



# CELEBRATION SEASON

How to prepare a timely toast.

By Christine Clapp, DTM

**I've always been more** intimidated by delivering toasts than by giving Toastmasters speeches or presentations at work. Perhaps you have been, too.

It's no wonder that we struggle with them. Toasts are given on special occasions to honor people we care about; we have something important to say and only a few minutes to say it. In many ways, the stakes are higher.

This season, whether you're celebrating a religious holiday, wedding, anniversary or other event, I hope you will embrace the challenge and experience the joy of giving a toast. You not only will honor the special people in your life, you'll also become a better public speaker.

Here are guidelines for crafting and delivering a memorable toast:

**Plan ahead.** Don't wing it. The best time to come up with your toast is not on the spot when there is a microphone in your hand. Prepare an outline and rehearse it six times — or until you can deliver it comfortably without notes. You don't have to convey your thoughts word for word — just memorize the main ideas and rehearse them until your delivery is fluid. A conversational delivery (even with a few hiccups) will be a better fit for a party than the reading of a script.

**Be concise.** Think Hemingway, not Faulkner. Toasts should be short: One to two minutes is appropriate. If you are a special guest, such as the host, best man or matron of honor at a wedding, you can stretch it to three or four minutes.

**Explain your connection.** If people in attendance don't know who you are, give them a little context. It doesn't have to be your opening line, but at an early point in your toast, briefly describe your relationship to the guest(s) of honor.

**Open with a theme.** Every great speech has a hook; toasts are no exception. You might simply have a theme that is supported by a story or a few short anecdotes about the person or occasion you are celebrating. Also consider starting with an inspirational quotation or passage and relating it to the guest(s) of honor or subject of your speech. If you are comfortable using humor, start with a tasteful and topical joke, and then provide a moral or advice that relates to the guest(s) of honor.

One of my favorite opening lines for a toast came in the 2001 movie *My First Mister*: “I’d like to propose a toast to all the special ‘f’ words — to friends, family, fate, forgiveness and forever.” It’s funny, sincere, memorable, and masterfully sets up the rest of the toast.

**Focus on the guest of honor.** It sounds obvious, but some speakers miss this subtlety. Your toast should focus on how great the person is, and not what that great person means to you or how he or she makes you feel. The former makes the toast about *them*; the latter makes it about *you*.

It is fine to tell personal stories involving yourself and the person you are toasting. But be sure those stories serve to highlight what is special about that person, and not shift focus on to you.

**Avoid insider information.** When in doubt, leave it out. If it isn’t possible or appropriate to explain a story or joke so that every guest can understand, it has no place in a toast. Leave that for a personal conversation or correspondence.

**Remember your thank-yous.** When giving a toast at a special event, think ahead to identify all the people you should thank or otherwise recognize. It could be the host(s), attendees, guest(s) of honor or others who made the event possible. Don’t miss out on an opportunity to show your gratitude publicly.

**Say “Cheers!”** A toast is just a speech if there’s no drink at the end. Don’t forget to invite other guests to join you in toasting the guest(s) of honor. You can say, “Please join me in raising a glass to ...” Or it can be as simple as, “Cheers!”

**Test your toast.** It is always a good idea to run your toast by someone

you trust. He or she can tell you if the humor is appropriate and the stories flow logically, or if you forgot to thank someone important! The candid feedback will give you confidence when it comes time to give your toast.

When it comes to delivery, you can ensure that your toast goes smoothly if you follow these simple tips:

- 1. Let the host go first.** Etiquette requires that the host gives the first toast. You might be eager to deliver your toast so you can get on with celebrating, but wait for the host to kick things off.
- 2. Speak before your second drink.** On the subject of getting to celebrate, make sure you give your toast before you start your second drink. It might seem like a good idea to have a few drinks to calm your nerves, but it’s not. Alcohol and public speaking don’t mix well. Save yourself, the host and guest(s) of honor potential embarrassment by sticking to water or speaking before you move on to your second adult drink.
- 3. Hold the microphone properly.** Watch for the placement of the microphone when you give your toast. If you hold it right up to your lips, you’ll

get a muffled or garbled sound, rather than a clear, amplified voice. If you hold it too low or too far in front of you, it won’t pick up your voice.

Keep your chin up, speak with a strong voice and hold the microphone at a 45-degree angle about four inches from your mouth. Avoid moving your hand on the microphone, as it can cause a distracting sound or even turn the microphone switch off. If you can, arrive at the celebration early and ask the event organizer for a moment to test the microphone. You might also discuss details of when toasts will be given and where speakers should stand to avoid unpleasant feedback.

There will be plenty of opportunities to say a few words at special events during the holiday season. Seize the chance to give your friends and family the gift of your words. **T**

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