

Winning Edge #25 – Mastering Unscripted Answers

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



Do you remember watching the microwave countdown as a kid? It was probably how many of us first learned to count backwards. You'd put in your food, push a couple of buttons, listen to the whirr, and watch the food spin. Finally, it would beep, and your food would be ready.

Or maybe you used it to experiment. How long before a marshmallow or hot dog explodes? Or how much tinfoil does it take to make a spark?

Whether you were experimenting or cooking, the appeal of the microwave is its speed. There is no preheating—just press a button, and you're in business.

In many ways, answering an unscripted question is like using a microwave. You are given a question and have to respond spontaneously in seconds. Usually, you just start talking and hope a good answer pops out. The problem is that we are poor judges of how long we talk. So, you often create an overcooked or meandering answer that's hard to follow.

How do you make a spontaneous answer great? It comes down to structure and time constraints.

Think of it like this: Answering a question is like turning on a microwave in our heads. First, you need to press the right button for the content and then pick a length of time to talk.

In this episode of the *Winning Edge*, we'll share two tactics for giving a concise and effective unscripted answer: the Two-Point Tactic and the Principle-Plus-Story Tactic.

The Two-Point Tactic

To create a clear structure for your answer, you can manufacture it using the Two-Point Tactic. Here's how it works:

1. Listen closely to the question.
2. Pause for a few seconds to gather your thoughts.
3. Say, "That's a good question. It comes down to two things."
4. State your first point, which gives you time to think about what you want to say next.
5. Introduce your second point by saying, "And the second important thing is..."

If you have only one point before you start talking, that's okay. Hit that one point, and then, usually, while you're talking, you'll think of that second point. Just trust yourself, and trust the process.

To practice the Two-Point Tactic, use a countdown timer on your phone. Have someone ask you a question, then start the timer and try to answer it in 60 seconds using the two-point structure. The goal is to complete your first point by the 30-second mark, leaving 20 seconds for your second point and then a final 10 seconds for a summary sentence.

The Principle-Plus-Story Tactic

The Principle-Plus-Story Tactic is similar to the Two-Point Tactic but with even more structure. Here's how it works:

1. When you receive a question, say, "That's a good question. When I'm elected, here's how I will make decisions based on questions like this."
2. Give a one- to two-sentence answer about the principle guiding your decision-making.
3. Tell a story from your past that reinforces this principle.

By stating the principle upfront, you provide a clear framework for your answer. The story then illustrates and supports the principle, making your answer more engaging and memorable.

Practice this technique by having someone ask you questions and then use the countdown timer as you answer the questions. Try a 90-second answer first. Use the first 30 seconds for your principle and then 60 seconds for a quick story. Don't worry about the back story. Just jump right to the story's action with minimal context. As the saying goes, if you want to tell a story about seeing a bear, start the story the moment before you see the bear.

Putting it all together

Mastering unscripted answers is a critical skill for any candidate, but it's also one you can easily practice. Think of it like a microwave. You get the question and need to decide which button to push, "Two-Point" or "Principle-Plus-Story." Then, press the button in your head, start talking, and be done before the countdown reaches zero.

To practice, use ChatGPT to create sample questions for you. It does a decent job if you give it the context and topics of the debate or interview. Type something like:

"I'm creating debate questions for [political office] in [area of state], and the topics include: [list topics]. Can you create 10 debate questions?"

Don't look at the questions, but have someone read them to you. Then, answer each question with the countdown timer on your phone. Focus first on getting 90-second answers, then 60-second answers, and finally, practice 30-second answers.

Try it out. You'll be amazed at how much more comfortable you feel creating spontaneous answers after several 30-minute practice sessions using these techniques.

So, the next time you get a question, remember the microwave analogy. Decide which button you'll press in your mind, the "Two-Point" or the "Principle + Story," and then give a concise answer in 60 to 90 seconds that follows the structure.