



Impromptu Speaking

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About the Tutorial

Impromptu speaking is a mode of speech, generally modelled around a speech and debate event, where participants get a time-frame of eight minutes to deliver a speech on a given topic, with a characteristically short time of preparation, ranging between one and three minutes.

Primarily started as a technique to evaluate an individual's aptitude, it has since then moved on to be applied in day-to-day conversations, social meetings, official conferences, formal gatherings, etc.

The tutorial aims to train the learners the tips and techniques of speaking impromptu on stage. The strategies help the speaker to generate ideas in an extremely small frame of time and articulate the ideas well before an audience.

Audience

This tutorial is designed to help working professionals get a better understanding of the importance of holding their own in any conversation, by bringing up relevant and interesting content into the discussion in a prompt manner.

Impromptu speaking and public speaking are vital for survival in the corporate sector, public sector, and in several other professions.

Prerequisites

There is no prerequisite for this tutorial. The learner must be passionate about public speaking. However, there is no barrier of language or ethnicity for this tutorial.

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1. IMPROMPTU SPEAKING - INTRODUCTION

An impromptu speech, by definition, is the one that a speaker delivers without any prior preparation on the topic. Impromptu, itself, means “doing something without preparation”.

In declamation contests, a random topic is fired at the speaker on the spot, and the speaker gets just a few seconds to think over the topic. In the span of these few seconds, the speaker is expected to come up with relevant content to speak on the topic, for a specified duration. In group discussions too, speakers are given a topic to discuss and are required to come up with their content at the spur of the moment. In debates, the speech is often regulated by the arguments of the opponent.

Such speeches, where the speaker has to be on his/her toes at all times while responding quickly to a topic, is called “**Impromptu Speech**”. The interviews of politicians, the US presidential debate, or even the panel discussions of TV channels are all examples of impromptu speaking. Interestingly, personal interviews also need thinking at the spur of the moment, yet we generally don’t place it under the realm of impromptu speech. The reason behind this is the questions in interviews are more or less focused around the resume of the candidate, who gets a lot of time to prepare the answers of these expected questions beforehand.

In 2008, National Forensics Association (NFA) in USA introduced to the world a new form of impromptu speaking for competitions; they called it the “**Editorial Impromptu**”. A short editorial, consisting of around 3-5 paragraphs, is provided to the speakers who are required to read and develop their opinion on it in nine minutes, followed by five minutes of speaking. Limited number of notes is allowed to the speakers for reference purpose.

Impromptu speaking has become a norm in today’s world and is used in many instances for selection into B-schools and for job placements. It’s become highly important for people to master impromptu speaking to climb the rungs of the corporate ladder.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF IMPROMPTU SPEAKING

Speech is one of the fundamental qualities of human beings. Without speech, language would not have evolved, just as without different languages, different cultures would not have risen and perhaps, the human civilization would have never got its shape. **Communicating is as integral a part** of our lives, as is breathing, eating food and sleeping. Not a day generally passes without us speaking to our friends, family, and colleagues. If we come across such a day, we feel isolated.

But how many times in our daily life, do we actually think whether our words have any significance? In other words, how many times do we recollect what we said to the other person, and try to assess whether our words really added any value to the listener? Or how many times do we think we have made an impact on the listener through our words?

These thoughts don't cross our mind very often, but when they do, we find ourselves unable to get our speech right. This assumes a bigger problem when we join the corporate circle and are asked to speak impromptu. We don't get ideas on a topic and **fail to make a good impression** on others.



Myths of Impromptu Speaking

Impromptu speaking, as a challenge, is not limited only to the academically-backward. On the contrary, it has been found that majority of the literate population are found wanting in this area.

Given a topic, we find ourselves with no option other than to stare at the roof, indicating that we are thinking of the topic when the truth is that our mind is devoid of any idea at that moment whatsoever.

Declamation contests, debates, and group discussions are some situations where we fail to come up with instant ideas on a topic. Due to this issue, most of us fail to make a mark on the panelists and hence, our chances of getting selected to a B-school or landing a job of our choice becomes difficult. Even though we are equipped with adequate technical knowledge, we fail to grab the opportunity because during the group discussion, debate or declamation contests, we fail to put appropriate words to our thoughts in short notice.

Speaking in Front of an Audience

What was the last time you had gone up to the podium to speak on a topic and you suffered from a choked throat, sweating forehead, and palpitating heart? If you have suffered this at least once in the last few months, then you need to know that it is not rare for even veteran speakers to face a black-out, when they are asked to speak impromptu on a topic for mere 2 minutes.

Identifying Areas of Improvement

Someone who uses too many slogans and catchy statements is not certainly a good speaker. If the audience has nothing – like a word, a phrase or personal quote – to remember at the end of the speech, then the speaker has failed. Hence, it is imperative that a speaker allows the audience **to return with some takeaway** from the speech. If that happens, then the speech – irrespective of the vocabulary, idioms, and proverbs – will be successful.

To help a person speak, we encourage him or her to speak in front of a crowd and shed their glossophobia. That, indeed, helps them to get rid of their stage-fright. But dropping this fear is not enough to make someone a great speaker. A speaker may have style, elegance and panache with delivery, but if the content is weak, then the audience won't have any key takeaway. If your listeners don't have anything to take back from your speech, then your minutes of speech have been futile. Hence, the content of your speech is really vital and has to be of good quality.

3. GENERAL CONVERSATIONS

The topics that generally appear in group discussions, interviews, declamation contests, and panel discussions are most-often related to current affairs, social issues, or topics of global concern. However, of late, it has also been observed that the topics in essay-writing contests and article-writing rounds of B-schools' selection process are centered on abstract topics that set free the imagination of the applicants.

In one of the XAT exams, the entrance exam conducted by the premier institute, Xavier Labor Relations Institute, the topic of essay revolved around Beauty. In 1996, the topic of essay round in XAT was "**There Is No Right Way of Doing a Wrong Thing**". In such cases, the writer is free to imagine situations, come up with ideas from diverse spheres of life, and be creative with the subject matter.

The Non-abstract Topic Dilemma

While abstract topics are a favorite for recruiters who are interviewing candidates for operations-related jobs, panelists recruiting for managerial positions tend to stress on non-abstract, serious topics. The topics generally revolve around social, environmental, political issues, in which the candidate is expected to back up his statements with facts and figures. The discussion doesn't have much scope for creative thoughts, unless of course it's a hypothetical scenario.

In group discussions, it is normally observed that topics are a mix and match of serious and abstract topics. The speakers can be given any topic and the conclusion always does not matter. However, in business discussions, the aim is to **always reach a conclusion**.



Addressing the Issue

To cover these two areas, we will bifurcate our discussion and this tutorial will first touch upon the preparation for serious or non-abstract topics. The other half will be devoted to abstract topics. Please note that the techniques for abstract topics and non-abstract topics are sometimes interchangeable. There is **no hard and fast rule** to adhere to a single technique for each of the two different types of topics. The task at hand is to generate ideas and to stand out of the crowd when faced with a topic.

It is important to note that there can be many other classifications of topics as well. However, for the sake of simplicity and for covering all types of topics under minimum number of umbrellas, we will discuss only two types of topics – viz. non-abstract and abstract.

4. NON-ABSTRACT CONVERSATION

The non-abstract topics generally comprise of geo-political issues, educational or environmental concern, or business information. These topics require the speaker to have knowledge on current affairs, and facts and figures pertaining to recent incidents happening in the world, etc. While speaking on a non-abstract topic, speakers don't have the luxury of digressing from the focal point, and have to think only on the lines of the words mentioned in the topic.

For example, if we are given a topic, "**The menace of terrorism**", the speaker has to stick to the theme of terrorism. He/she cannot digress from the topic and think of things not related to it. This is something unique about non-abstract topics. The speaker will have to think about the way terrorism originated, or the way it impacts our society. The speaker has to delve deeper into various facets of the phenomenon called 'terrorism'.

Points to Consider

One important thing about non-abstract topics is that the speaker has to come to a conclusion by the end of the speech. Open-ended conclusions left for the public to understand are full of risks. If the speaker does not take a stand at the end of speech, it seems as if the speaker were like a ship without a rudder. Without a firm stand, **the speech goes astray** and the audience has no key takeaway from the speech. As we had already discussed in the one of the last chapters that a key takeaway is vital for a speech to be successful.

Consider Another Example

In the topic, "The role of US in world economy", the speaker is required to think only of how the US impacts the economy of the world. It is not advisable to rope in other countries and talk about their influence in the world's flow of cash and goods. At the end, the speaker is expected to come up with a conclusion, and end with a brief summary of what all he/she had spoken.

A few examples of non-abstract topics are as follows:

- The role of media in society.
- The impact of social networking on the youth of the country.
- The terrorist attacks of Paris.
- The rise of democracy in Africa.
- Which is better – democracy or dictatorship?
- Is United Nations capable of bringing up a good world order?

Non-abstract topics are favorites in panel discussions, debates, and group discussions. Please note that debates rarely have abstract topics. In the next chapter, we will find out how debates can be fought even on abstract topics.

5. ABSTRACT CONVERSATION

Abstract conversation involves discussing topics that do not restrict the speaker to think in a particular direction. The speaker is free to fly in any direction with his thoughts. E.g. 'Black'.

For a topic like 'Black', the average speaker might stand there wondering about the beautiful color which has no shades, no hue and yet, is elegant. He might also speak about 'black' as a color, what it represents in his life and where all does he/she see that color. But that's it.

This is a major problem with the speakers who can't think of innovative ideas on abstract topics: they adhere to the literal meaning and don't think out of the box. They cling to what the topic conveys, in general.

As this topic "**black**" has nothing to do with anything of geo-political concern or social or environmental concern, instead of interpreting it as just an ordinary color, the truly engaging speaker will transform it into something serious as 'the apartheid'. The speaker can also think of the space - its void and black color. In other words, the speaker gets the license to interpret the given topic any way he wants.

Innovation in Thinking

One unique feature about the abstract topics is that they give the speaker the freedom to think and imagine. The speaker can shape and mold the topic in any way he/she wants. It's the widening of thoughts that's the most important here.

Most often than not, abstract topics appear in the form of famous quotes or idioms or proverbs. "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink" is a proverb and is an abstract topic.

This topic is not related to geo-politics, education, business, society or environment in particular. However, it can be shaped into a topic on any of these. An average speaker will just talk about what the proverb means and how forcing someone to do something cannot help the person. Someone may even cite the example of criminals, whose character doesn't change much even after spending years of self-introspection in prison.

Can't We Think of Something Innovative?

Can't we think of endless number of campaigns Indian freedom fighters did to threaten the British, to no avail? Can't we think of the engineering students in most parts of the country who are forced by their families to study engineering, but they end up learning nothing because science does not interest them?

These topics don't need a concrete conclusion, unless it is a topic for debate. For topics like 'Black', the speaker needs to focus on ideas, rather than shaping the opinion of the listeners.

The **ending of the speech can be open ended** as the aim is not to have a key takeaway, but to delve deeper into various facets of the topic.

Application of Abstract Topics

Abstract topics are a must for essay writing contests. Moreover, these days even the group discussion for campus placements and B-school selection rounds happen around abstract topics. Debates can be fought around abstract topics too. For instance, consider a topic '**Does an early bird always catch the worm?**' The debaters can speak at length on the topic.

Participants can talk about how entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates started early in their life and got successful, and how that helped them grab opportunities in business. Another side to the debate could be the cases of Sanjeev Bhikchandani or Boman Irani, who started a bit late in their careers, but still managed to achieve acclaim in their respective professional fields.

In this world that respects experiment over theory, it's important to prove the practicality of this tool. Let me see an example. Suppose the topic given to us is 'Black'. First, define the topic in whatever way it is convenient to you. For a person from science background, he/she will begin with a scientific definition of the term, which has to be comprehensible to a layman.

"Black, the color which absorbs all the wavelengths of the universe, is one color that surrounds us in all forms."

This sets the context of the speech. Now, move to each parameter slowly with proper transitions. Let me show you how the content of the speech will develop hereafter.

A few examples of abstract topics are as follows:

- Beauty is only skin deep.
- Don't judge a book by its cover.
- Red and blue.
- United we stand, divided we fall.
- Strike the iron while it is hot.

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