

Hosting Toastmaster Made Easy

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Taking on the duty of Toastmaster for a meeting is easier than you'd think, especially after the first time or two. Use the "AST Meeting Format and Participant Roles" guideline to prepare for and conduct the meeting.

Preparation

The first thing to know is that preparation for the meeting is 95% of the work ... and most of the pressure. You have help with your meeting right off the bat. A good VP of Education will have lined up most of the meeting participants for you and determined who is unavailable for unassigned duties. Also, having an up-to-date roster makes pre-meeting contact easy. During the meeting itself, the Sergeant-at-Arms helps ensure the room is set up.

Your part of the preparation is made successful by two things: thoroughness and timing. Start early, preferably on Thursday but definitely no later than Saturday, in confirming the volunteers and speakers for your meeting.

Doing things in order is very important. Your speakers require the most lead time. Contact them first. They may not be able to tell you all their key information (speech title, time, manual name and speech number and speaker introduction content), but it's important that they confirm they are speaking. If you can find out the time required, it helps in coordinating other meeting factors. Ask the speaker to give you a short script of how they want to be introduced. If a speaker is going to have to cancel or is uncertain, you will want to find other speakers or warn the Table Topics master to increase the number of topics. Try to have three speakers if possible.

Theme

Consider the theme of the meeting. A theme helps raise the spirit of the audience. If the Grammarian and Table Topics Master wish, they can tie the Word of the Day and the Table Topics into the theme. Where can you find ideas for the theme? Try the calendar (for nearby holidays), the newspaper (for current events), or a party supply store (for decorative accessories). You are in charge of the meeting; as long as you stay within the realm of good taste (loosely defined), you can select anything you want as a theme. If you can think of and afford it, find some materials to accentuate the theme. These might include table decorations, clipart for the program, some small giveaway for each attendee, or a prize for some contest. Don't spend much; tiny items can be just as fun, and you'd be surprised what you can find at a party store.

If you're really stuck finding a theme, talk with the Table Topics Master for ideas. The Table Topics don't have to match the theme, but the meeting has more continuity if it does. Either way, this is the time to contact the Table Topics Master. Talk about the rough number of questions to have ready — four to five if there are three speeches, more if there are fewer speeches. Often the Table Topics Master will have an innovative idea to try out. Within reason, the Table Topics master has free rein. Remind the Table Topics Master to mention using the Word of the Day and to call on people who have no other duties during the meeting—never on Speech Evaluators or guests (unless guests are invited to participate and a guest volunteers).

Speaker and Duty Confirmation

Contact the rest of the duty holders. Leave voicemail messages and send emails to confirm their participation. Never assume someone on the schedule is available for their assigned duty. If you get to Monday without a confirmation callback, line up a backup for that duty. If you have to, coordinate with the Listener or the Jokemaster to fill a vacant duty instead. Although these duties contribute to the meeting, they are more expendable than other duties.

You will need to ensure you have Evaluators for each Speaker, unless the Speaker is speaking from the Better Club Series (in which case, an evaluation is not required). A Speaker may request an Evaluator even if not required. Evaluators are required to have given at least three prepared speeches from the C&L Manual. When possible, match more experienced evaluators with more experienced speakers. Use your best judgment. Most important, you have to assume responsibility for these assignments. I do not recommend last minute changes nor do I recommend letting speakers choose their own evaluators. If you have an inexperienced evaluator, discuss their duties with them, and stress that feedback is to be constructive and nurturing. The best approach is a "feedback sandwich": start with

positive feedback, state one or two (at most) suggestions for improvement, and end with a positive statement. Avoid “shoulds.”

Printed Program

Finally, prepare the printed program. A well-organized program can save you lots of hassles during the meeting. Before printing it, triple check that it is accurate. If it's your first time as Toastmaster, use as a sample an old program that you thought worked especially well. Usually, once you have a format you like, you will re-use it. My idea of an ideal program includes indentions to clearly show which major duty holder calls upon which minor duty holders, the times for all timed duties, and (if available) the Word of the Day. The challenge is to print the program as late as possible so it includes last-minute changes and soon enough to avoid unforeseen disasters like running out of printer ink or your computer being down.

Pre-Meeting

Arrive at the meeting early. Help the Sergeant-at-Arms prepare the room, get out the ribbons, stopwatch, timing light, “Ah Counter” bell, and ballot/comment sheets. Coordinate with duty holders as they come in to ensure they remember their role, and give them their tools. Double-check with speakers about their speech times, and point out on the program who their evaluator will be. Make sure the speakers and their evaluators coordinate before the meeting for special speech criteria, timing changes, and so on. Check with each speaker regarding special needs, like furniture arrangement, use of chartboard or projector, and assist them when they come forward to present their speech. As the audience arrives, look for substitute candidates, in case you have no-shows. If you have any blank spots on the program, corner prospective substitutes as soon as you spot them. (Visiting TM officers are especially good candidates.)

Showtime

Try to start the meeting promptly at 7:00 pm. The Sergeant-at-Arms will work with you on this. This is the moment of truth; don't hesitate. The Sergeant-at-Arms will bring the meeting to order and introduce the Inspiration/Pledge Leader, who (when done) will introduce you as Toastmaster and turn control of the meeting to you.

Keep a copy of the printed agenda with you; it will keep you out of trouble. If a duty is still unfilled (hopefully not at this point), call for volunteers. If you don't find any, you may have to do it yourself. Inform the audience of any changes to the printed agenda. Talk about the theme a bit (and intersperse theme content throughout the meeting). Use as a guide the “AST Meeting Format and Participant Roles” (found in your New Member Packet and on the AST web site).

General Tips

When introducing duty holders, involve them with the theme if possible. Listen to each duty holder's explanation and if they miss anything, gently add the missing duty. Try to use the Word of the Day during your comments. Include brief participant introductions whenever possible, and always with speakers.

There are some general guidelines I use as Toastmaster. As a participant approaches the lectern, applaud until they get to your handshake and stay at the lectern until they arrive there. Hold applause for minor duty introductions until after they have spoken. You are in charge and the audience will normally take their cue from you. Mistakes happen. Roll with the punches and make the best of the mistakes.

Let the Table Topics Master know if you want control of the meeting between Table Topics and Evaluation portions of the meeting. If not, instruct the Table Topics Master when done to introduce the General Evaluator. However, be prepared to do anything the Table Topics Master may forget like calling for the reports or vote.

Listen to the General Evaluator's comments. Don't repeat them, but when you're called to the front for closing comments after the GE finishes, add anything you think the GE left out.

Thank duty holders and anyone else who helped you prepare for and conduct the meeting. Introduce and turn the meeting over to the Presiding Officer (generally the President) and you have successfully performed your role as Toastmaster!!