

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | FEBRUARY 2024

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**TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL MISSION:**

We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



**WHERE LEADERS ARE MADE**

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## Approaching Humor Across Cultures

Shortly after joining my Toastmasters club here in Germany, I discovered I had a problem. When I gave a speech, my evaluator would provide their feedback related to the objectives of the speech project and how I could improve as a speaker. The problem was that each time I included some humor in my speech, it just didn't seem to land with the audience.

Club members were from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, India, Poland, and Germany. *Perhaps they didn't understand my accent, or my choice of words was confusing*, I wondered.

Eventually, an astute evaluator took me aside after a meeting and explained that different cultures have different approaches to humor. His advice proved useful to me when presenting at work and relating to colleagues, neighbors, and friends. It also allowed me to tailor my message to people in the country where I was living.

As a native of Scotland, I was used to self-deprecating humor. Such humor abounds on television and in literature there and has its own distinct character. It is part of everyday life, and you'll hear it trip off the tongues of taxi drivers, bartenders, and passengers waiting for a bus.

In Germany, humor is not self-deprecating in the way I was used to. While in Scotland, self-deprecation is seen as an indication of strong character, Germans don't like to mock themselves in private or in public. For sure they have a sense of humor—it is simply different than the one I was familiar with.

Laughing together creates a bond. For many of us, humor is an essential part of our lives.

For example, in Germany each New Year's Eve, a 1963 black-and-white comedy sketch airs on TV about a woman celebrating her 90th birthday and her butler serving her dinner and getting progressively more drunk. *Dinner for One* originated in the UK, yet it's almost unknown there; however, in Germany it has acquired a cult following.

People have many attributes that help us identify with each other. The ability to speak the same language is one, and our ability to laugh is another. Laughing together creates a bond. For many of us, humor is an essential part of our lives.

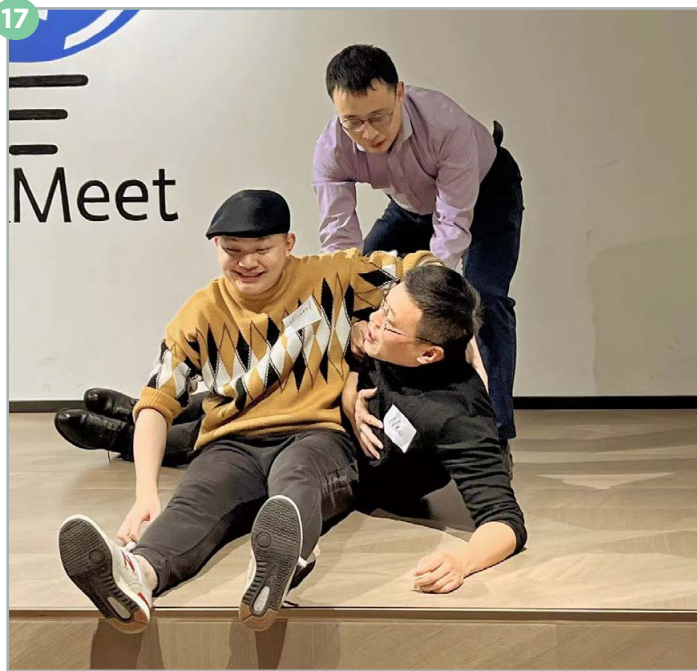
The advice from the speech evaluator really helped me to settle into my new culture and communicate more effectively. It gave me confidence to take on the "Jokemaster" role at club meetings and practice different approaches to humor.

How does your club help its members get comfortable with humor?

**Morag Mathieson, DTM**  
2023-2024 International President



## Features



**14** HUMOR:  
**Understanding Improv**  
 Polish your improvisational techniques in Toastmasters and life.  
*By Craig Harrison, DTM*

**17** CLUB PROFILE:  
**Improv-ing Club Meetings**  
 How 3 clubs are getting laughs and flexing their spontaneous speaking skills.  
*By Stephanie Darling*

## Columns

**3** VIEWPOINT:  
**Approaching Humor Across Cultures**  
*By Morag Mathieson, DTM*  
*International President*

**8** MY TURN:  
**Are You Too Young for Toastmasters?**  
*By Sayantan Das, DTM*

**9** TOASTMASTER TOOLBOX:  
**A Quip a Day Keeps the Boredom Away**  
*By Bill Brown, DTM*

## Articles

**6** Q&A:  
**Taking the Stage**  
 Multilingual member advocates for others through pageants and philanthropy.  
*By Shannon Dewey*

**10** PRESENTATION SKILLS:  
**Become an Unforgettable Speaker**  
 3 simple techniques to supercharge your speeches.  
*By Lisa Nichols*

**12** PRESENTATION SKILLS:  
**Techniques To Remember Your Speech**  
 Find out what memory aids work best for you.  
*By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.*

**20** HUMOR:  
**Humor in the Ordinary**  
 Identifying comedy in everyday life can alleviate stress, improve your mood, and enhance your speeches.  
*By Greg Glasgow*



**22** HUMOR:  
**Fire Up the Lectern!**  
 How to honor your officers and noteworthy members with a roast.  
*By Kate McClare, DTM*

**24** A CENTURY OF TOASTMASTERS:  
**Remembering Dr. Ralph C. Smedley**  
 His vision for lifelong learning continues today.  
*By Toastmaster magazine staff*

## Departments

**5** SEEN AND HEARD:  
**Snapshot / Traveling Toastmaster**

## Snapshot



**VANNECA PHELPS, DTM**, of Honolulu, Hawaii, and **JOSEPH SKODA, DTM**, of Santa Maria, California, have their wedding ceremony during a Lompoc Valley of Flowers Toastmasters (LVOF) club meeting in Lompoc, California. Fellow club member Ron Cockrell, DTM, officiated the wedding, and the couple celebrated with other members of LVOF, where Phelps and Skoda originally met.



## Traveling Toastmaster



**CAJETAN BARRETTO, DTM**, and **PRISCILLA BARRETTO, DTM**, of Safat, Kuwait, visit the Loch Ness, a lake in Scotland.



**KUNAL CHANDAK** of Pune, Maharashtra, India, poses with a Toastmasters magnet while trekking the Kalsubai Peak in Maharashtra, India.



# Taking the Stage

Multilingual member advocates for others through pageants and philanthropy.

By Shannon Dewey

**S**usan Vanderburgh is fluent in five languages, runs her own nonprofit, and uses pageantry as a platform to speak up for those in need. She currently holds the title of Mrs. Elite Asia Universe—along with other designations like mom, wife, entrepreneur, law student, and ambassador.

Vanderburgh, who joined Toastmasters in 2022, resides in Southern California with her husband. Together they have five children, ages 12-19, five lucky dogs, and one spoiled chinchilla.

Born in Saigon toward the end of the Vietnam War, Vanderburgh was later moved to a refugee camp in Malaysia before her family immigrated to the United States. Growing up, she practiced Chinese customs in her household and spoke in her native language of Cantonese. She didn't learn English until she was nine years old, but her lessons in language only increased from there.

Vanderburgh is now fluent in Cantonese, English, Spanish, Greek, and French. She also studied Japanese, Tibetan, Italian, Swahili, Tagalog, and Portuguese. She declares that foreign languages are a superpower, which could be attributed to her multicultural schooling in San Francisco, where she was surrounded by many diverse traditions and languages. Or it could also be the fact that her grandfather was fluent in 12 dialects of the Asian language, her father in eight, and her mother in five.

Vanderburgh often reflects on her parents' courage leaving Vietnam and risking everything for a chance at a better life. Keep reading to learn how she paved her own path to the stage and where her desire to help others stems from.

## Why did you join Toastmasters?

I originally looked into Toastmasters when I was working in San Francisco in the early 2000s. I visited a few club meetings during my lunch hour but couldn't make it work with my schedule. Over the years, I naturally progressed into being a public speaker, from school elections to community and business meetings, to becoming the regional director of the Public Speakers Association. I finally joined Toastmasters in 2022 when I realized that I needed to be part of a group of people more like me (i.e., entrepreneurial, business-like, and willing to help others).



## What do you like most about your club, Entrepreneurs Toastmasters?

What I cherish most about our club is the diverse and dynamic membership. It is an online club, so we can dial in from anywhere. At one of our meetings, we had someone from Malaysia, where I had resided as a refugee, so it was interesting to meet someone from there. There is professional and constructive criticism offered. It's the perfect club for me as a businessperson, speaker, and author.

## How did you get involved in pageants?

My favorite movie, *Miss Congeniality*, gives some insight into the world of pageants. I am still humored by the role that Sandra Bullock played because that reminded me very much of myself when I got started. I first applied because I wanted to honor my family and to gain recognition for my parents who were dedicated to making a positive impact without seeking the limelight.

From June 2016 to June 2020, my life was mostly devoted to being my husband's caregiver [during his battle with kidney disease]. In 2021, I was struggling to get myself out of depression, so I reflected on my life to see what I've accomplished. While doing so, I found the Woman of Achievement Pageant. In my application, I described my educational accomplishments, what I have done for my community, and my efforts for my husband's kidney search. As a result, I was accepted as a delegate.

My first pageant took place that year, competing with seasoned pageant veterans, holders of advanced degrees, entrepreneurs, authors, and speakers. I earned the title



Mrs. Elite Inland Empire, and thought to myself, *Not too shabby*, since I was at their level of accomplishments.

In 2022, I joined the United International Elite Pageants program to connect with women like me, who are not afraid to follow their dreams. As Ms. California Elite, I served as an ambassador for the pageant system and had the title of Queen of Hearts, where I assisted other title holders with various community service projects. I also hold the permanent title of Mrs. California Ambassador FoRe Living Royal, with the choice of 12 platforms and a nonprofit to represent.

My newest title is Mrs. Elite Asia Universe for the upcoming Transcontinental Pageant (TCP) /Universe Pageants-Mrs. Universe, where I'll be giving a speech about how my nonprofit work makes me a good match as the ambassador for the pageant.

### **Tell us how your nonprofit came to be.**

When my husband was ill and on dialysis for his kidney disease, we had friends who could help us with tasks, but financially, we were on our own. I could call a charity to assist us with food, but there were other necessities that could not be covered.

As a result, my nonprofit, [American Society of Community Benefits](#), was born out of necessity to take care of others. The primary mission

of this organization is to provide housing for veterans, domestic abuse survivors, and youth transitioning from foster care. I knew this mission was huge and would require substantial sponsorships and public support. While we are working on creating housing, we are still providing the community assistance with food, clothing, medical expenses, and tuition throughout the year.

### **What drives your passion for helping others?**

Perhaps it comes from the first act of philanthropy I witnessed. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, an anonymous benefactor sponsored my family's relocation from a Malaysian refugee camp to the United States. Upon entering Philadelphia, our entire family was treated to a nice dinner at a stranger's home. That was my first experience of someone helping me. I want to be able to give someone else that feeling. I also saw how my parents helped many people even when they were in need themselves.

### **How has Toastmasters helped you grow?**

While attending speaking and business events, I often wondered how the people on stage became such great speakers. I soon realized that I was one of those people and looked upon as a leader.

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In 2022, I joined the United International Elite Pageants program to connect with women like me, who are not afraid to follow their dreams.

The growth I've seen since joining Toastmasters is that I've learned to believe in myself. I've published two books and have a few more on the way. I started two talk shows: "The Susan Show," which highlights business owners and how they are making a difference in their communities, and "Talk 2 Susan," where I focus on current events. My fellow club members are very supportive of my endeavors—the craziness of "Susan's world!"

### **Switching subjects—let's talk about your experience in the legal field for the last 27 years.**

Between 1994 and 1995, I was enrolled in a business trade school where I trained to be an administrative support professional. During that one year, I was student body president, won a writing contest, and was part of the leadership team for the students.

After trade school, I became a bookkeeping assistant and was given a chance to work as a legal secretary. Now I am providing services as a paralegal/legal assistant while I (finally) complete my doctorate degrees. In my role I have worked with litigation firms and assisted with at least 30 trials. This type of work provides me with a unique view of the world and how to conduct myself professionally.

### **What else would you like to share about yourself?**

My current capacity as Mrs. California Ambassador FoRe Living Royal and Mrs. Elite Asia Universe means I have a very important role in society—to show good faith, goodwill to others, and to bring assistance to those in need. I have the ability to speak up for others who are unable or afraid. I am still learning and growing, and my Toastmasters experience has been a positive and encouraging part of that.

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**Shannon Dewey** is digital strategy and engagement editor for the Toastmaster.

# Are You Too Young for Toastmasters?

No, because it's all about the learning.

By Sayantan Das, DTM

A question I hear a lot is “How have you done so much in Toastmasters at such a young age?”

I am 23 and have already spent five years in Toastmasters. I have served in all the Club Executive Committee roles, became a Distinguished Toastmaster at 21, served my District as an Area Director, Assistant Program Quality Director, and Distinguished Club Program Chair, and am currently serving as a Division Director.

I also represented my Division at the District level of the International Speech Contest in 2019, when I was just about to turn 19.

As much as it might sound like I have tried to rack up every achievement I could, I don't look at it that way. To me, it's all been about the learning. Everything I have done in Toastmasters has helped me grow as a communicator and leader, especially since I joined as a student.

Most people face their steepest learning curve in their first job. Being a student is mostly a solo affair, and at most schools, students become knowledgeable in their field through individual learning. Thus, when these students are suddenly thrust into the corporate world, they face a completely new environment, one that is based on the foundations of team synergy and collective goal setting.

It is this gap that Toastmasters fills, helping to prepare students for their transition into the workplace, even as entry-level employees. In Toastmasters, you learn from others, help each other reach one's goals, and become better communicators and leaders.

I was a student in 12th grade when I first joined a Toastmasters club at 18. The following year (in early 2019), I became Vice President Education for my club, In-Steel Toastmasters in Jamshedpur, India. I had grand plans for the club and its members. As I interacted with them to understand their journey and goals, I realized everyone had a very different reason for joining Toastmasters.



Sayantan Das

Everything I have done in Toastmasters has helped me grow as a communicator and leader, especially since I joined as a student.

While all the reasons could be grouped under the umbrella of “becoming a better communicator and leader,” they were different at their core. Our club ticked all the boxes for club success. However, we were lagging when it came to members' satisfaction—they felt that their personal goals were not being properly catered to.

This was when I saw the Club Executive Committee come together, along with some of the more senior Toastmasters, to support each member. I opened myself to being mentored by past Vice Presidents Education and slowly learned the importance and process of broader goal setting. The keys were breaking goals into

smaller and achievable targets assigned to specific people, monitoring regularly, and revising the goals.

As my roles changed within the club and later at the District level, the people I interacted with also changed. I eventually learned when to use which leadership style, and I am still learning and polishing my skills each day.

I also figured out that each of those leadership styles demanded a different communication style. Delivering prepared speeches, Table Topics® responses, and speech evaluations, as well as engaging in one-on-one conversations, helped me learn the art of customizing your communication style based on the needs of the hour.

All these experiences came together to provide me with an edge when I worked on team presentations while still a student at St. Xavier's College in Kolkata, India, and during job interviews. I was able to frame a strong approach to any problem statement. I was also able to communicate the approach with a proper structure, again because of the communication training that I had in Toastmasters.

Since leaving college, I have been working in the finance industry as an analyst. The skills I learned in Toastmasters have helped me immensely in communicating with colleagues and stakeholders, demonstrating leadership, and taking ownership of my work—exactly how we do it in Toastmasters Club Executive Committees.

So, if you are a student or a young professional, don't miss out on the opportunity to leverage the benefits Toastmasters has to offer. While you may eventually learn some of these skills at your workplace, if you join Toastmasters, you will learn them earlier, and at a much more encouraging pace.

**Sayantan Das, DTM**, is a financial analyst and a member of In-Steel Toastmasters in Jamshedpur, India. He is also the Division G Director in District 124.



# A Quip a Day Keeps the Boredom Away

How to add humor to your speeches.

By Bill Brown, DTM

I can always tell when it is getting close to contest season. Someone emails me and asks me to help them add humor to their contest speech.

I believe that your humor is better if you create it yourself. Why? Because you will deliver it better.

I can hear some of you now. “But, Bill, I’m not good at humor.” So get good.

I am good at humor because I do it all the time. The more you tell jokes, the better you get at delivering them—and the better you get at seeing opportunities for humor.

Now when I say “joke” I am not referring to a riddle or a long story with a setup. I am referring to a one-liner that is a response to a comment from someone else. This, in my opinion, is the best kind of humor in speeches. It’s natural, it’s short, and it doesn’t divert from your key points.

In building your humor ability, I recommend that you get in the habit of telling jokes every day. It trains you to be in the moment, ready for any opportunity. And it gives you experience in how to construct a joke and how to tell it. Timing and expression are important.

Let me give you some examples that might stimulate your humor muscles.

It is not uncommon to be in a store and have a salesclerk ask, “May I help you?” I just casually say, “Oh, I’m beyond help, thank you,” and then enjoy watching their reaction.

Years ago, when I was a Toastmasters Area Director, I visited a club that was centered on gardening. They asked me to say a few words and I informed them that gardening wasn’t my strong suit. “In fact, my last name is Brown for a reason.” They loved that line, so I continued using it over the years. I have since taken up gardening and had a good crop of vegetables this past season. I know, you’re green with envy.

My wife recently was reading about a new restaurant in town. She told me that they had a featured meal every day. “Today, it’s chili.” I immediately replied, “It’s supposed to be even chillier tomorrow.”

One day my wife was getting ready to prepare dinner. I was also in the kitchen, so she

asked me to hand her a pan. I asked her which one. “Oh, I don’t care. Any one.” So, I picked up a vegetable that happened to be on the counter. It was called a Patty Pan.

I was in a Toastmasters club a number of years ago and a speaker talked on the history of the dunce cap (those cone-shaped hats used as punishment for students years ago). She had one as a prop, which she placed on a table, coincidentally

next to her notes. At one point in her speech, she had forgotten her lines, so she went over to the table and looked at her script. What if she had slowly picked up the dunce cap and placed it on her head? She would have brought the house down.

The more you tell jokes,  
the better you get at  
delivering them—and the  
better you get at seeing  
opportunities for humor.

And looking at the *Toastmaster* magazine, last month’s theme was personal growth. My first thought when I heard it was, *diet and nutrition can help you with that.*

Now, were those jokes absolutely knee-slapping funny? Not really. But it gives you a picture of what you can create with no warning and how to compose one in a few seconds. In a



contest speech, you can work on your humor to hone it to where it is awesome. And recognize, when you are in a real situation, what isn’t funny on paper can still be a real laugh because it is unexpected.

I keep telling jokes because it keeps me sharp. And, besides, it’s fun. It also helps that I don’t mind if I get a groan or if a joke falls flat. If you tell enough of them, you will get your fair share of laughs, and, as you get better at humor, those will come more and more frequently.

Give it a try yourself. Feel free to use the “Oh, I’m beyond help, thank you” line as a starter. It works in many situations. And it will give you practice.

When you listen to a speech in your club, what humor opportunities do you see? Add that to your evaluation.

I suspect that if you got a full-body x-ray, you’d find a crazy bone in there somewhere. Learn how to use it. And have fun in the process.

**Bill Brown, DTM**, is a speech delivery coach in Gillette, Wyoming. He is a member of Energy Capital Toastmasters in Gillette. Learn more at [billbrownspeechcoach.com](http://billbrownspeechcoach.com).



International speaker Lisa Nichols of *Motivating the Masses*

## Become an Unforgettable Speaker

3 simple techniques to supercharge your speeches.

By Lisa Nichols

For the first four years of my business, I worked out of my walk-in closet. Today, as CEO of my own company and an international speaker, I can honestly say that my brand has made a global impact, something that still astonishes me. While I made huge mistakes early in my career as a business owner, my speaking ability saved me every time. Most of the techniques I teach today started as an unconscious competence of mine.

After decades of speaking professionally, numerous people encouraged me to teach the techniques that I inherently used each time I delivered a talk. I've been fortunate enough to have received global attention, earned a tsunami of business, and consistently had people requesting more of my message. I was told that other speakers would benefit from something that came naturally to me.

Creating this system took time, energy, and effort, but I knew that if I wanted people to truly understand the hidden formula to being unforgettable, something that not only had a significant impact on their audience, but also attracted national media attention and endless speaking

invitations, then I needed to take the time to create a framework of my own that was unparalleled in its impact.

I want you to be just as unforgettable every time you speak, whether in your club, a boardroom, main stage, video, conference, or retreat. Just know that kind of impact rarely happens effortlessly. And the truth is, you CAN go from an average and ordinary speaker to an unforgettable presenter. I've seen it happen many, many times in my programs.

After spending seven days locked in my office like a mad scientist, I created the Science of Speaking—20 foundational and specialty techniques that serve as a “superpower” grab bag. When utilized individually or collectively, they can instantly increase your impact, and when mastered, make you unforgettable.

I'm excited to share a few foundational techniques that many speakers miss, causing them to also miss the opportunity to leave a lasting impression. When you apply even just these three of my 20 techniques, you will immediately feel more confident and have more impact.



Here are three of these techniques you can try right away:

**Task and Maintenance** – You may have noticed that when most people speak, they tend to have a monologue versus a dialogue. It’s understandable, after all, they’re passionate about their content, and they can get so into it that they forget it’s actually a conversation.

This “task” aspect of the technique is your awareness that 50% of your energy should be committed to the content, your time allotment, and agenda. The other 50% is what most speakers miss, and where you may also be losing your audience: “maintenance.”

Maintenance is your attention to the response of your audience, with the intention of utilizing their reactions to turn a monologue into a dialogue: You read and then play off their facial expressions, body language, and engagement. This adds an organic, unscripted angle of excitement to your speaking. You’re literally using their expressions as feedback, and making them a driving factor in how you deliver your message. You’ve most likely mastered “task,” but may rarely lean completely into task and maintenance simultaneously, however it’s a skill you can develop.

### Audience Connection Formula

**(Me, We, You)** – This is a favorite among my students as it’s one of the easiest to implement, and has instant impact on your audience and their feeling of connection to you.

This technique inserts you into the journey of growth and reaches out to your audience to find your shared experience, forming an instant bond of camaraderie between you and each person.

**Me the Speaker** – (Share a personal moment, look back at growth)

**Say:** “There was a time when I ...”

**We** – (Speak so everyone in the room feels a connection)

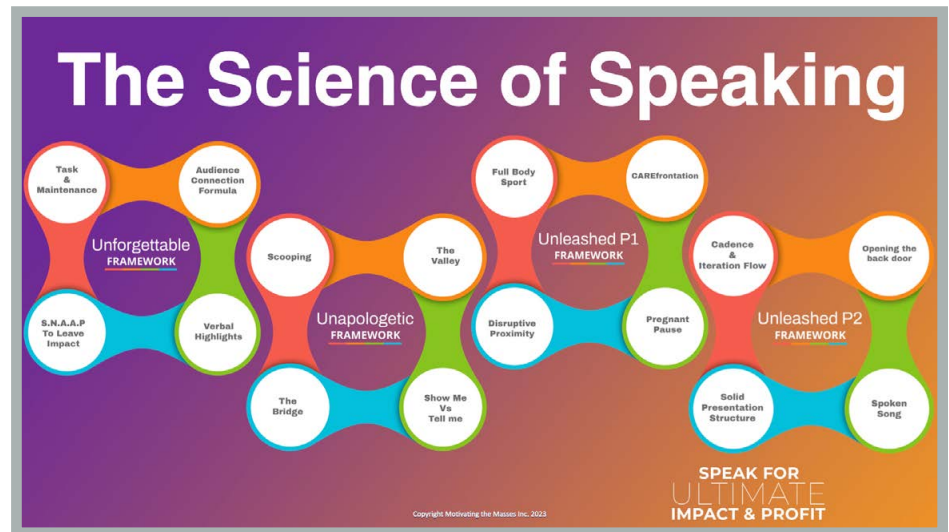
**Say:** “We have a tendency to ...”

**You** – (Ask one question that leads to a simple *Yes, that’s me! I see myself!*)

**Say:** “Have you ever ...”

*Example:* **There was a time when I** wanted to take a leap of faith in my business, but I was too afraid. **We have a tendency** to want something greater for ourselves, but often fear taking the next step. **Have you ever** dreamed big but stayed stagnant?

One of the biggest gifts you can give your audience is the gift of positive disruption



in your speech. Your ability to foster or be a champion for progressive development is what will set you apart from other speakers. It takes courage to maintain an inspiring and steady presence while delivering vulnerable, challenging, and/or transparent content.

**The Valley** – You can apply this technique to any message or topic, and in front of any audience. It adds sizzle to any presentation, turns a dry message into an engaging one, and makes your audience feel like new friends. While your content may change, the style will be consistent, and lead to an impactful outcome.

This technique is designed to create an immediate connection between you and your audience. It allows them to see the brilliance of who you are, provides a glimpse of a struggle that makes you human, and shares why you are the person they would want to work with, follow, or learn from.

Think of a valley; now consider the valley with three key points:

- 1. Big You** – Your big achievements stated in a very humble way. This is how people may see you before they know your entire story.  
*Example:* “I’m still blown away that I’ve been able to achieve ...”
- 2. Low Point** – This is where listener loyalty is built through showing you’re a human, just like them. You share a low point in your life, a time when you faced a struggle, a limiting belief, or a pain you had to overcome.  
*Example:* “What you may not know about me is that ...”
- 3. Your Why** – This is the lesson that you learned from your low point, and why you do what you do now—the struggles that turned into your strengths.

*Example:* “As a result of going through that, I now ...” “The greatest lesson I learned was ...”

The Valley technique is the most impactful superpower you can have as a speaker. It will take time and practice, as it incorporates many layers of techniques intertwined for best delivery. It’s the one technique that will reach out and grab your audience’s attention, connect to their souls, and make you an unforgettable speaker. The Valley is what has kicked open the most doors, created the most revenue, and has most often made me and many of my students go viral.

Speakers often mistakenly believe their graphics, website, PowerPoint, or marketing material need to be bigger, better, and brighter to make you a standout, but these tools and tactics actually have very little to do with you being memorable.

Believe it or not, it’s super easy to forget great visual presentations. On the other hand, YOU can be unforgettable. NO ONE can do you but you.

Here’s your opportunity and invitation to go deeper versus wider, by applying the Science of Speaking techniques to how you deliver your message. There is someone out there waiting, wanting, and needing to experience your everlasting impression.

I’d love to gift you with a bit more clarity on your journey. Take this [free assessment](#) to find out which techniques you have already developed, and the exact techniques that are still in your gap and space of opportunity to grow within.

**Lisa Nichols** is a world-renowned speaker, as well as a media personality and corporate CEO whose global platform reaches over 170 countries and serves over 80 million people. She was the keynote speaker at the Toastmasters 2023 International Convention. Her social media attracts over 2.4 million followers. Learn more at [motivatingthemas.com](http://motivatingthemas.com).

# Techniques To Remember Your Speech

Find out what memory aids work best for you.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.

I'll never forget the first time I took a job as a conference keynoter. I came prepared with an outline to help me recall the main ideas of my 45-minute speech. Then, just before I walked onstage, my hosts told me they couldn't find the lectern, where I had planned on placing my notes.

It was one of those times a speaker dreams about. And then wakes up screaming.

Let's be clear: There is no shame in using notes for a speech. Those journalists and politicians you see on the news usually read their lines from a teleprompter. But wouldn't it be nice to be able to move around the stage a little, make great eye contact, and not have to worry about losing your notes, your place—or your lectern?

## Knowing It Cold

For keynote speaker and speaking coach Sabina Nawaz, the ultimate prevention to a recurrence of my nightmare is not just memorization, but “memorization on steroids.”

“I've found one approach to public speaking works best,” she writes in the *Harvard Business Review*. “Knowing your ‘script’ cold.” This means not only intense rehearsal, but the right kind of rehearsal.

According to Nawaz, “Most people start at the beginning each time they practice, resulting in an unevenly memorized script; the introduction is solid, but the conclusion is shaky.”

This used to happen to John Gentithes, President of the West Boca Toastmasters Club in Florida.

“I would often begin very strong and end weak,” he says, “because I practiced from the beginning and then whenever I made a mistake [in practice], I started over. So I practiced the beginning really well, but not as much the end.”

Instead of learning your script in sequence, Nawaz advises, start rehearsing each time at a random section and take it from there. Then sew the whole thing together with good segues.

Knowing a script or presentation cold, she says, also means taking the time to craft the words and sequence of what you plan to say, and then rehearsing them over and over.

In this way, she says, you'll be less nervous and can effortlessly move from point to point. You are free to be fully present, and thus more responsive to your audience.

That's especially true when you speak extemporaneously.

## Memorization vs. Extemporaneous Speaking

Extemporaneous speaking is not Table Topics®. It means preparing what you are going to say well in advance, while exactly *how* you say it may be different each time you speak. It can be more comfortable for speakers than memorization because it requires mastery of the material, not of the exact wording.

It also allows for the flexibility to subtly adjust a speech to each unique audience and situation. So it can be easier to deliver an effective presentation no matter whom, or what, you face.

As a new speaker 20 years ago, Gentithes routinely memorized his speeches. He did notice that they sounded a bit canned, and his gestures and eye contact suffered. But he felt constrained by notes, and he wasn't yet ready to think on his feet.

More than once, however, Gentithes realized that while he was onstage, distractions like the ring of a cellphone or the sound of a sneeze rattled him, causing him to lose his place in his memorized script. Then, not long into his Toastmasters career, he was speaking at an Area speech contest when he heard a loud explosion off in the distance.

“It might have thrown me for 20 seconds,” he says, “but it felt like 30 minutes. I never did regain my bearings.”

Since then, Gentithes, like Nawaz, organizes his speeches into bite-sized units that are easier to remember, and that he can rehearse bit by bit. So if he gets thrown off, he can more easily find his way back.

He rarely if ever memorizes. Relating these units extemporaneously rather than by rote not only helps him remember, but it also makes movement easier to master. And movement, says Nawaz, helps commit more words to memory.





"If you're going to deliver your talk standing up, don't sit down to rehearse," she warns. "I will often mark a mini stage and walk across it as I would during the actual speech. Associating a section of the speech with a place onstage is a memory aid."

## A No to Memorization

Faye Andrusiak, DTM, is Vice President Public Relations and the Club Secretary of Treasure Chest Club in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, Canada.

a hindrance as well." She finds PowerPoint slides helpful. When the equipment is in good working order and people know how to use it, PowerPoint can be a boon to speakers, although it, too, can disrupt eye contact and movement.

In general, if you do use PowerPoint, try to use as few words as possible per slide. And remember, PowerPoint is not a replacement for knowing your speech; it's a visual supplement.

Here are some more memory tools to help with speeches:

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"Strategize how to handle a memory lapse as part of your preparation. Craft two or three phrases you can use."

—SABINA NAWAZ

After being a Toastmaster for almost 30 years, she now rarely memorizes her speeches.

"I am a nervous speaker," she says, "and if I forget my speech, I can't get back on track. Over the years I've found that simply learning my speech is more effective. I am much more confident at the lectern."

When Andrusiak uses notes, she writes down only key phrases or statistical information. "However," she says, "notes can be

**Mnemonic devices.** Find a learning technique to help improve your memory. This is how I quickly saved myself in the keynote debacle mentioned in the beginning. In the few minutes I had to learn my notes, I used alphabetization and acronyms (music students will remember "Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge" for the notes on the scale) to highlight the most important points.

**Storytelling.** Telling a story helps you (and your audience) remember your content better. There is a long, strong connection between narrative and memory for numerous reasons, including simple brain physiology. In addition, stories flow downhill. That is to say, it's relatively easy to remember their sequence because they are, by and large, logical. You can't walk out of a store with an item until you've paid for it. And if you do, that's memorable!

**Keep it loose.** Perhaps the most important thing about remembering speeches is that by and large, your audience doesn't know what you're going to say. If you begin by stating that you have three points to make, and you forget one, you may be able to come up with another. But the more specific you are in your introduction, the more you are tied to what you planned to say. And that can backfire when you're nervous and forgetful.

## When All Else Fails

Even the best-laid plans of well-prepared speakers can go awry. That's why Nawaz recommends having a backup plan for forgetfulness.

"Strategize how to handle a memory lapse as part of your preparation," she urges. "Craft two or three phrases you can use. Knowing that I have these go-to phrases makes me less nervous about forgetting."

Such phrases include: "Let me refer to my notes," or "I'm struggling to remember my next point. Let me take a moment and step back." Or even just take a sip of water. Your audience will appreciate your moment of vulnerability.

Then there are the times that you remember something you should have said earlier. Here's your chance to recoup your memory lapse. "What I haven't told you is ..." has saved me on more than one occasion.

I didn't use that statement when the lectern disappeared, however. I didn't need to. That's because the audience never knew that anything was wrong.

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**Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.,** has taught storytelling studies and public speaking at Florida Atlantic University for over two decades. She appears weekly on South Florida public radio and has presented at three Toastmasters International conventions. Visit her at [carenneile.com](http://carenneile.com).



## UNDERSTANDING

# IMPROV

Polish your improvisational techniques in Toastmasters and life.

By Craig Harrison, DTM

**Y**ou may find the very thought of standing on stage and doing an improvised scene—an improv—extremely intimidating. When we hear the word “improv,” we tend to think of a type of comedy routine, but an improvisation is anything we do that is unplanned.

Despite our best efforts, much of what we do in life is improvised. We are constantly assessing situations, thinking quickly, and formulating responses. We improvise in job interviews, business meetings, and daily small talk. We improvise a meal, a vacation, or a sports play, but we also improvise when a deadline gets moved, something breaks, or a priority shifts.

In Toastmasters, Table Topics® is our improv time. It is specifically designed for us to practice thinking on our feet, formulating responses in the moment, and responding coherently in an unrehearsed manner.

Being able to improvise helps develop skills such as flexibility, self-awareness, creativity, problem-solving, and collaborating. This often

leads to innovation and invention, new partnerships, improved processes, and other beneficial outcomes in our work and personal life.

In improv comedy, most of what happens is unplanned and unscripted. Dialogue, actions, and storyline are all made up on the spot by the performers. A successful improv can go in many directions with the end result being an unanticipated, potentially funny, yet somehow coherent story. However, improv isn't just fun and games. Improv is a process with a simple structure and basic rules of engagement.

### Presence, Acceptance, and Trust

Improvisation requires three basic skills: presence, acceptance, and trust. Izzy Gesell, a professional speaker and organizational coach, frequently uses techniques from improv to help his clients. “Presence means that improvisers are able to stay in the moment,” he explains. “Acceptance refers to the ability to deal with what is, rather than what they'd like it to be. ... And trust—improvisers trust process, which means they're able to suspend judgment in the moment.”

For Toastmasters it may seem counterintuitive *not* to prepare in advance. Yet the key for answering Table Topics is to be fully present and



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## Being able to improvise helps develop skills such as flexibility, self-awareness, creativity, problem-solving, and collaborating.

in the moment, without pre-planned statements, stories, or speeches. Being open to whatever comes and receptive to whatever your partner or the audience or the Table Topicsmaster suggests is of paramount importance. In improv, you want to take your cues from the moment.

One of the central concepts in improv is what's called "accepting the offer." Life is full of offers; whether it's someone asking us a question or wanting to give us something, we have a choice to accept or decline it. We can receive or reject it.

### Help Your Partner Succeed

In improvisation you also want to make your partner look good. It's a form of teamwork. If you focus on helping your partner, and your partner focuses on helping you, together you will succeed. In this way, partners develop trust quickly as they replace judgment with curiosity as they improvise.

One of the misnomers of improv is that someone "wins" at the end. In fact, a successful improv session involves collaborating, teaming, co-creating,

# YES, AND ...

When we respond to a Table Topics question, we're accepting the offer as a speaker. When we lead a meeting or take on an officer role, we are accepting the offer as a leader. Success in improv and in life often stems from accepting offers, sometimes literally in the moment. When we do, we are trusting the process will guide our reactions.

### The Concept of "Yes, AND..."

The building block of improv is based on the "Yes, and ..." concept. In life, when someone asks a question or makes a request, we often reflexively respond by saying "no" or responding with the conditional "yes, BUT..." Improv teaches us to trustingly respond with "yes, AND..." to any offer we receive.

The concept of "yes, and ..." suggests we accept all offers, building upon the original question or request with our own ideas, concepts, enhancements, or preferences.

Imagine your Topicsmaster calling up two participants in tandem to respond to a topic. Their only guidelines: Whatever the first person says, the second person accepts and builds upon by saying "Yes, and ..." before adding their own response. Alternating sentences, together they respond in the moment by listening to the other to fashion their response:

**Topicsmaster:** Why should strangers join our club?

**Respondent #1:** It's a great way to start off the morning.

**Respondent #2:** Yes, and it's a supportive group of people to wake up with at 7 a.m.

**Respondent #1:** Yes, and you leave at 8 a.m. with a head start on the rest of the world that's just waking up.

**Respondent #2:** Yes, and our club is full of a blend of experienced members, as well as new members just starting out.

The "Yes, and ..." technique is frequently used in brainstorming sessions to generate ideas and explore new possibilities. The key to its success: suspend any judgment of what is said and don't block your partner's offers.

and building something in partnership. The moment an improv player focuses on winning, or looking good, or using humor at another's expense, it quickly unravels. The magic of improv happens when each person focuses on their partner's needs.

People often get self-conscious and are concerned about looking foolish. Yet when you focus on helping your partner look good, and when they do likewise, everyone shines. Improv is based on accepting initial offers, building upon them, supporting new offers that sprout up, and going with the flow. All doors remain open when we suspend judgment and explore all that could be. This skill is invaluable in businesses where team successes trump individual triumphs. When the team wins, we all win.

### The Power of the Unexpected

You'll find a wide variety of improv games, books, classes, and troupes to sharpen your improvisational skills. Some clubs introduce improv into Table Topics or use improv activities in place of a speech. District conferences and Toastmasters Leadership Institutes periodically use improv programs as a fun activity to help people discover things about themselves and others. Many games exercise verbal and non-verbal skills, emphasize the power of observation and listening, and reward good team play.

"Improv is such a valuable tool for everybody regardless of what your career aspirations are," says Kenn Adams, author of *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play: The Art of Spontaneous Theater*. "At the end of the day it boils down into 'Do you work well with other people and can you collaborate with them?'" Improv gives you and your team practice with both. And with success, comes trust, confidence, and a desire to take on new challenges.

So go ahead: take a risk, experiment, get beyond your comfort zone, and focus on helping your partners succeed, and you will *all* become Improv-Masters!

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**Craig Harrison DTM**, is a professional speaker, a past District Director, and a charter member of Silicon Valley Improvmasters in San Jose, California. For more information, visit [ExpressionsOfExcellence.com](http://ExpressionsOfExcellence.com).

## MORE IMPROV GAMES FOR TOASTMASTERS

**Accepting the Offer.** Decide on a topic. Whatever your partner says, you accept by saying "Yes, and..." before appending your own idea. To which they respond "Yes, and..." See how well you develop an idea, story, or concept. (The alternative is to have the same conversation, but each response begins with "Yes, BUT..." Notice the difference when one's offer is blocked instead of accepted.)

**The Collective Story.** Each participant contributes a sentence to a story. Listen carefully to build on what's previously been established as a team. Here are several themes for your collective story during Table Topics: "Once upon a time our club decided to circle the globe ..." "Our club decided to change its location ..." "If Toastmasters ruled the world ..."

**Conversation From A to Z.** Pairs of people converse on a topic, alternating sentences. The first person's sentence begins with A. Their partner's sentence begins with B. The originator's next sentence begins with C. Try to get to Z!

**Conversation Within the Conversation.** Two people engage in a conversation. Two other people, standing behind the people in conversation, represent what each person is thinking. They verbalize the fears and dreams of the conversational partners, for all to hear.

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When you focus on helping your partner look good, and  
when they do likewise, everyone shines.

**Gibberish:** Instead of responding to a Table Topic in your usual language, respond entirely in Gibberish—a nonsensical language. Emphasize vocal variety, facial expressions, and gestures to get your point across.

**New Choice.** Begin to tell a story. At some point, your partner or leader will say "new choice" and whatever you just said, you must now change before continuing the story. For example, if you were describing a vacation to Alaska, when you hear "new choice" you must alter the location to a new place. Each time "new choice" is called out, whatever you just said (person, place, thing, action, feeling, etc.) must be changed, and then you continue the story with a new variable inserted.

**Physical Offer-and-Accept Game.** Form a circle. One person leaps into the circle and strikes a pose. Immediately, another player jumps in to join them, and strikes a pose that complements the first player's pose. The first player says, "Thank you" and rejoins the circle, leaving the second player holding their pose. Immediately, another player opts in, striking a new complementary pose. Continue until all players have joined.

**Tell a Story ... One Word at a Time.** Pairs of people attempt to tell a story one word at a time. Try to set your partner up, not stymie them.

**The Gift.** Pairs of people present each other invisible gifts. As the recipient opens his or hers, the recipient (not the gift-giver) declares what was received. Gifts can be tangible, esoteric, symbolic, or silly.

—Compiled by Craig Harrison, DTM





# IMPROVING

## CLUB MEETINGS

How 3 clubs are getting laughs and flexing their spontaneous speaking skills.

By Stephanie Darling

“You’re gonna need a bigger boat!”  
 This advice, from the 1970s movie *Jaws*, about the hunt for a killer shark, was delivered by actor Roy Scheider to the boat captain, just after Scheider’s character—and the audience—come face to face with a giant shark in the water behind their rickety fishing boat.

The phrase was part of an inside joke among the film crew, and Scheider chose to ad-lib it at the perfect point in the story. It became one of the most famous unscripted lines in movie history.

It was a memorable example of improvisation—or improv—the art of saying or doing something relevant to the moment, yet completely unplanned. Improv is a classic dramatic technique, rooted in storytelling, and long practiced in the performing arts, including dance, music, acting, comedy—and even public speaking. After all, Toastmasters have been honing spontaneous speaking talents for decades through Table Topics®.

Some Toastmasters believe so heartily in improv that they incorporate it even more fully into club meetings, not just in Table Topics. Improv fosters self-discovery—as well as an exploration into shared creativity, collaboration, and community—something Toastmasters also fosters. The technique is ideally suited to comedy, which is why many Toastmasters clubs enjoy it. It aligns well with Toastmasters founder Dr. Ralph C. Smedley’s long-ago observation: “We learn best in moments of enjoyment.”



The International Improv Toastmasters Club in Beijing includes time in its meetings for playing improv games.

“I encourage people to view this as a golden ticket out of their comfort zones and a gateway to uncharted growth.”

—BELINDA WU

Improv sessions can be incorporated into a club meeting in a variety of ways. Here’s a look at how three clubs are sparking spontaneity with members.

### Improv Toastmasters

This California-based online club is so committed to the art form that it’s written into the club’s mission statement, according to Thomas Iland, AS, DTM, of Valencia, California, an Accredited Speaker and Vice President Education of the club.

The statement reads: “... every member has the opportunity to develop communication and leadership skills and learn improv and improv-related skills ...”

“Basically, life itself is about improv so in our club, the key is to say ‘yes’ and see where it leads you,” Iland explains. “It has changed so many lives I know, on so many levels.”

He added that many members in this President’s Distinguished Club have gone on to successfully participate in speaking competitions, launch careers as professional speakers, or enhance their careers by boosting spontaneous speaking skills.

The club follows the traditional meeting format but begins and ends with improv games drawing in everyone who wants to participate. “We start and end the meeting laughing,” Iland says.

A popular game style is the round robin, which begins with a question or story thread with each member adding to the unfolding narrative. This practice is especially helpful in developing listening skills, as speakers logically or illogically add their own performance twist, based on what previous speakers have contributed.

Iland says that many club members are new to improv, so he appreciates the “carte blanche” permission it gives to individual expression, which is a foundational building block in Toastmasters’ philosophy, as well.

“Some people come to improv naturally, others don’t. So we encourage everyone to go at their own pace,” Iland says. “Get comfortable and remember, there are no wrong answers so just go for it!”

Former Club President Rick Randall of Quartz Hill, California, says improv helped reframe his wit, a personal talent he’s always prided himself on.

“Improv has helped me professionalize my wittiness by combining the basic foundation of public speaking with a fast-thinking approach to conversationalism,” he says. “I’m a more refined person because of improv.”

“There’s an inclination to unravel a fresh self through improv, exploring the untapped potential of one’s body and voice,” notes Belinda Wu, President of International Improv Toastmasters Club, a Chinese-English speaking club chartered in March 2023, in Beijing. “It also gives us the treasured bonus of camaraderie and joy.”

Karen Rae Hannah, President of the online Improv and Humor Toastmasters club, loves the uplifting comedic benefits of improv. It’s a chance to be silly, laugh out loud, and boost spirits.

“Improv is a very ‘up’ experience for me,” Hannah says. “Nourishing a sense of humor is a very important part of mental health and creativity that can get lost in the challenges of our daily lives.”

At its core, improv is an immersive dip into pulling all of one’s communication skills into action, without a single forethought, adds Rosetta Walker, President of Improv Toastmasters, an online club based in North Hollywood, California. It’s the unknown that creates the thrill and builds the skill.

“Spontaneity—that’s what improv brings to the table,” Walker says.

The “Yes, AND” rule of improv—where members agree to participate in the exercise, no matter how confident or wobbly they may feel—is an ideal technique for encouraging spontaneity and creativity. Techniques for incorporating this rule vary widely, from games to sketches involving two or more people. Adding a club role, such as an Improv Master or a Joke Master further helps members collaborate on spirited, imaginative improv scenarios each week.

A common bond is having fun while doing it, club leaders say.

“Our members come to polish personal and professional skills, but also to relieve stress by having fun with a sociable group, or simply to have a good laugh. That last reason is probably underrated in our society, but it’s something truly valuable,” says Xiaocheng Stephen Hu, DTM, with Beijing’s International Improv Toastmasters Club.



“Just like in real life, exploring the unknown and taking those chances yields unexpected, wonderful results.”

—BARBARA WOO, DTM

## International Improv Toastmasters Club

Improv has always been a “significant part of club activities,” says Wu, of this in-person club based in Beijing, China.

The club’s Improv Master opens the first hour, “when we aim to loosen our bodies, throats, and minds and pave the way for the subsequent hour, where we deliver or receive exemplary speech skills and insights,” Wu explains.

“We use all kinds of improv games, including some really dynamic exercises that bring out the body language, vocal variety, and emotions among players. And when someone comes up with a funny line, the room erupts in laughter,” adds Stephen Hu, DTM, also of the Beijing club.

“At the same time,” he says, “these skills can be applied to many real-life situations. When we interact with someone, most of our conversations will be improvised. So a skillful improv player will be able to go with the flow in any situation.”

Both Wu and Hu are convinced that the club’s lively, opening improv session creates an aura of excitement among attendees that carries through the entire club meeting.

“Having been energized by the improv hour, members usually feel more expressive when delivering Pathways speeches. Maybe that’s why our speech reservations fill up so quickly,” they say.

Improv is regarded as a popular teambuilding activity in Chinese corporate culture, explains Hu. “Although perhaps not as popular as stand-up comedy at a national level, there are certainly improv troupes in major cities, performing in Chinese and sometimes in English.”

However, the idea of improv didn’t necessarily come naturally to the club’s Chinese members, he adds.

“When we started, I could feel that our fellow Chinese members needed some time to overcome the apparent challenges of saying ‘yes’ and conjuring wild stories on the spot. At times, I found myself needing to use my right and left brain, typically used in critical thinking. Now I think all of us are a bit more seasoned and I regard this confidence boost very highly!”

Wu also found improv “uncharted territory” when she joined the club. Her longtime love of spontaneous dance, an art form that has used improv for centuries, won her ardent support for bringing the practice into the club.

Some members are naturally exhilarated by improv’s novel approach for expression; others, like Wu, are initially apprehensive.

“I encourage people to view this as a golden ticket out of their comfort zones and a gateway to uncharted growth,” Wu says. Club support for every participant is a given. “Our improv masters have a keen eye for the quiet souls, easing them into improv that often leads to heartwarming breakthroughs.”

## Improv and Humor

This club chartered in 2013 with a specific emphasis on improv training—and met in person for years before they became online-only during the pandemic. The shift drew new members from around the world.



Members of the International Improv Toastmasters Club often gather after their meetings.

Club meetings open with a 30-minute improv session featuring multi-person skits and games that strengthen expressive skills—and usually end in laughter. A favorite tactic is to set up improv scenes between two or more people and “use it to practice trust, vocal variety, self-awareness, quick thinking, and much more,” notes Barbara Woo, DTM, a professional actress who joined the club long ago to help her “ace” her auditions.

“The idea is to keep the scene moving, trust your partner, and take chances,” Woo explains. “Part of the thrill is free-falling into a scene knowing your partner will catch you. Just like in real life, exploring the unknown and taking those chances yields unexpected, wonderful results.”

The club creates a weekly theme that provides a tie-in for Pathways speeches, Table Topics, and improv games, setting up a cohesive learning experience for all. Because improv is a fluid art form, members can try out many different forms of expression, generally resulting in everyone leaving the meeting having learned at least one new thing. That’s a continual benefit to members, all of whom have different reasons for wanting to become skilled improvisors, Club President Hannah says.

“We have complete newbies, professional actors, businesspeople, retirees, working professionals, people who are pursuing speaking or coaching careers, people with English as a second language who want to become more comfortable thinking quickly at work and in conversations,” Hannah says, describing the member diversity in her club.

Woo, a busy actress, says improv helped her stand out among her peers. “How do you make a lasting impression, so the casting director wants to follow your character out of the room?” she says. Club improv has taught her body movements, facial expression, vocal strength, and the confidence to overcome stage fright.

Ultimately, improv is rooted in stories, told by many people, from many different viewpoints and communication styles.

“Improv is a journey of growth, spontaneity, and a deeper connection with the art of storytelling,” Woo adds.

**Stephanie Darling** is a former senior editor of and frequent contributor to the *Toastmaster magazine*.

# Humor in the Ordinary

Identifying comedy in everyday life can alleviate stress, improve your mood, and enhance your speeches.

By Greg Glasgow

No one knows the power of humor to deal with life's challenges more than Denver-based comedian Josh Blue. Winner of the fourth season of NBC reality competition show *Last Comic Standing*, Blue was diagnosed early in his life with cerebral palsy, a loss or impairment of motor function that can cause issues with muscle tone, movement, and posture.

He's found that people are more comfortable around him if he can acknowledge his body movements right away, something that not only lightens up the mood but explains his situation as well.

"People always think I'm drunk," Blue begins one of his routines. "I was walking down the street one day, and the police picked me up. I said, 'Wait a minute, fellas, I'm not drunk—I have cerebral palsy.' The cop said, 'That's a pretty big word for a drunk.'"

Humor became a defense mechanism early in life, Blue says—a way to laugh at himself before others could laugh at him.

"Being physically disabled, I could cry about it and be sad, or I could have a laugh and go with it," Blue says. "I'd much rather be laughing than crying."

He recommends that others take the same approach to life, looking for the humor in the everyday and just generally lightening up.

"People are way too serious about everything," he says. "If you can take everything with a grain of salt and not be so serious about all the little things, it makes life smoother. It just makes it more enjoyable to wake up in the morning."

Most importantly, Blue says, learn to laugh at yourself.

"I think that's mandatory," he says. "Not enough people are able to do it. When you can laugh at yourself, the other things in life aren't as bad."

## Boost Your Brain by Laughing

Experts say laughter is one of the quickest and easiest ways to improve your mood and increase your physical and mental health. A study from the University of Nebraska showed that laughing increases energy, while research from Northwestern University found that watching a comedy routine increased volunteers' ability to engage in creative problem solving. And according to a 2016 paper by Norwegian researchers, people with a good

sense of humor live up to eight years longer than those who don't like to laugh.

"Smiling and laughing will immediately improve your mental health, improve your physical health," says Stephan Dyer, a banker-turned-comedian whose company, reTHINK Group, inspires personal and professional growth through the lens of comedy. "Laughter makes everything easier, and it makes you feel grateful at the same time for everything that you have."

Humor can also help take the sting out of the bad things life can throw your way, says American comedian and corporate speaker Judy Carter.

"When we laugh at a problem, it makes a problem more manageable," Carter says. "And when we can find the humor in a situation, it makes it less painful. If you're going through a bad breakup, for instance, the moment you can make jokes about it is the moment you're on to healing."

## How to Find the Funny

If you're not a professional comedian, it can be difficult to find the humor in everyday situations. Experts offer a few tips:

**Immerse yourself in comedy.** "Go on Netflix or YouTube and look for stand-up comedy specials or comedy movies," Dyer says. "It's about breaking up the 9-to-5 grind and the copy-paste of every day. It doesn't even have to be comedy to make you laugh. You can join a volleyball team or a hiking group or dance class. Because you're already out of your comfort zone and there's tension, humor is going to come in and release it."

A Toastmasters club meeting is another opportunity to find humor. Challenge yourself to add a bit of humor in your speeches or Table Topics® answers. If you really love humor, try the Engaging Humor path in Pathways, or compete in a Humorous Speech Contest.

**Look for things that don't make sense.** One of the best ways to find humor in daily life is to look for things that raise questions, or don't quite add up.

"I pay attention to things that are weird," Carter, the American comedian, says. "For instance, I just saw a sign that said, 'Ears Pierced While You Wait.' As opposed to what? 'Oh, no, I'll just leave them here, and I'll come back





for my ears a little later.' Noticing things that don't make sense and ranting about them is how you find the funny in day-to-day life."

**Write it down.** "The best way to pay attention to funny things is to do what comedians do: Carry a notepad around, and when you see people laughing at something you said, or you heard something you think is funny, write it down," Dyer says.

Dyer agrees, adding that humor can prompt emotions in a way that words alone can't quite achieve.

Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." This resonated with Dyer. He says, "Comedy makes people feel great, and it makes you as the speaker look more approachable, more easygoing, more vulnerable."

## The Power of Laughter

Not only does humor get an audience on a speaker's side, it also bonds the room closer together. Something about the primal, intimate act of laughter connects us in a way few other things can.

"Every time I do a show, and people laugh together for an hour, I feel like it brings humanity together," Blue says. "There are people in the theater from all different walks of life, but they're all laughing together at the same thing. I feel like it goes a long way."

Most importantly, experts say, don't underestimate the power of humor to improve not only your outlook, but the outlook of your audience.

"The world is really in bad shape right now," Carter says. "People are very angry and depressed, and everybody's full of anxiety. If you can deliver your message and your story, no matter how serious it is, in a funny way, people will love you. People love people who can make them laugh."

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**Greg Glasgow** is a Denver-based author and freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the *Toastmaster*. His debut nonfiction book, *Disneyland on the Mountain: Walt, the Environmentalists, and the Ski Resort That Never Was*, was published in September 2023 by Rowman & Littlefield.

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"If you can take everything with a grain of salt and not be so serious about all the little things, it makes life smoother."

—JOSH BLUE

The technique not only trains your brain to pay attention to humorous moments; it gives you potential jokes to include in your next speech or presentation. Including humor is a great way to keep audiences engaged, Blue says.

"In college, when my professors were funny, I learned so much more from what they were teaching," he says. "It's the same in the business world. If you want to grab your coworkers' attention, don't just do the usual. Have something unique."

Having a developed sense of humor can also help you roll with the punches when the unexpected happens in the middle of your speech. A loud noise interrupts your flow? Make a joke about it. For example: "Don't start cheering yet; I'm not done with my presentation."

"In comedy, that's called ad-libbing," Dyer says. "When you get used to writing stuff down on a daily basis and recognizing it regularly, your comedic muscles are being exercised. Then you can turn anything serious into something funny."



# Fire Up the Lectern!

How to honor your officers and noteworthy members with a roast.

By Kate McClare, DTM

It's one of Sherri Raftery's favorite memories in Toastmasters: the meeting when her fellow club members spent the evening making fun of her. She even considered it an honor to be the target of one joke after another, because this was part of a time-honored and beloved speaking tradition: the roast, in which praise is delivered as a series of humorous insults.

"Being roasted is an honor for the person being roasted," says Raftery, a Distinguished Toastmaster and member of three clubs, including Island Foghorns Toastmasters Club in Middletown, Rhode Island. "It means folks took the time to think about what you did well and find funny ways to talk about them."

The roast is a unique kind of tribute made popular by the legendary comedians of the Friars Club (a private club based in New York City), whose famously filthy style got cleaned up for American TV and inspired imitators like the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts* of the 1970s and today's *Comedy Central* series. What sets it apart from other homages is not just its use of humor, but also that the jokes are used to first knock down the guest of honor and then raise them back up on their pedestal.

The humor is far gentler and decidedly G-rated at roasts of the many Toastmasters clubs and Districts that use them as special end-of-term tributes to outgoing officers or to recognize a member's birthday or major accomplishment. But it still shares the basic grilling recipe: brief stories and one-liners about the guest of honor, served with exaggeration and absurd twists.

The roast was a specialty speech in the legacy education program of Toastmasters and may be used for one of several projects in the Engaging Humor modules of the Pathways learning experience. It's a major event for St. Petersburg Toastmasters Club in St. Petersburg, Florida, which roasts its outgoing President at an annual summer banquet.

"People start taking notes (for the roast) right away, as soon as the new President comes on board," says club member Jeannette Sweeney, DTM. "People say we gotta start writing things down that we notice about these people, to use at the roast. It's part of our culture. It's part of our program."

Sweeney's club has roasted one President on her love of karaoke and loyalty to Duke's Mayonnaise (*remember that time when she spilled the Duke's all over the floor?*). "We would roast on little quirks about certain speeches they did, or how they might open up the meeting if they always had a certain saying or something like that," Sweeney says.

## Punching Up

A roast may be best defined by what it's not: an opportunity to criticize or complain about the guest of honor or get revenge for past slights. Neither should it focus on areas of weakness, like personal appearance or ethnicity. "This is an opportunity for camaraderie," says Raftery. "Remember the Toastmasters core values of respect and integrity."



Even if the subject is known for making fun of their appearance, it's best to avoid that topic. Making jokes about yourself is funny; making them about someone else is cruel—even if they're laughing. The jokes can still have an edge as long as they're not mean-spirited, says Chris Arning, Past President of Berkeley Square Speakers Toastmasters Club in central London.

"You take a positive quality and exaggerate it, but still in a positive way," he says. "It also

the roastee, and it will mean more to them. But if you don't know them, Raftery says, start with background information: Interview the recipient and those close to them. Get a few facts about their life and their Toastmasters career.

Arning thinks you should not only know the roast subject, but he says you also "need to have sweated with that person. You need to have had some history with that person. Otherwise, you

Sweeney's research has included watching *Comedy Central* roasts—not for their jokes, which tend to be raunchy even for basic cable TV, but the process. She points out that the show's professional comics always end on a positive note no matter how insulting they've been. She recommends doing that, and then thanking the subject for their contributions and sincerely complimenting them.

Like Raftery and other experienced roasters, Arning believes it's an honor to be roasted. "To dispel the lazy stereotypes," he says, "a roast isn't about cheap shots. It is a noble speech that says this person needs celebrating and doing it in a public forum. The premise is you know the person is a good enough sport to take the joke and you show that you care enough about them to bother to write it."

**Kate McClare, DTM**, is a writer and President of Miami Advanced Toastmasters Club in Miami, Florida. She has been a member of Toastmasters since 2011.

## To ensure you don't cross the line between ribbing and ridicule, experienced roastmasters recommend having someone who knows the roastee look over your material.

illustrates a point often made, which is that humor, even if it's jokes, usually has a grain of truth to it. So, you play on things that are true about the person but present them in a humorous way and often with some exaggeration or a little bit of an edge."

That's why it's usually best for members to roast an officer rather than the other way around—it's the timeworn comedy rule about "punching up" rather than down.

Arning laughed with everyone else when he got roasted by his club, even at the jokes he didn't particularly like. As a leader, he says, it was important for him to show that he could take the joke. That's the serious part of the fun.

"A roast is a rite of passage to show what broad shoulders you have," he explains. "Good leaders should be open to feedback, and in a way, a roast is like a concentrated dose of feedback. It says this person is resilient, they're able to have truths told about them and they can take it. For me, that's why it's such an important part of Toastmasters. All the best leaders I've seen have taken their roast and they've become better leaders for it."

### The Well-Done Roast

To ensure you don't cross the line between ribbing and ridicule, experienced roastmasters recommend having someone who knows the roastee look over your material. (Keep it a surprise for the roastee.) It helps if you know

haven't got the right to roast them. Fundamentally, roasting is not just a technical exercise. Plus, I think it's funnier if the whole audience knows you actually get along with the person but you're saying something slightly disparaging."

## Grilling Tips

Have you been asked to roast someone in your club? Here's what Toastmaster Chris Arning advises you to consider:

### ◆ Your Objective

A roast isn't a personal attack but a portrait you should paint as vividly as possible. Depict the individual in rich detail. Bring their unique quirks to life - tell anecdotes, but if you struggle, simply say true things about the subject of the roast that others will recognize and you'll 100% get laughs.

### ◆ Your Tone

Aim for light joshing, gentle teasing, not full-on insults. Imagine the roastee is a loved one or sibling; this is not the time to share private revelations and confidences, but should focus on their public foibles.

### ◆ Your Attitude

Commit to the joke - remember with a roast you are invariably punching up, meaning that the roasted person has more power than you. The person has broad shoulders, so you've got leeway to bring them down to earth. They should squirm a bit; it's better to be funny than to flop for want of killer delivery.

—Kate McClare, DTM

# Remembering Dr. Ralph C. Smedley

His vision for lifelong learning continues today.

By *Toastmaster* magazine staff



**T**oastmasters International turns 100 this year, a remarkable achievement that started with the foresight and vision of one man, founder Dr. Ralph C. Smedley. First fun fact: He was born on February 22, 1878, in Waverly, Illinois—which means he would be turning 146 years old this month.

Another detail that usually keeps people guessing: The “C” in Smedley’s middle initial stands for Chesnut—an old family name. He often had to tell people he wasn’t named for a nut or tree.

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1903, Smedley soon found his way to the local Y.M.C.A., where he made speeches and conducted meetings as the educational director—the first hint of Toastmasters in the making. In 1905 he married Frances Bass, and 10 years later they had their daughter, Betty.

In a letter she wrote to the *Toastmaster* in November 1989, Betty revealed a few more little-known facts about her father. He was an avid stamp collector and corresponded and exchanged stamps with people all over the world. He also loved music and played the flute for many years and the piano all his life. He enjoyed camping and fishing with friends, and especially summer vacations with his family.

“Dad was a man with an inquisitive mind,” Betty wrote. “He thoroughly enjoyed people and experiences and was truly interested in learning as much as he could, both for his own enjoyment and to help other people.”

In 1922, the Smedley family moved to Santa Ana, California, where the Toastmasters story began in 1924. For 40 years, Smedley worked to bring his dream of an organization where people could improve their communication and leadership skills. He helped shape and implement policy, developed and wrote educational materials, served as editor and then writer for the *Toastmaster* magazine, and visited and met countless members and leaders.

Although he passed away in 1965, Smedley’s legacy continues to live on through the thousands of members practicing their public speaking in clubs across 148 countries. Terrence McCann, executive director of Toastmasters International from 1975 to 2001, wrote the following about Smedley’s contribution in a 1999 *Toastmaster* issue:

The concept of adult education was largely unheard of at the beginning of the 20th century. It took the vision of a scholarly young man, just graduated from

Illinois Wesleyan University, to recognize the importance of lifelong learning—not only for adults at that time, but also to future generations. Today, thanks to the patience and perseverance of Ralph Smedley and his idea, people throughout the world have the chance to pursue their personal and professional goals—even after other avenues of education may be closed.

*In honor of Toastmasters International’s 100th anniversary, this is the second in a year-long series of articles commemorating historic milestones.*

## Quotes by Dr. Ralph C. Smedley

“While most of us may have entered Toastmasters to learn to make speeches, that benefit is but the beginning of the good which may come to us and the good which we may do for mankind.”

“We learn best in moments of enjoyment.”

“Understanding comes through communication, and through communication we find the way to peace.”

“The past prepares us to meet the challenges of the future.”

“Toastmasters is based on belief in the individual. ... Many organizations ask the individual to subordinate himself to the group. Ours is the only organization I know that is dedicated to the individual.”

“The first result of speech training is self-discovery.”

“Your Toastmasters club is your laboratory in which to try experiments in better communication.”

“Learning to give a speech is important, but almost equally so is learning to listen critically, analytically, and then to give the speaker the benefit.”



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## CLIENT SPOTLIGHT - BO BENNETT, DTM

You might know Bo as the creator of FreeToastHost, the host of the Toastmasters Podcast, or the Founder of eBookIt.com. Or perhaps you never heard of the guy. Either way, you will enjoy his latest book, *Some Really Personal, Yet Entertaining Stories From My Life That You Will Enjoy and May Even Find Inspiring*.

What is a "normal childhood?" Does it include almost being murdered by your sister with an ax? Speeding around town in the back of a station wagon because your mom is chasing an "alien spaceship"? Being busted by the police for intent to light a pond on fire? Tackling your mom to the ground and wrestling a knife out of her hand because she was trying to kill your dad? While my stories may be unique, readers will be able to relate to the broader themes that are part of a normal childhood such as sibling rivalry, eccentric parents, doing stupid things, and frequently preventing one's parents from literally murdering each other.

Although some of the subject matter is not something one would generally laugh at, you have my permission to laugh. Social rules don't apply here; my rules do. It works for me, and who knows, after reading the stories from my past, you might be inspired to see your own screwed up past in a more humorous light.

*Some Really Personal, Yet Entertaining Stories From My Life That You Will Enjoy and May Even Find Inspiring* by Bo Bennett is available in ebook, paperback, and audio, at



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