Topics response has three sections: a beginning, a middle and an end. Thinking of how to answer the question put by the Table Topics Master in this way will help get us started towards a successful answer.

### **B** The Beginning

When a jazz soloist begins to play, she begins with the theme of the piece. Often, she starts slow, not travelling far at all, simply warming to the subject. The first thing we can do as a Table Topics speaker is show that we paid attention to the question. Talk about it, comment on it, note its relative importance, give it its due.

For the listener, we are warming them up for what we are going to say in the body of our speech. For ourselves, we are creating time to think. The opening of a Table Topics is an opportunity to circle the topic for while, to look at it from different angles until it is clear what to do with it. We need to take our time because a well-developed opening can determine the rest of our answer. A good opening will allow us, and the audience, to get a sense of how you will develop the middle, or body of the speech, and that will lead us to the discovery of the right ending.



### **M** The Middle

There are a number of different ways to develop the body of your speech. For example, you are given the question, "Why do you like spring?" Here are a few ways to effectively answer the question:

#### **Example 1:** Simple Format

Opening: There are three things I like about Spring.

Body:

- First...
- Second...
- Finally...

Conclusion: 1), 2), 3) are three reasons why Spring is my favourite season

*There are three things I like about Spring. The first reason is because spring is the herald of Summer. Spring's gentle warmth reminds me that soon I'll be spending hot days at the beach, and warm nights around a campfire, serenaded to sleep by frogs.*

*The second reason I like Spring is because I love the sound of birds singing. Birds also sing in the summer; however, after winter's silence, the sound of birds singing in the Spring is so much sweeter.*

*The third reason I like Spring is because I've never grown up - I still love to play in the dirt. I dig with my fingers in the damp, Spring soil and feel rejuvenated, young again.*

*These three reasons are why Spring is my favourite season.*

### **Example 2:** Good, Better, Best

Opening: Spring is a great season!

Body:

- It's great because (good reason).
- Even better is (better reason).
- But the best reason is (best reason).

Conclusion: Because of (reason 1, 2, and 3), Spring is the best season.

*Spring is a great season!*

*It's great because university finishes and I can finally get a job and make some money.*

*Even better is that with some of this money, I'll be able to buy a car.*

*But the best reason is what I can do with the leftover money and the car. Come the longer days of Spring, with the money I've earned, I can take my girl for a drive along the Kennebecasis River (with the price of gas nowadays, you need a job to be able to drive). We'll stop to watch the submarine races without having to worry about freezing to death. But there's still that Spring nip in the night air that will make her cuddle up to me to keep warm.*

*Oh, yes. Spring is a great season!*

### **Example 3:** Change the Question

Opening: How could anyone like spring?

Body:

- Spring is (negative point 1)
- Also, it is (negative point 2)
- But most of all it is (negative point 3)

Conclusion: Spring has many drawbacks (1, 2, and 3 above). That's why I don't like spring.

*How could anyone like spring?*

*Spring, on the Kingston Peninsula, means sinking in the mud, almost up to your knees, every time you venture out of doors. Also, when you venture out of doors, you get an eyeeful of rain. You're cold, wet, and muddy. And that's not something I like to be. But most of all, Spring is tax time. Besides being cold, wet, and muddy, I'm also broke.*



*That's why I don't like Spring. Any why I question, how could anyone like Spring?*

**Example 4:** Plus / Minus

Opening: For many people, Spring is a favourite season.

Body:

- In Spring: (Positive Point 1).
- Also (Positive Point 2).
- There are, however, some people who do not like Spring. Perhaps it is (Negative Point 1).
- It might also be (Negative Point 2).

Conclusion: There is always at least two sides to a story. Positive point 1 and 2 are reasons people like Spring. Neg. Point 1 & 2 are reasons some people do not like spring. Myself, I side with those who (like/dislike) Spring.

*For many people, Spring is a favourite season. In Spring, people see the days lengthening, the air starting to warm, and the snow melting. Also, they enjoy the sounds that come in Spring - the chirping of the returning birds, the night-time croaking of the frogs.*

*There are, however, some people who do not like Spring. Perhaps it is the pollen in the air, the itchy eyes, the sneezing, the runny noses. It might also be the thought of soon to come sunburns that burns them up in Spring.*

*There is always at least two sides to a story. The warmer days and the sounds of wildlife are reasons people like Spring. But the hot sun also brings sunburns, along with the greening landscape. And with the greening landscape comes allergies. Myself, I side with those who like Spring.*

**Example 5:** Past, Present, Future

Opening: Spring is my favourite season.

Body:

- When I was (talk about what you did in the Spring when young).
- This year (talk about Spring this year).
- I look forward to (Spring in the future).

Conclusion: Because of (past, present, future), Spring is my favourite season.

*Spring is my favourite season.*

*When I was little, I loved Spring because its gentle rains would mix with the black soil in our garden plot. I loved getting on my little red boots, stepping into the mud, hearing the squish and suck sounds my tiny feet would make.*

*This year, Spring is my favourite season because I found a new tax accountant. As a result, soon, I'll have a large deposit to my bank account. Spring, to me this year means taking the family to Disneyworld.*

*I look forward to Spring next year because with the money left over from this vacation, I'll purchase perennials and bulbs that will bloom next year, filling our garden with colour and fragrance.*

*Because I remember my youthful play in the mud, because I can jingle money in my*



*pocket, and because of what will bloom in my garden next year, spring is my favourite season.*

**Example 6:** The ‘Yes...But’

Opening: Spring is a wonderful season.

Body:

- It isn't my favourite season because (positive reason #1).
- Nor is it my favourite season because (another positive reason).
- It's not the (one more positive reason).

Conclusion: Spring is my favourite season because (best reason of all).

*Spring is a wonderful season. It isn't my favourite season because of the birds returning, filling the air with song. I love waking to the sound of their music - it fills my joy with joy and hope. But it isn't for this reason that Spring is a wonderful season.*

*Nor is it my favourite season because of the daffodils that push their merry little heads through the still cold soil, brightening the winter-dead landscape with dots and dashes of yellow. When I see them, my soul takes flight and says, "Yes, life is returning to the land. There is hope." But this isn't why Spring is a wonderful season.*

*It's not being able to put away the winter woollens and dig out the cotton shorts. That isn't why Spring is a wonderful season.*

*Spring is a wonderful season, my favourite, because in Spring I have my birthday. I look forward to gifts from my husband, gifts from my children, gifts from my mother and father, and gifts from my brother and sisters. Greed is, and always will be, the reason I love Spring so much.*

**Example 7:** Tell Me a Story

Opening: I have many memories of Spring but the one that stands out the most is (memory).

Body: Tell a short story.

Conclusion: Spring always reminds me of (story). That's why Spring is my favourite season.

*I have many memories of Spring but the one that stands out the most is returning from Hawaii.*

*Now most people would think that going to Hawaii would be a reason to enjoy Spring. But that isn't the case. You see, my mother and I moved to Hawaii from Victoria when I was 16. I thought I would love the sun, the heat, the beaches - and the boys on those beaches. And I did. At least I did for the first while. But like a steady diet of your favourite food soon wearies and grows stale, so did the sun, the heat, the beaches - and the boys - well, maybe not the boys.*

*I longed to return to Canada - to a land that had a variety of seasons. I wanted more than just summer for my taste buds. After months of pleading, in Spring my mother agreed to leave what I had once thought would be paradise. Spring always reminds me*



*of the joy I felt upon returning to this beautiful land, a land that is truly paradise. That's why Spring is my favourite season.*

### **Example 8:** Change the Subject

Opening: Many people may prefer Spring but (Winter/Summer/Fall) is my favourite season.

Body: In the (winter/summer/fall) you can...

- Point 1.
- Point 2.
- Point 3.

Conclusion: Some people may like Spring but because of (reason 1, 2, and 3), (winter/summer/fall) is my favourite season.

*Many people may prefer Spring but Summer is my favourite season.*

*I love the heat, the sun, the beaches of Summer. Summer is travelling to the old family home in PEI. It's staying up late, laughing around the camp fire, hugging and kissing.*

*Summer is also vibrant, alive colours - splashes of red, green, purple and orange in the flower garden. It's the bright yellow of the bumblebee, the red breast of the robin, the blue of the clear, summer sky.*

*I also love Summer because of the smells. The neighbours barbecuing their dinner outside and filling the neighbourhood with the delicious aroma of marinated steak. The smell of roses in the garden and on the table. The smell of linen when it comes off the clothesline, into the basket, then on the bed.*

*Some people may like Spring but because Summer means love, life and delectable aromas, it is and will always be my favourite season.*

## **E** **The End**

Occasionally, because of something we have learned or have thought of previously, the perfect ending to our speech is the first thing we think of when asked the question. At those times, it's remarkable how easy it is to move through the sections of the speech to get where we knew we wanted to go from the first. Unfortunately, in our experience, that seldom happens.

The best endings are matters of pure inspiration that surprise and delight us. And like any other form of inspiration, they are wonderful when they happen but are not to be relied upon. The best any of us can really do is follow a template that will give us at least a reasonably good conclusion based on what we said in the body of the speech. For those times when inspiration strikes, there is still an opportunity to startle the audience, and ourselves, with our wit.

A jazz performer takes years of dedicated practice to become a master musician. We should not despair if our first few dozen attempts fall distinctly flat. But with practice, and some attention to the fundamentals of beginning, middle and end, each of us can be winding out improvisations that, if not absolutely classic, will be serviceable, and will present us a competent, thoughtful speakers.

So get out there, and blow!

