

Introduction to Small Talk

1 Small talk is a common form of communication. Before you listen to a dialogue between the host of a radio show and a communications expert on the subject of small talk, discuss the questions below in a small group.


1. What is small talk?
2. What is the purpose of small talk?
3. Can you give some examples of small talk that you have recently engaged in?
4. When and where do people engage in small talk?
5. What small-talk topics are popular in Canada?
6. What small-talk topics do you think are not acceptable in Canada?

2 The following words/phrases come from the radio show you will listen to. Write down what you think the phrases mean. Then listen for the phrases in the recording and revise your definitions based on what you hear.

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|------------------------------|------------------|
| • create rapport | • interaction |
| • no-no's | • casual friends |
| • break the ice | • robotic |
| • engage in (a conversation) | • colleagues |

3  **Audio 3.2: Listen to a radio show guest talk about small talk. Circle true or false below.**

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| 1. Small talk is mainly used to get things done and to provide information. | T | F |
| 2. When someone asks, <i>How are you?</i> they are asking for information about your health. | T | F |
| 3. In Canada, people always expect you to ask about their family. | T | F |
| 4. People use small talk in the workplace to keep their work relationships friendly. | T | F |
| 5. An example of small talk is giving a compliment to someone. | T | F |
| 6. Couples who have been together for a long time often engage in small talk. | T | F |
| 7. People in Canada talk about the weather all the time because they love it so much. | T | F |

4  **Search the Internet for a list of small-talk topics. Take notes on five topics you think you would use in small talk. Share your list with the class.**

Possible search terms: *small talk topics*

Making Small Talk

1

In small groups, read the situations below. For each situation, discuss whether or not you would make small talk, and if you would, what you might talk about.

Is small talk appropriate?	What could you talk about?
1. With a taxi driver while getting a ride.	
2. With a customs official at the airport.	
3. With your child's teacher before a parent-teacher interview.	
4. With a resident of your apartment building in the elevator.	
5. With a police officer who stops you for speeding.	
6. With a bus driver.	
8. With a stranger walking their dog in your neighbourhood.	
9. With people who are about to interview you for a job.	
10. With a client/customer of your company who calls you for information.	
11. With the receptionist in a busy doctor's office.	

2

Complete the table below with other possible conversation starters for each small talk topic. Practise using them in conversations with a classmate.

Conversation starters
The weather: <i>I can't believe how warm it is! And it's only April.</i>
Current events: <i>So, I heard we are going to have a transit strike again.</i>
A compliment: <i>I love those earrings! Did you bring them from your trip to Peru?</i>
A social event: <i>It's a great party, isn't it? And the food is amazing!</i>

Chatting With Strangers

Initiating small talk with a stranger can be a pleasant way to pass the time. It may even lead to a new friendship. However, striking up a conversation with someone you don't know can be awkward unless you are able to establish that you have something in common with the other person. To do so, you can:

- Ask a question or make a statement related to something you may have in common, like the situation in which the conversation is taking place. For example, in a long line-up to see a movie, you could say, *I can't believe the line-up to see this film. I sure hope it's worth the wait.*
- Ask for the other person's opinion about a particular situation. For example, *I heard this mall is closing down and they're going to build a bunch of condos instead. Isn't that awful?*

1 Imagine yourself in the following locations. What could you say to start a conversation with a stranger? Add more situations where you could make small talk. Then, with a partner, practise responding to these comments.

1. Waiting for the bus	I hear they're going to raise the bus fare again. What do you think?
2. In line at the grocery store	
3. At your child's daycare	
4. At a work-related seminar	
5. The first day of your ESL class	
6. In your doctor's waiting room	
7. At the community centre	
8. In an airport waiting area	
9.	
10.	
11.	
12.	

2 Choose four of the above locations or another location of your choice. With a partner, role-play a dialogue between two strangers.

Grammar in Context: Tag Questions

Common statements that are used to initiate small talk are often followed by mini questions, for example *It's a beautiful day, isn't it?*, or *You don't live in this building, do you?* These are called tag questions. More colloquial ways of saying tags include *Beautiful weather, eh?/no?/right?* Tag questions are used in small talk to seek confirmation or agreement from another person and are spoken with a falling intonation when used for this purpose.

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- Listen as your teacher models the following short dialogues. Then practise the dialogues with your partner.

A: It's a lovely day, isn't it? B: Yes, it's absolutely gorgeous.	A: This is nasty weather, isn't it? B: Yes, it certainly is.	A: This rain is awful, isn't it? B: Yes, it is.
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- Add a tag to the following statements used to initiate small talk. Then write an appropriate response. Practise reading your exchanges with a partner. Use falling intonation for the tag question and to express agreement when you respond.

1. Example: The food is really great here, isn't it?

Yes, it is.
2. Roberta performed really well, _____?

3. They sure know how to throw a party, _____?

4. The new office isn't very big, _____?

5. Harold did a great job with the presentation this morning, _____?

6. This is such a lovely wedding, _____?

7. That wasn't a great movie last night, _____?

8. Mirella dresses really well, _____?

9. Ms. Jones was a really good teacher, _____?

10. Bonnie is a good friend of yours, _____?

11. They've done a nice job of decorating this place, _____?

12. The music is always so loud in this place, _____?

Complimenting and Responding to Compliments

Complimenting is a common way to start a conversation. Women sometimes compliment each other on their clothing, hairstyle, accessories, etc. It is also common to give compliments on skills, abilities, behaviour, and personal characteristics. You don't have to know a person well to give them a compliment. However, you should be cautious about complimenting a member of the opposite sex as your compliment may be interpreted as flirting.

1 Complete the following sentences so they include compliments. Then add a possible response.

1. A: That's a _____
B: Thank you. I _____
2. A: You look _____
B: _____
3. A: That _____ really suits you.
B: Thanks. _____
4. A: You're a _____
B: Thank you for saying that. _____
5. I love your _____
Thanks. _____
6. Your _____ looks _____
Thank you. _____
7. I love those _____
Thanks. _____
8. What a _____
Thank you. _____

2 Discuss the questions below.

1. When do you think it is not a good idea to compliment someone? Why?
2. What (if any) differences have you noticed about the way people compliment each other in Canada and in your previous country?

Small Talk: Putting It in Practice

1 | Role-play small-talk conversations with a partner using the scenarios below.



Scenario 1: Your ESL centre is having a centre-wide potluck party to celebrate the winter holidays. You are standing in line to get something to eat. Strike up a conversation with the person standing beside you.

Scenario 2: You are attending the reading circle for moms and kids at your local library for the first time. After the storybook reading, everyone stays for coffee and cookies. Initiate a conversation with one of the other moms.

Scenario 3: You are a bank teller at Canadian First Bank. Initiate some small talk with your client.

Scenario 4: You are a dental hygienist working in a dental practice in a shopping mall. Initiate some small talk with your next patient.

Scenario 5: You notice that a new family has moved into the apartment beside yours. Knock on the family's door and welcome them to the neighbourhood. Enjoy some small talk.

Scenario 6: You are a student at a community college. Your class in workplace communication has just ended. As you leave the class, strike up a conversation with one of your classmates.

Scenario 7: It's a cold snowy day and as you leave your house, you see your neighbour shoveling his driveway. Initiate some small talk.

Scenario 8: Your colleague at work has just returned from a maternity leave. Welcome her back and initiate some small talk.

Scenario 9: It's the first warm day of spring. Everybody is walking around enjoying it. You go into your local variety store to buy some milk. Initiate some small talk with the owner of the store.

Scenario 10: You are taking an exercise class at your local community centre. Strike up a conversation with another participant in the class.

Scenario 11: You are at a party held by your friends. You don't know other guests. Initiate small talk with another guest at the party.

Scenario 12: It is Monday morning at work. Initiate small talk with a colleague.