



UNIVERSITY *of* WEST FLORIDA

# How to Up Your Small Talk Game

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## How to Up Your Small Talk Game

Does the thought of making small talk fill you with a sense of weariness or dread? Turns out, you are not alone. While this may be a skill that comes to some rather naturally, it is a skill that you can improve with some easy techniques and practice.

### Here are five ways to help up improve your small talk skills:

#### 1. Start with Attitude and Remember Body Language

Your attitude will determine the flow of your conversation. Smile, make eye contact and keep your body language OPEN (no crossed arms). If making eye contact is difficult for you, try to focus on noticing the person's eye color as a cue.

- In person, look at the other person when you speak, not at the conference table or the wall.
- On video calls, make eye contact with your CAMERA, it will help communicate eye contact on screen.
- On the phone, smile! — it will make your voice sound warmer.

It's not just what you say, but HOW you say it, that will help others connect with you.

#### 2. Use Open Questions

Challenge yourself to create the habit of asking Open Questions – these typically start with **Who? What? When? Where? How?**

Compare these two options:

- *How are things going?* – this will almost lead to a generic “Fine” or “Good”
- *What did you get up to this weekend?* – this OPEN question leaves space for more details to build the conversation further

Generally, questions that start with ‘**what**’ are good, non-biased open-ended questions. For example “**What** did you think of today's workshop?” or “**What** would you like to learn more about?” gives the opportunity to answer without being influenced by the person asking the question.

#### 3. Encourage the Other Person to Talk

If you want to be considered a wonderful conversationalist, just invite others to talk about *themselves*. We are all more comfortable speaking about a subject that is familiar, and what is more familiar to you than you? A perfect follow up question is often: *Tell me more.*

The objective to is be genuine and not to feign interest – look for opportunities to create synchrony and finding moments where you can say, “I agree” or “Same for me.” These moments create building blocks for rapport and better conversation.

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### 4. Move Beyond the “Hourly Update”

The fallback for a lot of people is like the newscast “hourly update” — traffic, sports, weather and so on. Drill this into your head: It is a horrible icebreaker.

A good conversationalist engages the listener and stimulates the conversation. Keep up with trends and current events so you’ll have something to talk about. Take a keen interest in others, but also live an interesting life of your own!

Try new things. Accept unusual invitations. Volunteer for causes that interest you. Read. Meet new challenges, and then share your experiences within social circles.

### 5. Know When to Speak and When to LISTEN

The best kept secret of small talk is high-level listening. By listening well and taking time to focus on what is being said, you will naturally be able to find jumping off points to carry the conversation forward. Ideally, this will happen in a balanced give and take pattern: participate, but don’t monopolize.

It can be flattering to be asked a lot of questions, but make sure that it doesn’t turn into an interrogation and that you are balancing questions with sharing things about yourself.

## Additional Resources:

- Boothman, Nicholas. *How to Make People Like You in 90 seconds*. (2008). Workman Publishing.
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- Halton, Mary. “Small Talk Can Have Big Benefits.” Ted.com.  
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