



District 48

Using Zoom Breakout Rooms for Speech Contests

Zoom Breakout Rooms

In Zoom, the host can create up to 50 breakout rooms for use by different groups of participants. This document describes how these rooms can be used to facilitate Toastmasters speech contests.

Zoom has provided general training videos and articles about the basics of breakout rooms, including how to manage them and how to use them. [This page](#) is a good place to start that training.

Zoom host

In most cases, the contest Sergeant at Arms (SAA) is also the Zoom host. That person starts the Zoom meeting, sets up the breakout rooms, and manages which participants move into and out of each room.

The Zoom host can also name one or more Zoom co-hosts who can assist in managing the breakout rooms. For details, see the Zoom training mentioned above.

Briefings

For an online contest, some Contest Chairs will choose to hold their Contestants' and Judges' Briefings previous to the contest day. In that case, separate Zoom sessions can be scheduled for the briefings.

If these briefings are held just before the contest, as is traditional with in-person contests, using breakout rooms works well to group the participants.

One breakout room can hold the Contestants' Briefing, and another the Judges' Briefing. It's good practice to name the breakout rooms appropriately to help identify who is in each room.

When creating these rooms, one of the options is "Allow participants to return to the main session at any time". If that option is selected, the participants in the breakout rooms can return to the main contest session when their briefing is complete. Otherwise, the leader of the briefing must contact the Zoom host (e.g., by text message) to return those participants.

Sequestering Contestants

During Tables Topics® and Evaluation speech contests, the contestants must be sequestered in a separate room and brought into the contest room one at a time. Breakout rooms can be used for this purpose.

When the contest begins, the first speaker stays in the contest room. The others are then put into the breakout room awaiting their turn. As each speaker finishes, during the minute of silence, the Zoom host must move the next speaker out of the breakout room and into the contest room.

However, there is no method in Zoom to move a participant from a breakout room into the main Zoom session without ending the breakout room, in which case all contestants would move to the contest session at once.

There are some workarounds for this situation:

Workaround 1: Allow contestants to move themselves to the contest room

Turning on the above-mentioned option allows contestants to move themselves back to the main session. When the previous speaker is finished, the SAA can message the breakout room participants to inform the next contestant that it's time to move to the contest room. That contestant then selects "Leave Breakout Room" to perform this function.

In this workaround, it may be useful to appoint an additional contest SAA as Zoom co-host, and that person moves to the breakout room with the contestants. That helps prevent any movement out of the room before the appropriate time.

Workaround 2: Use breakout rooms for the main contest room and the sequestering room

If you decide not to allow sequestered contestants to move themselves to the contest room, the Zoom host must move them manually. As mentioned, there is no direct way to move one contestant from a breakout room to the main session – it's either all or none.

Zoom does allow the host to move participants *between* breakout rooms as desired. A second workaround, therefore, is to create two breakout rooms when the host initiates the meeting. One breakout room becomes the main contest room, and the other is the sequestering room.

When participants log in to the meeting, the Zoom host must move them to the contest breakout room. (This process doubles as a “waiting room”, which can reduce the possibility of disruptive participants.)

When the contest begins, therefore, all participants are in the main contest breakout room.

When it is time to sequester the contestants, the Zoom host moves the appropriate contestants to the other breakout room. It is then a quick and simple step to move each contestant to the main contest breakout room when it is their turn.

Thanks to Jim Ellis for this workaround idea.

Workaround 3: Close and reopen the breakout room for each contestant

Another approach is to end the breakout room after the first speaker. That brings all remaining contestants into the contest room. Then the Zoom host returns all but the second speaker back to the breakout room.

With this method, the breakout room is closed after each speaker, then reopened to sequester the remaining speakers. Suppose, for example, there are four contestants in a Table Topics contest:

- When the contest begins, the first speaker remains in the contest room as the Zoom host moves speakers 2 through 4 (possibly with an assistant SAA) to the breakout room.
- When the first speaker finishes, the Zoom host ends the breakout room, automatically moving speakers 2 through 4 back to the contest room. The Zoom host immediately reopens the breakout room and moves speakers 3 and 4 back to it. Both of these steps are performed during the minute of silence.
- When the second speaker finishes, the Zoom host ends the breakout room, automatically moving speakers 3 and 4 back to the contest room. The Zoom host immediately reopens the breakout room and moves speaker 4 back to it. Both of these steps are performed during the minute of silence.
- When the third speaker finishes, the Zoom host ends the breakout room, automatically moving speaker 4 back to the contest room.

Although this seems like a lot of movement, it's a fairly simple process with the breakout room controls.

Conclusion

Breakout rooms in Zoom enable you to move people to separate sessions in order to conduct your speech contests as required by Toastmasters International.

The Contest Chair, Contest Master, Chief Judge, and SAA(s) should practice using breakout rooms at least once before the day of the contest. That can come in a separate meeting just for this purpose, or it could be part of your briefing meetings. By rehearsing the process you choose, you increase the likelihood of having a smooth and enjoyable contest experience.