

SHORT TALK, NOT SMALL TALK

Open-Ended Questions in Conversation

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PART ONE

S*mall talk* is casual conversation with strangers or acquaintances, usually about subjects like weather, local sports teams, recent events, movies, and online news. Although it's less common in situations where people are busy with their cell phones or tablets, it *does* still exist. In North American culture, its purpose may be to help people feel comfortable by replacing awkward silence with insignificant talk.

Today, however, “small talk” may go beyond polite, uninvolved conversation. It often becomes “short talk”—brief conversations about personal matters—sometimes opinions, feelings, and values. In social or potential business situations, its purpose is to establish connections among participants. When we make “short talk” with people we share environments or experiences with, we’re trying to find out if we are compatible conversation partners. We want to know if we have anything in common to build on.

Nowadays, many different topics are appropriate for social conversation—our families and friends, our studies and work, our interests and experiences, our travels—all in addition to the weather, sports, entertainment, and politics. There are still “taboo” topics, of course. In North American culture, for example, it’s not usually acceptable to ask adult acquaintances about their age, their weight or physical condition, or how much money they make. It *is* becoming more common, however, to talk openly about controversial topics, like current issues, values, and beliefs.

In fact, talkative people who are also good listeners are usually more popular and more successful in work and life than people who are shy, silent, or very polite in social conversation.



What are some ways to become a good conversationalist in social situations? Here are some suggestions from “the experts”:

- ❑ **ASK INTERESTING “OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.”** People usually give short answers to “closed-ended questions” like “What’s your name?” or “How are you?” or “Where are you from?” Such questions are fine for brief, polite exchanges and formal interviews, but they don’t encourage people to talk. To have interesting conversations, ask some “Open-Ended Questions” like “What do you think of American social customs?” “What do you miss most about your country?” or “Why do people from your culture tend to be so quiet?” Then you’ll give your conversation partners something to think about, and they may be motivated—or even eager—to tell you their thoughts and experiences. *And* they might want to find out about *you*, too.
- ❑ **When someone asks you questions, ADD INTERESTING INFORMATION OR (NEW) IDEAS TO YOUR RESPONSES.** For example, if someone asks you where you’re from, you can mention a few unique things about your hometown or country. If someone asks about your work, you can tell what you like—or dislike—most about it. While you’re giving a fascinating response, you might even “discover” new truths—especially about your own values, ways of thinking, or goals.
- ❑ **LISTEN CAREFULLY** to your conversation partners’ ideas, and **MAKE COMMENTS** about them. To keep someone talking about a topic, you can make encouraging sounds like “Mmmm” or “Uh huh.” You can add responses and questions that show you’re following the conversation—like “I see” or “Really?” If you show your interest and understanding consistently, people will *want* to talk to you. And they will tell you interesting things about themselves and their lives.
- ❑ **BE HONEST** in your conversation. Tell about yourself and your experiences. Share your knowledge. Tell your opinions and thoughts. If you’re *open* in social conversation, other people will talk more honestly to *you*. On the other hand, don’t say *too much* about you (and only you) at the wrong time. Before you talk on and on, make sure others are really interested in what you’re saying. Remember—a good exchange has *balance*. Don’t monopolize a conversation, and don’t let others talk too much, either. Few people *really* enjoy their own monologues!
- ❑ **Except to add encouragement or to make sure you’re following what someone is saying, DON’T INTERRUPT.** It’s generally impolite to cut short what someone is trying to say or to rush his/her thoughts by changing the subject—especially if your interruption shows lack of interest in his/her opinions or feelings. It may even harm the relationship. Of course, if you can *help* a speaker who seems to have trouble getting to the point, do so—in a positive, friendly way.
- ❑ **HELP PEOPLE FEEL COMFORTABLE** when they’re conversing with you. The best conversationalists are—first of all—good listeners. They know how to *give* and then to *get* attention. Therefore, when they talk, others find it easy to listen and to respond.

The communication skills of conversation are very important at school, at work or in business, in social life, and even at home. Fortunately, these language skills can always be learned and/or improved on. Go ahead—give these tips a try! And keep



Where can we hear examples of Open-Ended Conversation?

- ❑ **GATHERINGS:** At parties and in other social situations, in restaurants, before and after classes at school, before and after meetings at work, at business “meet-ups,” and so on.
- ❑ **THE MEDIA:** On radio and TV talk shows and online—in interviews of celebrities and “ordinary people.” In dramas, comedies, episodes, and series with scripted dialog and exchanges.