

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | NOVEMBER 2025

# TOASTMASTER®

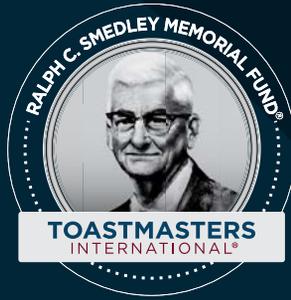


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# Don't Go It Alone

There have been moments in my Toastmasters journey where I've felt completely overwhelmed—like I was in way over my head. The expectations I had of myself were high, and I was equally aware of the expectations others had of me. I didn't want to disappoint anyone. That sense of pressure, mixed with uncertainty, can be paralyzing.

I've even caught myself preemptively feeling shame—imagining what it would be like to fail before anything had even gone wrong.

In those moments, my instinct has often been to simply push through. To figure it out quietly. To carry the load alone. As if asking for help was some kind of weakness.

Fortunately, Toastmasters has taught me something invaluable.

I vividly remember leading a team and having endless challenges with one person. I tried everything I could think of to build a better working relationship. Nothing worked. We had very different ideas of what should be done and seemed to clash all the time. It was exhausting!

I realized I needed help. Eventually, I reached out to my mentor. His words of wisdom changed everything: "You have to approach this situation with empathy. The movie going on in their head makes perfect sense to them."

That guidance helped me realize this person simply had another perspective—equally valid. I began approaching the situation with curiosity, trying to understand their viewpoint rather than change it. From there, we could finally move toward finding common ground.

If you've ever felt like everyone else has it figured out except you—you're not alone. We've all been there.

Each time I've reached out—to admit I was struggling, unsure, or simply tired—I've been met with empathy, support, and generous wisdom. Reaching out when vulnerable wasn't a moment of weakness. It became a turning point.

Whether it's in your club, your District, or at the Board level, help is always within reach. The key is simply to ask. Don't wait until you're overwhelmed.

So here's my challenge for you and for myself:

Who can you reach out to today—for guidance, encouragement, or support?

And who around you might need a reminder they don't have to do it all alone?

None of us do. All it takes is one brave moment to ask.

**Aletta Rochat, DTM**  
International President

Help is always within reach. The key is simply to ask.



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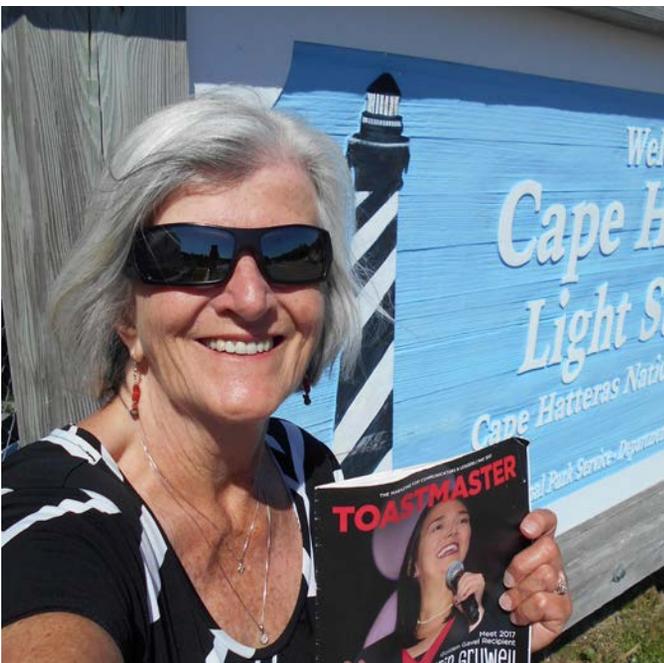
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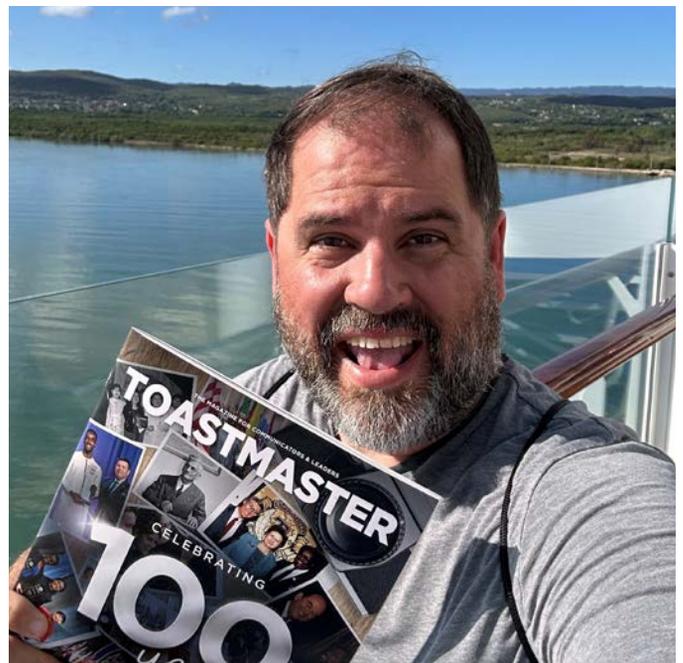


**District 124** (parts of India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan) officers pose with printed covers of the *Toastmaster* magazine while visiting Kurseong, a hill station in West Bengal, India, after attending a training program for District officers.

## Traveling Toastmaster



**Carol Finley** of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, poses in front of the Cape Hatteras Light Station sign on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.



**Arthur Woods** of Manheim, Pennsylvania, enjoys the centennial edition of the *Toastmaster* magazine while aboard the Disney Treasure cruise ship in Falmouth, Jamaica.

# Talk It Out

How explaining a problem to a rubber duck leads to solutions.

By Ben Guttman



How often do you get stuck on a problem and simply can't figure out a solution? Whether you're trying to create the perfect speech title or come up with a creative way to entice guests to visit your club, it's vital to get out of your head. How can you get unstuck? It may be as simple as grabbing a rubber duck. No, you don't need to jump in the bathtub (though that might help too!), you just need a friendly face to speak to.

When we're forced to verbalize a problem, the solution suddenly becomes obvious. This practice is called rubber duck debugging, or rubberducking, and it comes from Andrew Hunt and David Thomas' 1999 book, *The Pragmatic Programmer*. Here's their explanation of the tactic:

*A very simple but particularly useful technique for finding the cause of a problem is simply to explain it to someone else. The other person should look over your shoulder at the screen, and nod his or her head constantly (like a rubber duck bobbing up and down in a bathtub). They do not need to say a word; the simple act of explaining, step by step, what the code is supposed to do often causes the problem to leap off the screen and announce itself.*

In a footnote, the authors explain that they named the practice after a colleague who kept a little yellow rubber duck on their desk for this very purpose.

While this framework is useful for computer programmers, it's a tool that all of us can use in our work—especially when we're writing a presentation, developing a proposal, or designing a new app.

When writing a speech, we often start by literally *writing*. But speeches are primarily

spoken and heard. What looks pretty on paper doesn't really matter—your speech in Toastmasters or beyond is only effective if it performs in the venue where it's being delivered. You must work through it out loud, at full volume to a friend, a mirror, or a stuffed animal. By speaking out loud to a supportive “audience,” you can hear where an idea doesn't translate clearly or workshop a stronger transition that wasn't coming across smoothly.

When we break out of our echo chambers, we can often see things that are otherwise easily overlooked.

Rubberducking is a one-way form of what I call in my book, *Simply Put*, the “Enlightened Idiot”—a practice of developing empathy with our audience by getting out of our own heads. When we break out of our echo chambers, we can often see things that are otherwise easily overlooked. Hearing your words and ideas when speaking to your rubber duck can allow you to catch an idea that might resonate with your audience better when explained differently and therefore, improves your speech before you take it to the live audience.

When communicating, in a speech or otherwise, we must always remember one thing: We're not the audience. They live different lives,

they know different things, and they want to achieve different goals. What makes sense to us doesn't always make sense to them.

We're all biased, and we have to accept that reality to address it. Our insider perspectives and knowledge, if not accounted for, will prevent us from getting our message across. We need to get out of our own way.

Writing about writing, prolific author and marketer Seth Godin says, “No one ever gets talker's block.” Writer's block is a problem for many, but we talk every day and never get stuck. Why? He answers, “We get better at talking precisely because we talk.”

Researchers have widely supported the idea that engaging in explanation or teaching doesn't just benefit your audience but can lead to a better understanding of the material by you, the one *doing* the explaining or teaching. Dubbed the “protégé effect,” this strategy has now been used in classrooms around the world to improve academic outcomes, and it can be used in your work to become a more effective communicator.

If your work is stiff, take it off the page and talk it out. Talk to yourself in the shower, talk to your spouse over breakfast, or, best yet, talk to somebody who's close to your audience. By virtue of thousands of daily reps, your talking muscle is probably a lot stronger than your writing one, so use it.

Even if it is just to a rubber duck.

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**Ben Guttman** is a marketing executive, adjunct faculty at CUNY Baruch College, and the author of *Simply Put: Why Clear Messages Win—and How to Design Them*. More at [benguttman.com](http://benguttman.com).

# E-mazing Club Insights!

Is your club losing members or struggling with attendance? Download *Healthy Clubs* for 11 chapters of proven club revival strategies and real success stories from the *Toastmaster* magazine.



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# Flex Your Voice, Flex Your Career

How Toastmasters helped me build confidence and land opportunities.

By Kareem Rogers

When people hear the word “fitness,” they usually think of physical strength—lifting weights, running laps, pushing limits at the gym. But in my business as The Fit Recruiter, I see fitness as a mindset that applies to more than just your body. I coach jobseekers to strengthen their résumé, sharpen their interview skills, and build the professional muscle needed to reach their career goals.

You can train your voice, your confidence, and your leadership—just like you train your muscles. For me, the gym that helped build those skills was Toastmasters.

After taking a short break in 2019, I rejoined Toastmasters during one of the most uncertain seasons of my life. It was 2020. I had just completed my master’s degree, the world was in lockdown, hiring had frozen, and I was unemployed. I was anxious about my future, but determined to grow.

What started as a way to improve my public speaking turned into one of the most impactful career decisions I’ve ever made. I launched my business after discovering how building a strong career and building a strong body required the same principles: discipline, goal setting, and resilience.

Here’s how you can use Toastmasters to grow your career, flex your voice, and strengthen your personal brand.

## 1. Turn Uncertainty Into Opportunity

Joining Toastmasters while unemployed wasn’t just a way to “stay busy”—it was a way to stay ready. I knew that when opportunity came, I needed to be confident, polished, and prepared to tell my story. The evaluations and speaking opportunities in club meetings sharpened my ability to communicate under pressure—something that came in handy during interviews and networking conversations.

Even now, when I mention Toastmasters on my résumé, in job interviews, or at work, people light up. It signals initiative, professionalism, and a commitment to growth.

## 2. Build a Personal Brand That Resonates

As The Fit Recruiter, I coach clients to treat résumé updates like a progressive workout. I help job seekers build “interview stamina” through mock interviews, just like conditioning for a marathon. And I encourage clients to view their career development as a lifelong journey of growth.

Before Toastmasters, I didn’t have the voice to deliver these ideas powerfully. Toastmasters taught me how to communicate in a way that motivates and empowers others. I learned how to refine how I present my brand. Now I’m able to deliver stories with clarity, emotion, and impact.

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You can train your voice,  
your confidence, and your  
leadership—just like you  
train your muscles.

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## 3. Turn Practice Into Performance

Just like working toward a personal record in the gym, growth in Toastmasters happens through consistency. I didn’t just attend club meetings—I competed. In 2023, I won second place in the District 103 Speech Evaluation Contest and in 2024, I won first place in the District 103 International Speech Contest.



Those successes were the result of practicing speeches, receiving honest feedback, and showing up week after week—even when I was nervous. That same discipline now shows up in my professional life—in interviews, client calls, presentations, and speaking engagements.

## 4. Grow Your Network and Your Confidence

Through Toastmasters, you meet people from all walks of life, each with their own story and strengths. I found mentors, collaborators, and lifelong friends who encouraged me to keep growing. Fellow members reviewed my speeches, offered feedback, and even connected me with opportunities to expand my brand.

Toastmasters also helped build my confidence. Giving prepared speeches taught me how to organize my thoughts under pressure. Table Topics helped me think and respond quickly. Today, that confidence shows up when I facilitate workshops, host live Q&A sessions, and speak to clients and hiring managers with clarity and authority. I no longer second-guess my voice—I trust it to open doors and create opportunities.

Toastmasters is the perfect training ground to lift your voice by practicing real-world communication skills in a supportive space.

So if you’re ready to accelerate your career, develop leadership muscles, and speak with the power your story deserves—Toastmasters is waiting. The mic is yours.

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**Kareem Rogers**, also known as [The Fit Recruiter](#), is a member of the Wrightwood-Ashburn Overcomers (WAO) Toastmasters Club in Chicago, Illinois. He is a career coach, speaker, and HR professional who empowers ambitious professionals to build their “career muscles.”



# Memorize Your Speeches and Avoid Interruptions

Solutions for your questions and queries.

By Bill Brown, DTM

This month we look at a couple of pesky questions that often find their way into every speech.



## How much of my speech should I memorize?

I have been a Toastmaster for 19 years and a member of 13 different clubs. One characteristic of every club, besides too many “um’s” and “ah’s,” is that members hate memorizing their speeches. Is that a problem?

The answer is “that depends.”

If you are competing in a speech contest, you have to memorize it. But if you are scared stiff in a club meeting, don’t worry about memorization.

Additionally, if you are working on your speechwriting skills, focus on that instead of memorizing. Ideally, however, memorization can help your delivery.

What benefits does memorization provide?

First, it frees you up to focus on how you deliver your speech. If you don’t have it memorized, a part of your mind will be thinking about what words should come next. And that will yield a flat delivery. Your audience responds to the emotions you convey in your speech. If you have little emotion, their response will be subdued.

Second, memorization enables you to deal with the inevitable interruptions. See the second question for tips on how to handle this.

Now let’s look at long-form speeches—say, 20 to 60 minutes. That’s too long to memorize a speech.

When speaking about a topic I understand, I know each segment pretty well, so I can mostly speak off the cuff. I do have a note sheet, but it only has the main points on it.

If I’m speaking about a new topic, or there are a number of quotations, I use detailed notes. I do have to be conscious of how well I am connecting with the audience, though. Reading and looking at the audience is not an easy skill.

So, how much should you memorize? Use your best judgment, but keep in mind that the needs of the audience are far more important than your own.

## How do you handle interruptions?

Interruptions during your speeches are about as unavoidable as death and taxes. Expect them.

Many interruptions are minor, such as a cough or sneeze. It is best to ignore most of these. If someone is a constant disruption, you might need to address it, but if you can keep going, do so.

If you are competing in a speech contest, you have no choice but to keep going. One time I was competing at the District level in the International Speech Contest. It was a dinner meeting, and the meal was running late, but they decided to continue with the contest anyway. During the first few minutes of my speech, the servers were handing out dessert. Clanging dishes are not fun. Then in the middle of the speech, a woman decided to blow her nose—loudly! Fortunately, I knew the speech well enough that those distractions did not faze me.

But what if there is a major event like a medical emergency?

I was in a meeting once where paramedics came into the room. The health issue wasn’t critical, so the speaker told the medical team to do what they had to do. And he continued speaking.

On the other hand, I was in a different meeting when an attendee went into cardiac arrest and needed CPR. Chairs were thrown to the side to make room for the procedure. Needless to say, the speech took an intermission.

When you are the speaker, you must decide what to do when something unforeseen happens. Most interruptions are minor. In those instances, it helps if you have most of your speech memorized. That way you can keep going without skipping a beat.

**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).

# 3 Benefits of a Comprehensive Résumé

Develop this document to capture the details of your career.

By Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM

Most people don't remember all they have done and achieved throughout their career. I've seen this demonstrated time and time again in my 25 years of advising individuals from more than 40 different countries on job-search strategies, tactics, and application materials.

I've interviewed people who couldn't remember the details of something they listed on their résumé. While writing a cover letter in my own job search, I've sometimes remembered relevant experience only after I reviewed a past résumé. For these reasons and more, I recommend that you maintain a comprehensive résumé throughout your career.

## Being Comprehensive Counts

A comprehensive résumé can be similar to a curriculum vitae, also known as a CV. In some countries, the terms “résumé” and “curriculum vitae” are used interchangeably. In places where the two are different, a résumé is a more concise document—typically one or two pages. A CV is as long as it needs to be and includes such items as research, teaching, presentations, and publications. CVs are often used in academic, medical, and scientific fields.

A comprehensive résumé—or comprehensive CV—is much more. It's a document that lists *all* of your career-related experience—paid and unpaid—including part-time, consulting, contractor, internship, and volunteer positions. Provide full details of your duties and accomplishments. Many people are reluctant to include unpaid opportunities; however, those experiences can be just as relevant to your career, maybe even more so if you're making a career transition to another industry or applying for a position in which you have volunteer experience. (See the article sidebar for more details on preparing a comprehensive résumé.)

Here are three reasons why you should maintain one:

### 1. It helps you write targeted self-marketing materials.

Self-marketing materials can be cover letters, résumés, CVs, essays, and other job application items. Whatever you're writing, it's important to take the time to customize each item, always tailoring the material to the specific opportunity. This is why documenting lots of individual details about your experiences is so important—you want to have as many options as possible.

When I offer feedback on application materials, I assess the job description first. I note the top skills and experiences sought and the words that are used repeatedly. Then I review the person's materials,

noting if anything emphasized in the job description hasn't been mentioned and needs to be added.

You want to be sure that throughout your materials, you're addressing the major skills and experiences the organization is seeking. If you can do so naturally, mimic some of the language used in the job description and organization's materials to show your experience is aligned.

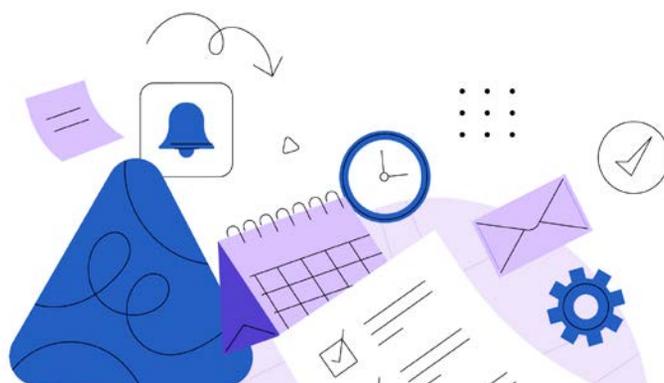
You typically don't have a lot of space to do this, so prioritizing is key. You can review your comprehensive résumé and pick what is best to highlight, including the most relevant entries and details for each application. Having more details to choose from helps you stand out as a strong candidate.

### 2. It helps you prepare for an interview.

When preparing for any interview, don't just revisit the materials you submitted when applying for the job. Reviewing a comprehensive résumé will help you reflect on all of your experience. Taking time to think about your overall background and achievements will serve you well if any unexpected questions arise or the interview delves more deeply into a particular experience than you expected.

You also want to prepare anecdotes highlighting your relevant accomplishments. Have two or three examples of how you've demonstrated each skill and experience noted in the job description. Use your comprehensive résumé as a guide to develop different examples from your career so you're not just depending on one job to make your point. The more experience you can show that aligns with the job opportunity, the stronger case you make about your candidacy.

Reviewing your comprehensive résumé can also help you think about the questions you have for the interviewer. Reflecting on your past experiences will remind you what you need to know to make the most informed decision when evaluating the job opportunity.





# How to Create a Comprehensive Résumé

## 1. List everything career-related.

Provide the title, organization, location, dates (month and year), and description for each entry. Remember to include both paid and unpaid work, and to list your duties and accomplishments. On a comprehensive résumé, everything is documented—it doesn't matter if you worked on something daily or one time. You never know when that one item could highlight a key experience an employer is seeking.

Organize the document with as many categories as needed. In addition to the typical Professional Experience and Education categories, consider other sections, such as Volunteer Experience, Presentations, Publications, Computer or Technical Skills, and Language Skills. If something doesn't fit into a typical category, create an Additional Experience section. I tend to like awards and honors to be integrated into the corresponding entry so a commendation is linked to and highlights the effort. However, not all awards are directly connected to one activity, so you could always create a separate section to list them.

## 2. Add the details.

Each entry should have a full and detailed description. When documenting what you did, use bullet points that start with meaningful active verbs to communicate the skill involved, such as “organize,” “manage,” “coordinate,” and “research.” If you are actively doing such activities, use present-tense verbs. Use past-tense verbs for anything done in the past or any fully completed tasks at a current job.

Then add context and quantify, including for such items as amounts (e.g., budget size, numbers of people), levels of people (e.g., government officials, board members, interdepartmental), how often (e.g., weekly, quarterly), and more. You can also add scope by incorporating such descriptive words as “quantitative and qualitative” and “municipal, national, and international.”

You don't need to be job searching to maintain a comprehensive résumé. It's best to update one regularly, especially after you do something new or achieve a goal. Then you'll be ready—whether it's time for a job search or another opportunity that presents itself, or you need a reminder of all that you've accomplished. If you don't have a comprehensive résumé already, create one today.

—Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM

## 3. It helps you remember what you've accomplished.

A job search can be stressful. It's already challenging if you're unhappy at your current job or unemployed. It's even more difficult if you're not receiving any responses to applications, or you advance to the interview stage for a job you want, but you don't receive an offer.

Looking over your comprehensive résumé during a job search, or even a tough day at work, can boost your confidence. I remember working with a graduate student who expressed concern about finding a job. He doubted himself. We worked on his résumé together and developed a thorough inventory of his experiences and accomplishments. A wave of happiness and confidence washed across his face when he saw he had so much to offer an employer.

---

**Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM**, has more than 25 years of career development and advising experience. She is a member of 5-Star Toastmasters Club in Arlington, Virginia, and AAMC Toastmasters in Washington, D.C., as well as a regular contributor to the *Toastmaster* magazine. Learn more at [jenniferlblank.com](http://jenniferlblank.com).

*Toastmasters International, USA/Hungary/France*  
**Distinguished Toastmaster**, May 2011-Present  
Member, June 1995-Present  
**2021 International Convention Session Designer and Moderator**, August 2021  
**2020 Webinar Series Creator and Moderator**, May 2020  
**District Trainer**, June 2004-June 2009/October 2014-January 2015  
**Club & District Officer**, August 1995-August 1999/October 2002-June 2013/May 2014-June 2015  
**New Club Founder & Mentor**, April 2002-April 2003, May 2014-June 2015

- Selected to conceptualize and lead online international professional development programming
- Present prepared and extemporaneous speeches and evaluations
- Mentor members in public speaking and leadership
- Trained groups of 15-100 district officers
- Oversaw international...

# Debunking the Myth of LAZINESS

You're not slacking, you're just exhausted.

By Olya Amelina

**H**ave you ever called yourself lazy for putting things off? You're not alone—but you're probably wrong. There's a reason behind laziness, and there's also a way to fix that feeling.

We live in a world obsessed with doing. Hustle harder. Hack your productivity. Wear “busy” like a badge of honor. The message is everywhere: Keep going, no matter what. So when you can't bring yourself to act, you don't pause to ask why. Instead, you blame yourself, assuming, *I'm just lazy.*

But what if laziness doesn't exist the way we think it does? What if what we label as laziness is something deeper, more human—and completely solvable?

## The Illusion of Laziness

What does “laziness” look like in real life? Maybe it's scrolling on your phone for an hour instead of tackling that overdue task. Or filling your weekend with productive chores and errands, yet struggling to drag yourself out of bed on Monday morning. Or telling yourself you just need more motivation, even though your mind and body are begging for rest, so you pour another cup of coffee or crack open an energy drink to push through work you've already been putting off for weeks.

You call it laziness. But is that really true?

As a health and performance coach, I've worked with athletes, entrepreneurs, and busy professionals for years. High achievers often label themselves lazy when they're actually battling something else: deep fatigue.

Think back to days when you were running on too little sleep, juggling endless

tasks and decisions. Even a simple chore feels like climbing a mountain. Your brain fogs. Your body resists. You scroll on your phone, pretending to look for inspiration—or just to escape.

That's not laziness. It's your mind and body trying to survive the environment you've created: where you check your phone, your calendar, your messages—but rarely check in with your own energy.

## When Your Battery Is Charged

When you're rested, you feel capable. You see possibilities instead of obstacles.

You've probably noticed it: one night of truly restful sleep, and you wake up sharper and more energetic. Or you put your phone away early, spend the evening with family, or lose yourself in a good novel—and by morning, your mind feels clear again. Even saying yes to dinner with friends or a weekend break can give you the mental distance to solve a problem that stumped you for weeks.

Science backs this up. Research shows that sleep doesn't just restore physical energy—it strengthens memory, sharpens focus, and can even double your chances of finding creative solutions to tough problems. Taking mental breaks and letting your mind wander also boosts insight and helps you connect ideas you'd otherwise miss when you're grinding nonstop.

That's why when your energy level is high, you don't need to force motivation. Challenges excite you instead of scaring you off. Distractions lose their pull.

One client of mine used to call herself lazy because she kept putting off launching

her business while working a demanding corporate job. But when we looked closer, she was surviving on five hours of sleep, running a household, trying to be everything to everyone—and putting herself last. Her days lacked clear structure, true priorities, and genuine recovery. The result? Zero energy left for her biggest goal.

We worked together to make some changes. We clarified what really mattered and set boundaries to protect her sleep and downtime. We rebuilt her schedule around her priorities—not everyone else's.

Within six months, she launched her company, not because she magically found more motivation, but because we built a simple system. We started with proper sleep, added a quiet “morning clarity” routine involving journaling and a coffee while reading a few pages of an inspiring book, and included a relaxing weekly massage to recharge her. On top of that, we set clear priorities and a realistic daily structure to maintain her energy and pace long enough to turn plans into real action.

## How Laziness Really Works

When you feel tired, you push through, telling yourself you just need more motivation. But pushing on empty drains you even faster. Small tasks feel bigger. Guilt creeps in. So you push harder—until you burn out.

This isn't moral weakness. It's how your mind and body protect you when you're overloaded.

Beneath the surface, three silent drains pull you down:

- **Cognitive overload:** too many mental tabs open.

ZZZ...

- **Decision fatigue:** exhausted by hundreds of micro-decisions.
- **Emotional depletion:** constant stress without proper recovery.

The result? You feel lazy, but actually, you're uncharged.

I see this with nearly everyone I coach. We pretend life divides neatly into work and free time, but in reality, daily life is a jumble of chores, texts, kids, errands—all draining the same battery you need for your biggest dreams. Unplanned demands break your perfect plan, leaving you juggling everything and cutting the very habits that refill your energy: sleep, exercise, moments of calm.

One entrepreneur summed it up perfectly. He told me, “I wake up and grab my phone. I lose an hour to messages before I even stand up. All day I react to everyone’s needs—clients, suppliers, family. By night I’m too wiped out to train or plan tomorrow. I scroll, sleep too late, and wake up tired again.”

He didn’t need another push. He needed to recharge.

We started with basics:

- Phone-free mornings and evenings
- A daily 15-minute walk after lunch
- Offline weekends
- A planner (analog or digital) to clear his mind

Within weeks, he laughed, saying, “I get more done by doing less. My best ideas come while walking, not forcing them at my desk.” And having a physical planner allowed him to dump his thoughts in one place, allowing him to think more clearly and feel less stressed.

That’s the paradox: When you slow down wisely, you recover enough to speed up when it counts.

## The Four Pillars of Real Rest

Scrolling your phone or watching TV might feel like rest, but be honest: Do you really feel recharged afterward? Or do you crash into Monday still wishing for one more day to recover?

Your body and mind drain on multiple levels—physical, emotional, and mental—so you need layered recovery to truly refill your tank.

Elite performers—from Fortune 500 founders to Formula 1 drivers—build recovery into their routines because they know peak performance demands full batteries.

They don’t rely on sleep alone. They protect four dimensions of rest:

1. **Relaxation:** Try low-stimulation activities that calm your nervous system—breathwork, a warm shower, soothing music.
2. **Detachment:** Step away from the problem space entirely. Take a walk without headphones. Leave your phone behind. Let your mind wander. Meet a friend.
3. **Mastery:** Do something you enjoy and feel competent at, but unrelated to work or goals. Try a new hobby, learn a language, dance, paint, cook. It’s about learning something new and building fresh neural connections—driven by curiosity and play, not performance.
4. **Control:** Structure your day intentionally. When you know what’s coming next, you cut decision fatigue and daily chaos. Clear routines help your brain feel safe and free up energy for what truly matters.

When you practice all four steps consistently, you don’t just feel better—you perform better. Every time.



## Tips for Finding Energy

Even with all I have learned—having built my own offline business, far outside my comfort zone—I still catch myself working late, skipping workouts, and telling myself I’ll rest once my to-do list is done. But the truth is, the more I push when I’m already drained, the less creative, patient, and effective I become. Rest is what resets my best self.

If you’ve been beating yourself up for being lazy, you’re not alone. Rather than feeling guilty, find clarity as to what is going on. Ask yourself:

- Do I know exactly what to do next?
- Do I have the energy to begin?
- Am I steady enough to handle bumps along the way?

If you answer no to any of these, laziness isn’t your problem. Depletion is. But don’t worry. There are small, simple steps that you can start doing today to regain your energy and motivation. Try adding just one new habit:

- Go to bed 15 minutes earlier.
- Do a short breathing exercise in the morning or read a few pages before going to bed.
- Take a short walk without your phone.
- Sip a cup of tea while watching the world outside.
- Pick up a hobby you’ve always put off—even 10 minutes a day helps.
- Plan tomorrow realistically.
- Plan for tomorrow the night before to reduce anxiety and avoid draining your energy at the start of the day.

Little choices refill your energy. When your battery is full, your motivation returns, your thinking sharpens, and you feel ready for what comes next.

Protect your energy. Recharge on purpose. And watch how quickly your so-called laziness disappears.

**Olya Amelina** is a health and performance coach who helps athletes and business professionals develop daily routines that enable them to take control of their time, maintain high energy levels, and feel good while achieving their big goals. She lives in Germany. Learn more at [LinkedIn](#).

# How to HOOK AUDIENCES From the Start

Capture attention with no-fail starters and conditional concepts.

By Joel Schwartzberg



The start of a speech is a zone of high audience interest and attention. Why? Because the audience is most curious at this early stage, and their minds are open and undistracted by competing information.

The most powerful way to make the most of that opening zone is with a “hook,” a short but attention-grabbing statement, story, or activity that performs two equally important jobs: 1) captures the audience’s interest quickly, and 2) directs their interest toward your main point.

Shera Carter Sackey, Ph.D., a public speaking coach, author, and professor of speech communication at San Jacinto College, in Houston, Texas, emphasizes the importance of valuing audience attention. “To speakers, attention is currency—it’s one of the most valuable things they can receive,” she explains. “Opening hooks grab and keep the audience’s attention, forging an immediate connection between the speaker and their audience.”

But not all hooks have the same impact or appropriateness. Let’s explore which hooks can be applied effectively by all speakers, which should be considered conditionally, and which should be avoided entirely.

## Hooks That Work for Everyone

The good news is that speakers can use a wide range of hooks to excite, inspire, and engage their audiences. Below are three good-for-all-speakers hooks due to their creativity, compellingness, and usefulness in demonstrating points.

### Relevant Stories

Telling a story may be the most effective way to grab the audience’s attention because humans

react more to stories than to exposition, and [narratives are ideal vehicles for exemplifying points](#).

“A personal story is a powerful hook because it creates an instant human connection,” said Joia Jefferson Nuri, public speaking coach, TEDx speaker, and founder of In the Public Eye Coaching. “It fosters trust and keeps your audience engaged because they see themselves in your experiences.”

But an opening story is only as valuable as its ability to illustrate or at least introduce your point, so immediately follow up your stories with lines like “This story illustrates ...”, “This case study shows ...”, and “This experience proves ...”

Example: “When my sister Carla forgot to bring her purse to the grocery store, she thought she’d have to turn around and walk home. But then she realized that everything she needed, including her money, coupons, and loyalty card, was on her phone, thanks to her digital wallet. Her realization demonstrates how useful digital wallets have become.”

### Startling Statements

Startling openings challenge understandings, pose unusual or counterintuitive actions, and make provocative statements that push an audience to think anew.

“You want your audience to be intrigued from the very first sentence,” says Julia Hector Douglas, president of Momenteam, a team and leadership development consultancy. “Captivate





them with something that grabs their attention and makes them want to lean in and hear more.”

Compelling statements often use absolute terms like “best,” “worst,” “biggest,” “smallest,” “everything,” “nothing,” “always,” and “never.”

“A surprising statement or counterintuitive fact shocks your audience into paying attention,” says Nuri. “It disrupts their expectations, piques their curiosity, and compels them to keep listening.”

Example: “*What if I told you everything you’ve been taught about recycling is wrong?*”

### “Imagine a World” Depictions

These statements invite the audience to envision a more ideal reality or future. Visualizing this scenario for your audience can kickstart hope and optimism about your point even before you explain it.

“Imagine a world” hooks should be rosy, not gloomy because you don’t want to depress your audience early. Your primary role is to be the [voice of solutions, not challenges](#).

Example: “*Imagine a world where generative AI was as ubiquitous as the internet, and everybody—even those who hate writing—have the power to communicate clearly and efficiently.*”

### Hooks to Use Conditionally

Some hooks are effective only under certain circumstances or have inherent risks. That doesn’t mean you should avoid them entirely but proceed cautiously.

### Audience Participation

Soliciting audience input is an easy and effective way to engage them quickly and relevantly. But keep in mind that the most effective audience participation hooks are not just fun icebreakers but intriguing activities that plant seeds of interest and inspire early thinking about your point.

Internationally recognized speech and communication expert Laurie Schloff, of The Speech Improvement Company, says one of her favorite interactive hooks is an audience poll, which benefits both the speaker and the audience.

“Conducting a short poll—like asking for a show of hands—can do more than just introduce your topic and engage the audience. It can also relax you and help your audience feel instantly included,” she explains.

You can transition from poll results to your presentation’s point with lines like, “I see most of you believe X, but it might surprise you that Y ...” or “Like most people, you believe X. Let’s explore why that holds true and how we can apply that learning to better ourselves.”

Keep in mind that the audience response you want and expect is not guaranteed. Audiences may vote in a way that contradicts your point or steers the conversation down time-consuming rabbit holes. They may not even respond to your invitation to contribute.

“When you pose a question or invite audience participation, you’re gambling



on their response,” said Nuri. “If they react unexpectedly—whether they have new ideas or no ideas—that can create awkward moments and stall momentum.”

Bottom line: If you involve your audience, avoid open-ended questions and be prepared for any and all responses.

Example: *The speaker holds up a newspaper and says, “Raise your hand if you think newspaper brands will inevitably become obsolete. I see that some of you do and some don’t—and maybe there’s some wishful or nostalgic thinking there. The truth is the final edition of this industry has yet to be printed. Let’s examine the purpose and usefulness of newspapers in modern society, which ones are succeeding and failing, and what newspaper journalism must do to evolve with its integrity intact.”*

### Relevant Jokes

If you don’t have a natural sense of humor, there’s a good chance that telling a joke will come across as inauthentic at best, and off-putting at worst—not an ideal way to start a presentation.

“Jokes can be counterproductive if the joke turns out to be offensive, the timing and



setting are inappropriate, or no one laughs,” says Sackey, the communication professor. “The resulting awkwardness can affect the speaker’s confidence and make an audience anxious.”

Even if you’re naturally funny, remember that a joke is a fleeting piece of entertainment, whereas a story is a lasting and powerful illustration. Unless the joke is sure to inspire chuckles and is significantly connected to your point, opt for a story instead (and use your natural humor skills to make it funny).

### **Video or Audio Recordings**

Starting with media elements can be impactful—but it’s also risky. You’ll probably need to contextualize the clip, which may eat up valuable time. You may also encounter technical or volume issues that can create a shaky start. Lastly, by directing attention away from yourself, you may lose a degree of stage presence and authority that you’ll need to regain.

### **Hooks to Avoid**

Avoid these hooks entirely, even if you see other speakers use them.

### **Your Qualifications**

Opening with your titles and accomplishments only delays your job of expressing your point. In most cases, your bona fides will be established by a program or introducer. If not, the fact that

you were an invited speaker already establishes credibility. Remember: Job number one is selling your point, not your prominence.

### **Cliché and Pointless Hook Prefaces**

Audiences may perceive familiar openings, such as “The dictionary defines ...” and “In today’s world ...” as stale. They will be more energized by original introductions than trite ones, so prioritize clever over cliché.

“Too many speakers distract their audience from their key points by starting with preambles like ‘let me tell you a story,’” says Matt Abrahams, a lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, author of *Think Faster, Talk Smarter*, and 2025 Toastmasters Golden Gavel recipient. “Instead, start your story like the opening scene of an action movie—with movement and drama, not narration and credits.”

### **Famous Quotations**

Starting with quotations—especially old and famous ones—is problematic because you’re effectively outsourcing your role as a speaker to someone else who doesn’t know you or your point.

Imagine starting a speech with this: “Mark Twain once said, ‘the secret of getting ahead is getting started.’”

Your audience is now visualizing Mark Twain, likely admiring his wit and pondering the meaning behind his quote. In other words, you’ve effectively begun your presentation by having your audience think about someone who passed away more than half a century ago and said something more pithy than directly pertinent.

That’s not a wise trade-off, especially with so many other compelling and point-focused options.

### **History Lessons**

Remember the hypothetical speaker who asked the audience to raise their hands about the future of newspapers? One thing he knew not to do was begin with a history lesson. (“The first official printed newspapers appeared in Europe in the 1600s.”) He avoided this because his point is more about the intriguing present and future of newspapers than their well-documented past.

Though history lesson openings may have been popular in primary school English classes, these dull bits of exposition are powerless as hooks. That said, if a very relevant and surprising historical event ties brilliantly into your point, take Abrahams’ advice and tell it like it’s an action movie.



“A great hook makes your audience *feel* something, which makes them want to *do* something.”

—JULIA HECTOR DOUGLAS

***Anything Complicated, Confusing, or Longer Than a Minute***

Because your audience’s attention span is short and you’ve got a lot of content to cover, an extended or complicated hook can easily sabotage your start.

“Long and meandering starts can divert your audience’s attention away from your presentation, and they may never return,” Abrahams warns.

**The Closing Word on Opening Hooks**

Douglas sees the hook as a powerful lever to drive impact from the start. “A great hook makes your audience *feel* something, which makes them want to *do* something,” says the leadership development consultancy president.

A good hook is not about introducing your idea through context but amplifying it through captivation. If your hook is as fresh and relevant as it is riveting, you’ll have your audience’s attention in the palm of your hand when it matters most.

**Joel Schwartzberg** is a presentation coach; executive communication specialist; and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team* and *Get to the Point! Sharpen Your Message and Make Your Words Matter*. Follow him on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/in/joelschwartzberg/).





# Make Friends With Feedback

It takes skill and savvy to benefit from constructive criticism.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.

Early in my career as a university instructor, I organized a national conference at my school. After I put out a call for evaluations of the event, one presenter cornered me at a break in the proceedings to tell me what I had already done wrong. I was so demoralized that, decades later, I still remember what she said, and how I felt.

Whether or not she was right isn't the issue. What stands out to me is that I had asked for feedback when I was in no way ready to accept it. The story is ironic for at least two reasons: First, I had expressly *asked* for constructive criticism. Second, I had placed as first runner-up in our District Evaluation Contest a few years earlier. In other words, I knew how to dish out feedback, but I had no idea how to take it. And I was not alone.

Rob Nash, Ph.D., head of psychological research at the National Institute of Teaching in the United Kingdom, says many people struggle with this process.

"It's clear that receiving and acting on feedback are difficult skills," says Nash in a British Psychological Society publication, "and we recognize people haven't been taught these skills, but we still expect they should be intuitively good at it."

Whether performing onstage, working in an office, maintaining a personal relationship, or speaking at Toastmasters meetings, we are all subject to evaluation of one type or another. And that's usually a good thing. Useful feedback can motivate, enhance skills, and promote personal and professional growth. Useless feedback, on the other hand, might start with a poor evaluator—or it simply might be potentially useful feedback that has landed on unprepared ears.

## How to Accept Feedback

According to "Evaluation and Feedback," a Level 1 Pathways project, the key to accepting feedback is to be thoughtful, engaged, positive, and open. Here are other strategies for boosting this all-important skill:

- 1. Ask for feedback only when you are ready for it.** Granted, if we are in school, or if we are up for our annual review at work, we may not be able to schedule the most convenient time for an evaluation. The same goes for Toastmasters meetings. That said, you don't have to read written evaluations during, or even directly after, the meeting at which you presented. And if you know in advance when an evaluation is going to take place, you can at least prepare yourself for it by reframing.
- 2. Reframe.** Many of us think of feedback as criticism, which is derived from the Greek word for "judgment." Judgment, as we know, can have negative connotations. But if we think of feedback as "analysis"—from the word meaning to break things down into simple components—we may be able to neutralize the experience and accept it more openly.
- 3. Evaluate the evaluator.** Effective receivers of feedback employ good critical thinking skills. In advance of your evaluation, you might ask yourself questions like: *Is this evaluator someone who has more experience or expertise than I do? Is this someone whose opinion I generally respect and trust? Does this person have all the facts?* For example,

[peer evaluation](#) is at the very heart of Toastmasters. That's a wonderful thing, as long as you recognize that everyone is learning just like you.

Whether performing onstage, working in an office, maintaining a personal relationship, or speaking at Toastmasters meetings, we are all subject to evaluation of one type or another.

Lynne Zander, DTM, knows a thing or two about poor evaluations.

"When I first joined Toastmasters in 2004, I presented a speech where I was doing a one-act play," says Zander, a member of two clubs in Ontario, Canada. "One of the objectives was to not make eye contact with the audience, since I was presenting like I was onstage."

Afterward, a veteran member criticized Zander for not having made eye contact with the audience. "He obviously hadn't read the speech project evaluation or listened to the introduction," she explains. "I was very embarrassed and hurt, especially since I was a new Toastmaster and had worked so hard on following the objectives."



**4. Determine what you need.** According to the Pathways project, valuable feedback can hinge on the speaker telling their evaluator what specific skills they wish the evaluator to focus on. You might even consider having that area of focus mentioned in your speaker introduction as well. For the conference I created, I simply wanted to know if people enjoyed the speakers and what, if anything, they had learned from them.

**5. Prepare.** This includes both evaluating yourself and opening your mind and heart to listen. In theory, at least, your evaluator has your and the organization's—or relationship's—best interests in mind. Does your significant other need to talk? Hear them out without interrupting or allowing yourself to feel defensive. Open your mind to the possibility that they may be right even when the comments they make may not always feel good.

Incidentally, says Florida-based licensed mental health counselor Bobbi Newman, some people need to open their minds to compliments as well as to negative feedback.

“We tend to be more judgmental about our work than anyone else would be,” explains the former Toastmaster. “There’s an ‘I’m not good enough’ attitude that can push away anything that conflicts with that belief. It’s important to remember that Toastmasters is a playground to learn to breathe in all the support and friendship offered.”

The issue can also be cultural. According to a 2024 article on the BBC website, one study showed that as many as 94% of Nigerian English speakers were able to accept compliments, compared to 88% of South Africans, 66% of Americans, and just 61% of New Zealanders.

**6. Take in the information you receive, then sit with it before reacting.** You may feel ready to argue about points that feel unfair, but keep in mind that evaluators have had the opportunity to prepare their remarks, while those who are evaluated are hearing them for the first time. You don’t want to say anything you may later regret—or miss the chance to say something important.



“Sometimes I don’t agree with the evaluator, and I will talk to them about it. It becomes another learning point.”

—TIM KNIGHTS, DTM

**7. When you’re ready, it’s fine to discuss the evaluation.** “Sometimes I don’t agree with the evaluator, and I will talk to them about it,” says longtime Toastmaster and Past Division Governor Tim Knights, DTM, from the Florida Toastmasters Club in Johannesburg, South Africa. “It becomes another learning point. There’s almost always a good point to be made on either side.”

**8. Thank the evaluator.** The “Evaluation and Feedback” project reminds us to treat the evaluator with respect and courtesy. After all, feedback is, as Newman puts it, a “growth gift.”

**9. Ask for another opinion if necessary.** We do this with doctors, so why not evaluators? After all, unlike, say, hard data, much of what is evaluated is open to interpretation, taste, and perspective.

**10. Re-engage.** If appropriate, don’t let the conversation end when the feedback does. Pathways suggests making a list of areas for improvement. Then, suggests Newman, check in with the evaluator, especially if it’s a Toastmaster, boss, or significant other. Measure and note your progress in reaching your goals.

Finally, remember that you have the power to take from the analysis only that feedback that works for you—and helps you reach your full potential. After all, another ancient meaning of “analysis” is to set free.

**Caren Schnur Neile, PhD.,** gives and receives feedback in Boca Raton, Florida. Visit her at [careneile.com](http://careneile.com) or write her at [cneile@fau.edu](mailto:cneile@fau.edu).

# Meet the Winners of the **2025** World Championship of Public Speaking

Humor and happiness take center stage at the convention event.

Attendees at the Toastmasters 2025 International Convention, held in August in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were encouraged to “Envision Y(our) Next Move” and focus on the future, for themselves and the organization.

If the World Championship of Public Speaking® is any indication, the future looks very enjoyable indeed. The top three winners all wove humor and laughter into their speeches, winning over the audience and the judges.

The event is the final stage of the International Speech Contest, which begins with competitions in clubs around the world. Winners advance through the Area, Division, District, quarterfinal, and semifinal contests.

## Sabyasachi Sengupta

By Laura Amann

From the moment he stepped from behind the curtains, knelt down, and literally kissed the stage, Sabyasachi Sengupta had the audience captivated. The 2025 World Champion of Public Speaking kept a sparkle in his eye and a lightness on his feet while delivering his humorous speech “[Just Nod.](#)”

He wove together lively stories as he took the audience on his journey, starting with his desire to be a Bollywood performer, to his career in finance, to his realization that he could still “be a performer even in a boardroom.”



He peppered his points with humorous asides, ambiguous nods of his head, and expressive eye gazes.

Sengupta, a member of Fusion Toastmasters Amsterdam in the Netherlands, who goes by Saby, clearly had fun onstage.

## Dream of Winning

Much like all contestants in any type of contest, Sengupta has long dreamed of being the winner. However, in his case, he's also lived it many, many times before actually living it, albeit in his mind.

He explains that he regularly and frequently manifested being on the World Championship stage, imagining those seven-and-a-half minutes, envisioning himself giving a great speech, making people laugh, and leaving them feeling happier and lighter than when they walked into the room.

"It's something I've always visualized—what I'll say, what I'll do. I have choreographed this moment in my mind so many times over the last decade. But the real experience is 10 million times better," he laughs.

He admits that even up to the moment he went onstage, he was still forgetting things as he went over his speech in his head. But as soon as he finished, he knew he had delivered the best version he could.

After his win, even while the excitement still swirled around him, Sengupta remained humble about the journey and realistic about his new title of World Champion.

"I'm very, very grateful," he says. "But this whole time I also have been really trying to have a sense of detachment. I try to attach to things that are in my control—my speech, my performance, my energy—and detach from anything that's out of my control: the outcome, how the audience might react.

"And so I'm extremely happy, but if I'm brutally honest, I'm also detached, because winning is great, but my role was to give my best performance."

This perspective derives from a favorite quote of his, inspired by the Bhagavad Gita: "You are nothing more than a small molecule in this big universe. So you do your role. You do what you can do. You do your action to the best of your ability. And that's all in your hand, all in your control."

## Journey to the Stage

Sengupta's journey to the 2025 World Championship stage almost didn't happen. In fact, he didn't plan on competing this year at all. Two days before the club contest, he had just returned home after months of being away. Unbeknownst to him, the Vice President Education had signed him up to be a contestant that Wednesday.

So he adapted a speech he had previously given and came in second, which was enough to get him to the Area contest. He worked a little harder on that speech, and won. But at the Division contest, he started having coughing attacks, and wasn't sure if he could compete at all. Somehow, he pulled it together and managed to speak for seven minutes with no coughs, and the road to the Philadelphia stage continued.

Sengupta joined Toastmasters in 2011, shortly after moving to the Netherlands, as a way to meet people. He held a few club officer roles before entering his first club contest in 2014. He knew right away that was where he needed to be.

He credits his older brother, Somaditya, with cultivating his success in speaking and onstage. Sengupta describes himself as a small, skinny kid who was often bullied. His brother saw something in him, and pushed him to participate in debates and deliver elocution speeches, starting as early as 9 or 10 years old. Even joining Toastmasters was his brother's idea.

"He saw a winner in me when nobody in the world did. Without my brother pushing me from childhood to understand my strengths and believing those strengths, I would never have come this far in my life," he reflects.

## Preparing the Speech

Sengupta knew that delivering a humorous speech on the World Championship stage might be risky, noting that most speakers bring a seriousness to their message, and humorous speeches often aren't recognized at the same



level. And he tried writing a few of those speeches, but ultimately he realized he was trying to be somebody else.

So he leaned into his strength. "Humor is one way I can convey, connect, and even inspire an audience," says Sengupta, who also gave a humorous speech in the semifinals.

"Why kill someone with a sword when you can win them over with a smile?" he adds. "I always follow that thought."

His sense of humor was obvious before he even spoke a word. His opening kiss to the stage brought a big laugh and propelled him forward. He wanted to acknowledge the love of standing on a stage, whatever the size, something that Toastmasters would understand.

That kiss, however, was a last-minute addition, and a way of flipping the traditional speech opener of starting on a personal note.

It was one of many small adjustments that he made after becoming wracked by a bad case of self-doubt two weeks prior to the World Championship. He was suddenly feeling unsure about his semifinals speech and questioning parts of it. Fortunately, timely support came from his coaches and mentors, Aditya Maheswaran, DTM, of London, England, and John Zimmer of Geneva, Switzerland, both of whom offered more tips and encouragement.

"Nobody can win a speech contest without asking for help from someone," Sengupta notes. "It takes a lot to learn to go to a mentor and ask for help; it's a very beautiful and humbling experience."

In the end, he decided to trust that he would deliver his best performance when the pressure was the highest.

“I just love the competition, the pressure, the preparation of contests,” Sengupta says. “It forces you to write a good speech. It forces you to think creatively. It teaches you humility, creativity, resilience, and also how to handle stress.”

### Next Steps

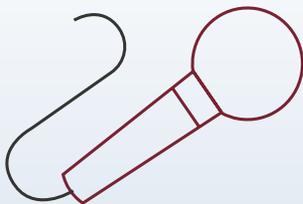
Since his win, life has been a whirlwind of celebrations and opportunities he never dreamed of. While he has been soaking in his new reality of being a World Champion, Sengupta has also been busy in his career.

True to his speech’s message, he is finding ways to meld his presentation style with his professional life. He’s transitioning out of his career in finance, and building his own company—one that will focus on change management and team development, not through training sessions and lectures but through public speaking, improv theater, doodling, Legos. The company’s motto, Method in Madness, alludes to his belief that whoever has the most fun, always wins. “We can make people change, change behaviors, understand cultures,” he explains, “but we can do it in a fun way.

“I’m trying to bring my own little style, my little razzle dazzle, to the corporate world.”

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**Laura Amann** is managing editor of the *Toastmaster magazine*.



## Mas Mahathir Bin Mohamad

By Laura Mishkind

If you think you’ve seen Mas Mahathir Bin Mohamad on the World Championship stage before, you’d be right. His signature maroon suit and bowtie appeared in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2022, when he won third place in the World Championship of Public Speaking. This year in Philadelphia, he advanced to runner-up.

Mahathir got his start with Toastmasters officially in 2016 and is currently a member of MII Toastmasters Club in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He began competing in speech contests in 2017 and has advanced to the International Speech Contest semifinals four times.

He was first introduced to Toastmasters as a child. In Malaysia, his parents were (and still are) members, so public speaking practice runs in the family. Mahathir says it is nice to see how proud they are of him, and life lessons from his mother often inspire his speeches.

His 2025 speech, “... Raindrops,” tells the story of Mahathir’s time tutoring a boy at an orphanage at his mother’s urging. The two have a rocky start, but after a reminder from Mom that the student doesn’t have the parental support Mahathir benefits from, the relationship shifts. Mahathir discovers the impact showing kindness to others can have.

“Looking at the world that we live in today, we witness so much hopelessness, loneliness, violence, and the list goes on,” he says, explaining why the topic is so important to him. “I wanted to share this speech on the world stage because I believe we can make

this world a kinder place for everyone, and it starts with us, it starts with one action, no matter how small.”

Mahathir’s tale of kindness was accompanied by hand gestures, body language, and snapping. The periods in his speech title were introduced as three snaps. Think “snap, snap, snap, raindrops.” The snaps played a role in the speech itself and served as a reminder to the audience how one small drop can have a ripple effect.

Asked about the decision to use a sound effect in his title, the second-place winner says being on the world stage allows for the opportunity to try something new. “I had doubts prior to finalizing this title too, but I decided to take the risk and see how it goes, and I’m really glad the Contest Chair Stefano [McGhee] was able to snap so well—better than I could!”

This choice was a self-implemented challenge for growth. Mahathir explains that in 2022, he didn’t expect to place third, but this year, he actively challenged





himself to give it his all to see how far he could go. After learning he had qualified for the quarterfinals, he practiced his speech at more than 30 clubs around the world (in person in Malaysia and online in other countries) in just 30 days. “All of [the members] were kind, encouraging, and supportive to share their feedback,” he says.

The support continued in Philadelphia. “Before and after the contest, you would not believe how many people came up to us speakers just to share encouragement, kind words, affirmations. All of us semifinalists and finalists got so much love from everyone!” And the semifinalists became great friends too. Mahathir says sharing the stage with this group will be a key memory.

With this support and fond memories in mind, Mahathir is eager for future contest seasons. “I will compete as often as I can because I have two goals that continue to fuel me,” he explains. “One, to be the first Malaysian World Champion, to make not only my family proud, but also my country. Two, to keep growing and improving myself. Because I believe that the growth I get from competing definitely shapes me into a better storyteller, but an even better human being.”

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**Laura Mishkind** is associate editor of the Toastmaster magazine.

## Allen Ang Boon Kiat, DTM

By Paul Sterman

He may not have become a basketball superstar like Allen Iverson, as he had once dreamed, but Allen Ang Boon Kiat, DTM, emerged a winner in Philadelphia nonetheless.

The communication coach and financial planner, from Seria, Brunei, scored a third-place finish at the 2025 World Championship of Public Speaking. His speech, titled “[Keep Dreaming](#),” explored how his life goals and perceptions of success changed over time.

As a teenager, he told the audience, he loved basketball and idolized Iverson, who played for the Philadelphia 76ers in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Ang, miming flashy basketball moves in his speech, even changed his first name to “Allen.” He vowed that one day he would be an NBA player—never mind that he was 5 feet, 5 inches—and represent Brunei on a global platform.

It may not have happened the way he planned, but more than 25 years later, trading basketball for public speaking, the Bruneian flourished in Philly.

When he was announced as the third-place winner, “the moment felt surreal,” Ang recalls.

“For me, it was closure to a childhood dream—representing my country on the world stage.”

A Toastmaster for 12 years, Ang is a past District 87 Director and a member of the Brunei Advanced Speakers club. In his final-round speech, he mixed playful humor with poignant observations as he reflected on life changes. As a young man, once his basketball fantasy faded, Ang established a new plan: to be financially independent and retire by 40. But reality interceded. He married, had two children, and experienced both ups and downs professionally, including losing two businesses during the pandemic. At 37, retirement looked a long way off.

At one point, beset by self-doubt, he asked his wife, Fen, if she was proud of him. Speaking softly in his speech, Ang shared how her loving words in that moment altered his perspective. Success, he realized, is not always measured by splashy achievements, but rather, by “the quieter dreams, the smaller dreams that have already come true”: being a good husband, a good father, a positive role model. And, as Fen pointedly reminded him, he had scored big by having “the most amazing and brilliant, intelligent woman as your wife.”

Indeed, Ang says his wife, who was in attendance at the championship, served as an excellent sounding board throughout his contest journey. “Her moral support and reassurance carried me through the last few months,” he says. His children, Angela, and Anson, too, were an inspiration.

In addition, his Toastmasters club was a great source of support.

“They made sure I had the personal space I needed without overwhelming me,” Ang says. “Before the finals, one member and close friend, Aziman, gave me the best reminder of all: *Have fun.*”

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**Paul Sterman** is senior editor, executive and editorial content, for Toastmasters International.

# Club Meeting Roles: Starring You

Answer your club's next casting call to take on a speaking or functionary role.

By Kate McClare, DTM



If a Toastmasters meeting were a Broadway show, the prepared speakers might be the stars of the show. But for their performances to truly shine, they would need the help of the supporting cast. In this case, the supporting actors are those in a functionary role.

Whether you're a new member who only wants a small part or you're ready to stand in a bigger spotlight, here's how you can help make every meeting a hit and leave the audience wanting more.

## Act 1: Exposition

In many clubs, the Toastmaster of the Day opens by explaining how the meeting is organized and introducing the different meeting roles.

### Toastmaster of the Day



The Toastmaster is the director and host, primarily responsible for managing an efficient meeting—they introduce

roles, facilitate the transitions between speakers, and make sure the meeting runs on time. This is not an easy role; you need to make sure all assigned positions are covered and arrive early to the meeting so you can help set up.

Taking on this role is an opportunity for you to polish your speaking style and work on organization and time management skills. Since the role sometimes requires quick problem solving—for example, if none of the prepared speakers show up—the Toastmaster of the Day needs to make sure they understand each element of the agenda.

For Ana Yudha of Malang Toastmasters Club in Malang, East Java, Indonesia, the role helps her polish her English-speaking skills. She was even asked to be the English-speaking emcee for an event at the school where she teaches.

“The more often I serve as Toastmaster of the Day, the more progress I feel in my English,” she says. “In the beginning, I used to rely heavily on a script. But now, after four years of actively being in Toastmasters, I can confidently say that I no longer rely as much on my script as I used to. It has really boosted my confidence—not only when hosting in English but also in my native language, Indonesian.”

## Act 2: The Heroes Rise

Like in any performance, the headliners have a significant role in the show. In this case, Table Topics® and prepared speeches are the main events.

### Table Topicsmaster



In this role, you come up with the Table Topics questions and call upon members to speak.

Members sometimes joke that the best thing about being the Topicsmaster is you don't have to worry about being called on. That might be, but the role is an excellent opportunity to exercise creativity and get to know your fellow club members.

Take the traditional approach and ask provocative questions or have some fun: Ask participants to finish a story you start, have them pick questions from a hat, divide participants into teams and make it a game. Anything that engages participants will work.

When preparing your questions, keep a couple of things in mind. First, make the questions short and simple. Long, clever setups cut into the participants' time. Second, don't throw out obscure questions to trick or embarrass the speaker. There's nothing fun about that.

By helping members learn to organize and express their thoughts, within a short amount of time and in an impromptu setting, taking on this role can also help you improve your own time management and facilitation skills.

Every function you perform plays a part in the success of the meeting and everyone in it, including you.

### Prepared Speakers



The leading roles for every meeting are the prepared speakers. In this role, you have (ideally) spent time preparing and rehearsing your speech, have the longest speaking time in the meeting—typically at least four or five minutes—and draw on your skills to hopefully engage and enlighten the audience. No matter the level of the presenter, audience members are bound to learn something from every speech, both about the topic and what is done well and not so well by speakers.

Unless you're giving an impromptu speech, show respect to your audience by rehearsing a few times before the meeting. Arrive with your speaker introduction already written; don't plan to scribble it a few minutes before you're called to the stage. Write one that interests the audience and tells them why they should listen to you.

Part of your role as a speaker is also to listen attentively to your evaluator's comments when that time comes. Processing feedback is an important skill itself.

### Act 3: Resolution

Here's where all the roles come together to round out a successful performance.

### General Evaluator



The General Evaluator manages the evaluation team, which consists of the speech evaluators, Ah-Counter, grammarian, and timer.

As the General Evaluator, you introduce the people in those roles, asking them to deliver their respective meeting reports. You are also responsible for reviewing everything that happens, or doesn't happen, during the meeting. For example, did the meeting start on time? Were all roles filled before the Sergeant at Arms banged the gavel? Did everyone perform their roles as directed?

By leading the evaluation team and giving a short but comprehensive speech—prepared in the course of the meeting itself—you can improve your critical thinking, organization, time management, and motivational skills. You also need to understand each of the roles in case an assigned evaluator cancels at the last minute and you have to take on an additional role.

Hold everyone to Toastmasters' standards but be constructive and try to end on a positive note.

### Evaluators



Prepared speakers are what fill the meeting seats, but a well-delivered evaluation is what keeps the speakers coming back to continue

learning and growing.

Each evaluator is assigned to a speaker, providing verbal and written feedback on their presentation. In Toastmasters, evaluations are intended to be positive, but they should always be constructive and include areas for improvement. In addition, your evaluation should be expressed as your opinion alone. General Evaluators should follow these same rules when it comes to meeting evaluation.

Evaluations improve active listening, critical thinking, and positive feedback skills. Stephen Harper, a member of Dublin South Toastmasters in Ireland, says delivering evaluations has made him a better speaker.

"When we evaluate others, we learn a lot about our own public speaking," says Harper. "Having to pay close attention to another speech and then write a short evaluation speech during the meeting was quite a learning curve. At first, I tried to write as many notes as possible, but with experience I've relied more on paying attention, writing minimal notes, and being more impromptu. This has improved my focus and ability to be more natural and conversational in my public speaking.

"Don't worry if you think your evaluation is 'wrong,'" he adds. "All points of view are valuable."

### Ah-Counter



The Ah-Counter helps fellow members improve their language skills by noting overused or filler words—*and*, *well*, *but*, *so*, *you know*—and

sounds like *ah*, *um*, and *er*. By taking on this role and listening attentively for filler words, you can improve your listening skills and catch your own use of crutch words.

Should you ring a bell or other audible device when you hear a target word or sound? Some find it embarrassing and discouraging to be called out so audibly, and it can feel unkind when you're the one hitting the buzzer. Other members like the "tough love" and view it as an effective deterrent. Let your club decide.

For positive reinforcement, try awarding the "No-Bell Prize" to anyone who doesn't use a filler word when speaking.

### Grammarian



The grammarian plays a crucial role in helping club members enhance their grammar and vocabulary. In this position, you point out

speakers' engaging, as well as ineffective, uses of language. You also choose the Word of the Day and listen for members using it.

People can be hesitant to take this role on; they may have bad childhood memories of struggling in grammar class. But pointing out technical errors is the least of it. Michele Weneck of AstraZeneca Toastmasters Delaware decided to stop focusing on words alone and started listening for the message they conveyed.

"I challenged myself to listen more attentively to the content and noticed outstanding phrases, excellent vocabulary usage, and distinct communication styles," she explains. "This enabled me to provide more comprehensive grammarian role reports and similarly improved my speech evaluations. For example, in a recent

meeting, I concentrated solely on the speaker's message without distractions. I was able to provide detailed feedback on their use of figurative language and speech structure."

When she serves in the role, Weneck says, "I ask myself whether I understood the intent of the message, whether my observations include more than just grammatical errors, and, most importantly, whether I can mentor the speaker in a way that provides value."

### Timer



Helping speakers present within a project's required length is the one job in which listening skills can hurt more than help. Many people in this role have been so enthralled by a speech that they forget to watch the clock and literally lose track of time. This is a problem that can be overlooked in a club meeting, but in a contest it's a deciding factor in whether someone advances to the next level.

Timing a speech is more complicated than it may seem. The job involves using a timing device and indicating with cards or lights when the speaker has passed each timed interval of their presentation. The length of a speech can vary depending on the type of speech, and you need to make sure you're timing accurately.

Before the meeting starts, confirm timing sequences with the speakers or Toastmaster of the Day. And keep your eye on the timing device!

### No Small Roles

To tweak a famous show business saying: There are no small meeting roles—only small imaginations. Every function you perform plays a part in the success of the meeting and everyone in it, including you.

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**Kate McClare, DTM**, is a professional writer and editor who joined Toastmasters in 2011. She is a member of Miami Advanced Toastmasters Club in Kendall, Florida, and an Area Director for District 47, Southeast Florida and The Bahamas.



Visit this  
[club meeting roles](#)  
resource to learn more  
about how each role  
builds real-world skills.



## A Big Win

Whether you're running or speaking, stepping forward is key.

By Paul Sterman

It might seem like a stretch, but Toastmasters and running share a lot of common ground. The road to the lectern and to the finish line—both paved with challenges and rewards—cover a similar path.

First, a step back. This summer I set a goal: to run a 5-kilometer (3.1-mile) race. I signed up for a local event, ramped up my exercise routines, then set out on a Sunday morning in early August with about 2,500 other race entrants.

At the end of the run ... victory! Well, not literally—doves of people whizzed past me during the race, including pint-sized youngsters who weren't even breathing hard (the insolence!)—but victory nonetheless. I crossed the finish line. I accomplished my goal.

I also felt part of a bigger scene. We all persevered on the run, volunteers offered water and encouragement along the way, and finishers celebrated together, handing out high fives with abandon. Many went back to cheer on the participants who were still on the course, pushing toward the finish, some running, some walking.

A few minutes after I completed the run, an 89-year-old man crossed the finish line. It never fails to inspire me—and give me hope—to see what people can accomplish at an advanced age. This makes me think of two people I wrote about for the magazine earlier this year: [Walter McHugh](#) and [Jose Petrick](#). Walter is 100, Jose 101, and both are still showing up for their Toastmasters club meetings, he in California and she in Australia.



## Sharing the Road

All of us at the 5K, from fastest to slowest, had a common purpose: make it to the end. Toastmasters, too, share a common goal: to improve our communication and leadership skills. We learn, have fun, and make friends on the journey.

All of us at the 5K,  
from fastest to slowest,  
had a common purpose:  
make it to the end.

And, like participants in a local race, Toastmasters pull for each other. We cheer each other on—to and from the lectern—offer tips and support, and celebrate our wins together.

We also learn to take it one step at a time when things get tough. About two-thirds of the way through that summer race, I had to do a quick mental reset. My mind said, *I have to keep running*. My body said, *I don't want to*. A compromise was reached. *Just keep running for a little longer and then we'll talk*.

By the time I was ready to revisit the matter, the road ahead seemed more manageable.

I go through a similar mental process when I sign up to give a speech. Typically, a few days before the club meeting, the internal voice starts up. *This speech isn't good. I don't like what I've written. Should I cancel?*

Then the counterargument: *Hold on. One step at a time. Practice it again tomorrow and see how you feel*.

Inevitably I give the speech—and it always feels great when I finish. *I accomplished my goal*.

Can you relate? Are there times where you feel daunted by the thought of completing all the Pathways projects needed to finish a path? Or of serving as an officer for the term? Or giving a speech next week?

Don't get ahead of yourself. Focus on the first step. Put one foot in front of the other, and keep moving toward the finish line.

**Paul Sterman** is senior editor, executive and editorial content, for *Toastmasters International*. Reach him at [psterman@toastmasters.org](mailto:psterman@toastmasters.org).



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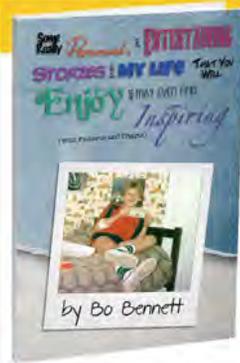
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## CLIENT SPOTLIGHT - BO BENNETT, DTM



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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