

The Ultimate Guide to Small Talk: Conversation Starters, Powerful Questions, & More

Like it or not, small talk is integral to your success.

Whether you're networking, speaking with a new prospect, or warming up a customer before upselling them or asking for a referral, you must be able to build rapport with casual conversation.

To help you master this crucial skill, we've written a comprehensive guide to small talk.

What Is Small Talk

Small talk is light, informal conversation. It's commonly used when you're talking to someone you don't know very well and at networking and social events.

How to Make Small Talk

There are four strategies that'll help you make small talk in any situation.

First, ask open-ended questions. Most people enjoy talking about themselves -- not only are we are our favorite subjects, but it's also easier to discuss yourself than something you know little about. Think about it: Would you have a harder time speaking about 14th century glass-blowing or your favorite book? Open-ended questions generate an interesting, dynamic conversation and encourage the person you're speaking with to open up.

Second, practice active listening. It's tempting to tune out occasionally, but you'll forge much stronger connections if you pay attention. The other person will notice how engaged you seem. In addition, it's much

easier to ask relevant questions and remember details to bring up later if you're not listening with one ear.

Third, put away your phone. We tend to pull out our phones when we're feeling uncomfortable or awkward in social situations, but nothing will sabotage your conversational efforts more quickly. Few people will approach you if you're scrolling through your phone -- and you'll send a plain message to anyone you're already talking to that you're not interested.

Fourth, show your enthusiasm. Small talk might not always be the most stress-free activity. However, if you go into it with the right attitude, you can actually have fun. View these conversations as opportunities to learn more about other people. You never know whom you'll meet or what they'll have to share -- so embrace the chance it'll be an amazing discussion.

Having good small talk topics up your sleeve won't just help you kick off great conversations, it'll also relieve some of the anxiety of walking into an unknown environment.

1. The location or the venue

Discuss your surroundings. Are you in a beautiful hotel, home, or conference area? Is the town noteworthy? Did you recently visit somewhere cool nearby?

2. Entertainment

Talk about what you've enjoyed lately and what's on your list. That might include the Netflix show either of you are binge-watching, the last movie each of you saw, the books you're reading, the podcasts you're streaming, any plays you've attended, and so on.

3. Art

If the person you're speaking to enjoys art, ask them which museums they've gone to and would like to visit, their favorite exhibits, which artists they enjoy, if they have any recommendations for galleries, which genre and medium of art they prefer, how their interest developed, and so on.

You can also discuss changes in the art world. Are there any new trends developing they're interested in (like "post-internet art")? What are their thoughts?

4. Food

Food is one of the best small talk topics, since almost everyone loves to eat. Ask which restaurants they'd recommend and the dishes you should order. If they don't eat out often, ask which dishes they like to make at home. Describe an upcoming scenario and get their opinion on what you should cook or bring. For example, *"I'm responsible for dessert for a housewarming party. There are 10 people coming -- two vegans, one person with a nut allergy, and another who doesn't eat gluten. What would you suggest?"*

5. Hobbies

Delve into the other person's passions. They'll be enthusiastic to talk about what they love, and you'll get the chance to connect with them on a deeper level.

Ask what they do in their free time, which activities they participate in outside of work (and how they became involved), what their childhood hobbies were versus now, whether they're taking any classes, and what they'd like to try (sushi-making, novel-writing, salsa dancing, etc.).

6. Work

Talking about your day jobs can be tricky. You don't want the conversation to devolve into a boring comparison of what you do -- which it quickly will unless you steer toward more interesting territory.

On the other hand, work is a good small talk topic because the vast majority of people have something to say.

Instead of asking generic questions like, *"Where do you work?"* *"How long have you worked there?"* and *"Do you like it?"*, use interesting, unexpected ones such as:

- *"My [niece/son/grandchild] wants to become a [profession]. Do you have any advice I should pass on?"*
- *"What's your favorite aspect of your job? Why did you decide to work in [X field]?"*
- *"Many of my clients in [X role] tell me [Y detail about job]. Has that held true in your experience?"*
- *"Which skill do you use the most in your work? Is that what you expected?"*
- *"What's the stereotype of a [job title]? Does it hold up?"*
- *"Is there anything you didn't anticipate about this role? Do you like or dislike that?"*

7. Sports

Some people could talk about sports all day. Others would rather talk about anything but. There are a few rules of thumb for discussing sports.

First, if you're in a group of two-plus people, make sure everyone is a sports fan. You don't want to exclude someone from participating.

Second, while an enthusiastic conversation is fun, a heated one won't help your networking goals whatsoever. If you or the other person starts getting riled up, change the topic.

8. The weather

Weather is the ultimate small talk topic. It's typically not the most scintillating conversation-starter, but with a little creativity you can spark some engaging discussions.

Ask about the other person's plans given the weather (for example, if it's rainy are they going to stay at home and watch movies? If it's sunny, are they going to have a BBQ, do something outdoorsy, go on a hike, eat dinner on their patio, etc.?)

You can also discuss their favorite type of climate and why they like it. This frequently turns into a discussion about their personality, which can be fun and interesting.

Get them talking about the climate in their hometown. Is it different from where they live now? The same? Which type do they enjoy more? If they could choose to live anywhere based solely on the weather conditions, where would it be?

Seasonal rituals and traditions are handy conversation-starters as well. Do they do anything special this time of year? Are there any places they visit, trips they take, people they see, or other activities they do?

9. Travel

Not everyone you speak with will be a world traveler, but asking if they've traveled anywhere interesting lately can open up a world of possibilities.

From weekend trips an hour away, to big summer vacations, or bucket list journeys -- this question can get even the most reserved prospects gushing about cherished memories or exciting upcoming adventures.

Make sure you have some follow-up questions around what they plan to do on their trip. What foods they're most excited to try. And what souvenirs they're planning to bring home.

10. Their local favorites

HubSpot Director of Sales Dan Tyre has a trick every rep can use. Before a call with a prospect, he Googles their town. Often, the people he's speaking with live in towns Dan's never visited, but with a two-minute search, he knows about their hottest new restaurant, what the weather is like currently, and which landmarks the locals love.

He uses this knowledge to wow his prospects with questions like, "*Have you made it to [Insert hot new local play here] yet?*" or "*Are you staying cool over there? I hear it's going to be in the 90's this week.*" This extra step puts the prospect at ease, shows them Dan cares about what they care about, and builds immediate rapport.

Conversation Starters

For prospects:

- *"What's the most exciting thing about your business?"*
- *"What's the most exciting thing about your product?"*
- *"What's the most exciting thing about your team?"*
- *"What's the most exciting thing about your industry?"*
- *"What's the most significant change at your company in the past six months?"*

- *"If you could go back one year in time, what would you do differently?"*
- *"I'm curious to know your story."*
- *"Tell me about your highlights at [company name]."*
- *"Tell me about your lowlights at [company name]."*
- *"What's your biggest priority right now?"*
- *"What's your lowest priority?"*
- *"What is your boss fixated on right now?"*
- *"What's your number one most important metric?"*
- *"What can I do to help you achieve [X goal]?"*

For customers:

- *"How are things going?"*
- *"What's your progress on [X goal]?"*
- *"How has business changed since we talked last?"*
- *"What are you worried about?"*
- *"What are you happy about?"*
- *"Which industry events are you planning on attending?"*
- *"How are your efforts in [related business area]?"*
- *"How's life in [city]?"*
- *"What can I do to make you even more successful?"*

For professional acquaintances:

- *"What's your industry like right now?"*
 - *"Do you need any introductions?"*
 - *"As an expert in [field], I'd love to hear your thoughts on [event, announcement, major change]."*
 - *"Tell me about your latest work win."*
 - *"We've discussed your role before, but it's probably evolved since then."*
 - *"Which blogs are you reading to stay informed on [topic]?"*
-

- *“You’re still one of the only people I know who [did X, achieved Y].”*

The talking points above are great umbrella topics for small talk, but you might be looking for specific questions.

Here are a few that have proven to work extremely well.

1. “How did you end up at [name of event]? If you could snap your fingers to instantly summon your [coworker, boss, best friend], would you? Why or why not?”
2. “What’s been the highlight of your [day, week, month] so far?”
3. “Are you a long way from home?”
4. “Would you recommend that [food or drink they’re holding]?”
5. “What’s the most memorable part of this [name of event] so far?”
6. “If this was Groundhog Day and you had to repeat this day over and over, would you be relatively happy or unhappy about this particular day?”
7. “What’s the last movie you saw in theatres? What did you think?”
8. “What was the last concert you went to? How was it?”
9. “How did you choose to work in [field]? If you could go back in time, would you make that same choice again?”
10. “Would you advise your children to go into [field]?”
11. “If you could turn one of your current skills into a bona fide superpower, which would it be and why?”

12. "Which TV show would you choose to live in?"
13. "Which TV show most closely mirrors your life?"
14. "You remind me strongly of a celebrity, but I can't remember who it is -- whom do people always compare you to?"
15. "When was the last time you did something for the first time? Were you glad you tried it?"
16. "If you were responsible for catering [event], what would you order?"
17. "If you were hosting this event, [who would you invite to speak, which theme would you have chosen, what would you have done differently]?"

How to Talk to Strangers

Talking to strangers is nerve-wracking for most people, even if you're fairly charismatic and confident.

The number one technique to use? Questions. As long as the other person is talking, you don't need to say anything beyond "mhmm," "tell me more," and "interesting."

That's far easier than attempting to entertain them with your own stories.

Don't just ask one question and then move on. Once the other person has finished their answer, ask a follow-up question. This mitigates the risk you'll seem like you're interrogating or interviewing them.

For instance, if you say, "*Where are you from?*" and they reply, "*Minnesota,*" you might ask, "*Why did you move?*", "*What's the*

greatest similarity between Minnesota and here?”, *“If you could have brought anyone along with you from Minnesota, who would it be?”*, *“Where are your favorite places in Minnesota?”*, *“If I go to Minnesota, what can I absolutely not miss?”*, or another Minnesota-centric question. When you first kick off the conversation, you know virtually nothing about this person. That’s why author and speaker Gretchen Rubin **suggests opting for topics** common to both of you in the moment.

Your physical environment is always a safe bet. Look around for something worth commenting on -- the architecture, an interesting piece of artwork, the song that’s playing, and so on.

The other person’s clothing can also work as a conversation-starter, although you want to avoid seeming creepy. Give compliments like, *“Those shoes are pretty unique. Where did you get them?”* and *“I like your shirt’s design. Which brand is it?”* rather than ones like, *“Your pants look good.”*

Rubin also recommends “reacting to comments in the spirit they were given.” When the other person makes a joke, laugh -- even if you didn’t think it was a knee-slapper. If they offer a surprising detail or anecdote -- like *“The lack of an Oxford comma **could cost a Maine company millions of dollars** in an overtime lawsuit”* -- react with surprise. They’ll feel gratified by your response, which will make them want to keep talking to you.

How to end a conversation

It’s also handy to have a pre-planned exit. If the conversation is stalling -- or it’s simply finished and you need a non-awkward way to walk away -- use this line to gracefully wrap things up.

Here are eight potential exit lines:

1. *"This has been great -- thanks for telling me about X. Do you have a card?"*
2. *"Can't wait to hear how [initiative, project, personal decision] goes! Let's catch up at the next [work party, conference, meeting, get-together]."*
3. *"I'm going to go grab [some food, a drink]. Great to [meet you, catch up]."*
4. *"I see my [friend, coworker, client] over there and should probably go say hi. Want to exchange contact info?"*
5. *"The next session is starting soon, so I'm going to go find my room. It was nice meeting you!"*
6. *"Excuse me, I'm going to use the restroom. Enjoy the rest of the [event, party, conference]."*
7. *"Well, glad we got the chance to connect over [topic]. I don't want to dominate your [morning, afternoon, night] -- I'm going to [check out the snacks, say hello to someone, take a walk around the venue, etc.]"*
8. *"Is there anything I can [help you with, do for you]?"*

How to Get Better at Small Talk

It doesn't matter how bad you are at small talk: With practice and the right strategies, you can improve. Small talk is a skill just like any other.

1. Look for opportunities to make small talk.

The more frequently you do it, the more comfortable you'll become. You'll also quickly learn which topics generate the best conversations, how to gauge a person's mood and personality by their body language and tone of voice, when to pivot to new topics, and the signs a conversation has wrapped up.

To reduce your nervousness, practice your small talk in a low-stakes environment. Go to a casual networking event for a different industry, attend a meetup, or ask your friends to bring you along to their work events.

You can also “train” by talking to strangers when you’re out and about -- just make sure you don’t force a conversation with anyone who’s clearly not interested.

2. Pretend you’re speaking to a friend.

Would you be on edge if you were making small talk with someone you knew really well? Probably not. If you need a quick trick to mitigate your anxiety, pretend the other person is a good friend. As an added benefit, this mental shift will make you seem warmer and friendlier.

3. Give yourself a break.

Don’t dwell on awkward moments or long silences. We’re all far more focused on and critical of ourselves than anyone else in the room. You might be cringing for days after you mess up someone’s name or crack a joke that falls flat, but chances are, every other person will forget within two minutes.

Next time you’re worried about a specific faux pas, remind yourself it’s nowhere near as big a deal as you think.

4. Set a goal.

Having an objective can make small talk feel more meaningful. For example, maybe you commit to meeting four people at an event, or

exchanging contact information with two other professionals in your field.

Once you've gotten a concrete goal, you'll feel purposeful and focused. This also allows you to objectively measure your success.

Avoiding Small Talk

It might seem silly to write an extended post about small talk -- and then delve into tactics for avoiding it.

But let's be clear. This isn't a guide to steering clear of conversations at networking events, office parties, conferences, or social gatherings. If you want to do that, I have a simple suggestion: Stay home!

Of course, that's usually not a feasible strategy if you want to forge new connections (and since forging new connections tends to go hand-in-hand with career growth, I highly recommend doing it occasionally).

Avoiding small talk = avoiding boring, trite, meaningless, forgettable conversations that don't add value to you or the other participants.

If you want to do *that*, here are a few suggestions. (By the way, avoiding small talk is one of my continual goals in life.)

First, be curious. The person or people you're talking to are interesting. Chances are, they know a whole lot about something you know something about -- if not many things. Take advantage of that. Figure out what they care about and ask lots of questions. Don't forget to listen and stay engaged so it's clear you're not just going through the motions.

Second, pose unique questions and start non-obvious discussions. If you say something like, "It's so cold this week," you're going to have a meh

conversation (unless you're talking to a farmer or meteorologist, maybe). Get creative and maybe a little weird. When someone says, "Wow, it's so cold this week," reply, "Sure is. Did you grow up in a warmer area?" Now you're talking about their childhood and the different places they've lived. Way more interesting.

Third, avoid ultra-controversial or sensitive topics. These include:

1. Politics
2. Physical appearance
3. Religion
4. Age
5. Anything PG-13 and up

Whether you love making small talk or wish you never had to do it, these tips, conversation starters, and questions will help you get the most from it. Good luck out there.

Source: <https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/small-talk-guide>