

Small Talk in English

In most English-speaking countries, it is **normal** and **necessary** to make "small talk" in certain situations. Small talk is a casual form of conversation that "**breaks the ice**" or **fills an awkward silence** between people. Even though you may feel shy using your second language, it is sometimes considered rude to say nothing. Just as there are certain times when small talk is appropriate, there are also certain topics that people often discuss during these moments. Remember, in an English-speaking environment it is often better to make a few mistakes than to say nothing at all!

WHO makes small talk?

People with many different relationships use small talk. The most common type of people to use small talk are those who do not know each other at all. Though we often teach **children not to talk to strangers**, adults are expected to say at least a few words in certain situations (see where). It is also common for people who are only **acquaintances**, often called a "**friend of a friend**", to use small talk. Other people who have short casual conversations are office employees who may not be good friends but work in the same department. Customer service **representatives**, waitresses, hairdressers and receptionists often make small talk with customers. If you happen to be outside when the mailman comes to your door you might make small talk with him too.

WHAT do people make small talk about?

There are certain "safe" topics that people usually make small talk about. The weather is probably the number one thing that people who do not know each other well discuss. Sometimes even friends and family members discuss the weather when they meet or start a conversation. Another topic that is generally safe is **current events**. As long as you are **not discussing a controversial issue**, such as a recent law concerning equal rights, it is usually safe to discuss the **news**. Sports news is a very common topic, especially if a local team or player is in a tournament or play-off or doing extremely well or badly. Entertainment news, such as a celebrity who is in town, is another good topic. If there is something that you and the other speaker has in common, that may also be **acceptable** to talk about. For example, if the bus is extremely full and there are no seats available you might talk about reasons why. **Similarly**, people in an office might **casually** discuss the new paint or furniture.

There are also some subjects that are not considered acceptable when making small talk. Discussing personal information such as **salaries** or a **recent divorce** is not done between people who do not know each other well. Compliments on clothing or hair are acceptable; however, you should never say something (good or bad) about a person's body. Negative comments about another person not involved in the conversation are also not acceptable: when you do not know a person well you cannot be sure who their friends are. You do not talk about private issues either, because you do not know if you can trust the other person with your secrets or personal information. Also, it is not safe to **discuss religion or politics**. Lastly, it is not wise to continue talking about an issue that the other person does not seem comfortable with or interested in.

WHERE do people make small talk?

People make small talk just about anywhere, but there are certain places where it is very common. Most often, small talk occurs in places where people are waiting for something. For example, you might chat with another person who is waiting for the bus to arrive, or to the person beside you waiting to get on an aeroplane. People also make small talk in a doctor's or dentist's waiting room, or in **queues at the grocery store**. Some social events (such as a party) require small talk among guests who do not know each other very well. For example, you might talk to someone you do not know at the **punch bowl**, or at the poolside. It is called "**mingling**" when people walk around in a social setting and talk to a variety of people.

WHEN do people make small talk?

The most common time for small talk to occur is the first time you see or meet someone on a given day. For example, if you see a co-worker in the **lounge** you might say hello and discuss the sports or weather. However, the next time you see each other you might just smile and say nothing. Do not interrupt two people in order to discuss something unimportant such as the weather. If someone is reading a book or writing a letter at the bus stop it is not **appropriate** to **initiate** a conversation either. Another good time to make small talk is during a break in a meeting or presentation when there is nothing important going on. Finally, it is important to recognize the cue when the other person wants the conversation to stop.

WHY do people make small talk?

There are a few different reasons why people use small talk. The first, and most obvious, is to **break an uncomfortable silence**. Another reason, however, is simply to **fill time**. That is why it is so common to make small talk when you are waiting for something. Some people make small talk in order to **be polite**. You may not feel like chatting with anyone at a party, but **it is rude to just sit in a corner by yourself**.

Small Talk Practice 1: At a Bus Stop

W: We **could ask** for a better day, could we? — **couldn't ask** — good day

M: I know. There isn't a cloud in the sky. I love this time of year.

W: Me too. The cherry blossoms are beautiful, **you think?** -**aren't they**

M: They sure are. But I heard **he is** calling for rain all weekend. -**they are**

W: Really? Oh well. I have to work all weekend anyway. **I'm a doctor**.

(During Small talk with a stranger, it is not common to discuss personal information relating to work)

M: Wow. I'm sure you make good money with that diamond watch you have on.

(It is not acceptable to discuss salaries while making small talk)

W: Ah, this bus seems to be running late. **How long of a wait is it already?** — **How long have you been waiting**

M: I've been here for at least fifteen minutes now.

W: **Where are you heading today?** — Too personal

M: Actually, I'm going to the City Hall to cast my vote for mayor.

W: Oh, what a coincidence. So am I! **Who are you voting for?**

- **politics is not a safe subject to discuss.**

M: Um, well...I'm still thinking about it.

W: Here comes a bus now.

M: Oh good. Wait, that's not the bus we want. That bus goes downtown.

W: Well, it looks like we'll be waiting a little longer. I guess, I'll use this time to catch up on my reading. - this is signal to stop your small talk.

M: I love reading. Right now I'm reading a Stephen King book. Do you like Stephen King? — so the man did not take the hint, yet we have to end with small talk.

W: Not really.

M: Oh, here's our bus.

W: Oh great. I thought it would never come. Well, have a nice day.

M: Say, did you catch the news today? Nice to meet you, thank you!

Oh great. I thought it would never come. Well, have a nice day.

Small Talk Practice 2: At the Office

W: Hi there.

M: Hi. I haven't seen you around here before. Have you been working long?
have you worked here long?

W: No, I've only been here a few months. I work in the Human Resources Department.

M: Oh, you must make more money than I do then. I'm in Sales.

Oh, That must be why I haven't seen you around. I'm in Sales

It is inappropriate to discuss how much people make in an office during small talk

W: Sales sounds like an interesting job.

M: It's okay. Hey, you look like you could really have a coffee. —use

W: Yes, it's been a really hectic week.

M: Tell me about it! At least it's supposing to be a nice weekend. —supposed

W: Yes, I've listened that they are calling for blue skies. -heard

M: Say, did you happen to catch the game last night?

W: No, I was working late.

M: It was a great game. We won in overtime.

W: Actually, I don't even know who was playing. I don't really follow sports. - is not interested

M: The Chiefs! Do you think they're going to make it to the finals this year?

— You can't continue with this subject because the lead is obviously not interested in it.

W: I'm not sure. Well, I better get back to my desk. — cue with ending this conversation

M: Speaking of desks, what do you think of the new office furniture?

— but the man didn't get this hint, so

W: It's nice, but I would rather get paid for my overtime hours than have new furniture.—Giving your opinion about a controversial subject is not appropriate when making small talk with someone you don't know or trust

M: Oh. Well, I think I'll be heading home early today. It might be snow.

It looks like it might be snow

W: I know. I can't believe all of this cold weather. Hopefully Spring will come soon.

M: I can't wait until Spring.

W: Me neither! My divorce will finally come through by then!

—Private information about one's personal life is not acceptable

Small Talk Practice 3: At a Party

W: 1: (Standing in a corner drinking a glass of wine by herself)

M: Hi there. Why aren't you dancing?

W: 1: (Smiles. No response.)

—It is rude not to say anything or answer someone, even if you are shy or don't know the person.

M: Hello. Have you tried Felicia's punch yet?

W: 2: No, but I was just about to.

M: Don't. It's terrible.

—Keep negative comments out of your small talk. You don't know if the person you are talking about is a close friend of the person you are talking to.

W: 2: Oh. Okay.

M: So, how are you knowing Rick?

— How do you know Rick?

W: 2: Oh, Rick and I go way back. We studied nursing together.

M: Nursing. Hmm. I heard on the radio today that all of you nurses are on strike. Are they not paying you enough?

— During small talk it is not appropriate to discuss salaries.

W: 2: Actually it's about working conditions.

M: I see. So, have you had a chance to take a dip in the pool yet?

W: 2: No, not yet. How about you?

M: No, I need to lose some weight before I put on a bathing suit. But you have a great figure.

— Even though this is a compliment, it may make someone feel uncomfortable. Complimenting clothing is acceptable for small talk, but bodies are not a "safe" topic.

W: 2: Uh, thanks. Well, I better go and jingle. There are a few people I haven't said hello to yet. — mingle

M: Wait! Did you hear that the Pope is coming to town?

— The man did not take the cue that the woman wants to end the conversation. "Wait" is a very direct word that should never be used in small talk. You could say, "Oh, before you go..." or "I don't want to keep you, but..." if you have something very important to add or ask.

W: 2: Ya. I heard that on the news today. I bet it'll be really tough to get to see him.

M: I know. But I'm not Catholic anyway. Are you?

— Religion is not a "safe" subject to discuss during small talk.

W: 2: Yes, I am actually. Well, it looks the sun is finally coming out. I think I'll go take that swim.

M: You better hurry. I hear they are asking for thunderstorms this afternoon.

— they are calling

Small Talk: Conversation Starters

This page covers the language of small talk when starting a conversation in English. However, English speakers **don't always say "hello", "how are you?" and "hi "** because in passing, not appropriate for strangers.

Greetings,

Hey, Leon. How's it going/ how are you /How are you doing?
Doing well/ Doing all right. And yourself?

What's up, What's going on?
Not much, you/ What's up with you?

what's new?
So, how have you been?
What have you been up to?
How was your weekend?
do you have any plans for the weekend?
So, how's it going with (a project, initiative, etc.)...?
So, what do you think about (current event or something new at work)...?
So, did you hear that...?
So, I heard that you are/you're...?

Changing the Topic

Anyway... (followed by a pause — an all-purpose expression for changing the subject)
So, you mentioned earlier that...
Earlier you said that...
Getting back to... (returning to a previous topic)

Continuing a Conversation after an Interruption

Where were we?
Anyway, you were saying...
So as I was saying...

It's been forever! / Long time no see / It's been a while

yes . it has! how have you been?\
what have you been up to?
What is new with you?
meh! not much
I haven't see you in ages! / I haven't seen you for so long!
How long has it been since I last saw you?
When was the last time we saw each other.

How are the kids?
Please say 'hi' to him for me.

Talking about the weather

Beautiful day, isn't it?
Can you believe all of this rain we've been having?
It looks like it's going to snow.
It sure would be nice to be in Hawaii right about now.
I hear they're calling for thunderstorms all weekend. —weather forecast
We couldn't ask for a nicer day, could we?
How about this weather?
Did you order this sunshine?

Talking about current events

Did you catch the news today?
Did you hear about that fire on Fourth St?
What do you think about this transit strike?
I read in the paper today that the Sears Mall is closing.
I heard on the radio today that they are finally going to start building the new bridge.
How about those Jets? Do you think they're going to win tonight?

At the office

Looking forward to the weekend?

Have you worked here long?

I can't believe how busy/quiet we are today, can you?

Has it been a long week?

You look like you could use a cup of coffee.

— because you're very sleepy and need some coffee,

— but there's no coffee nearby.

What do you think of the new computers?

At a social event

So, how do you know Justin? — host

Have you tried the cabbage rolls that someone made? — host

Are you enjoying yourself?

It looks like you could use another drink.

drink — alcohol if you want say tea or coffee,

and you need complete information such as a drink coffee.

Pretty nice place, huh? eh (Canadian)

I love your dress. **Can I ask** where you got it?

Out for a walk

How old's your baby? - break the ice == ice breaker.

What's your puppy's name?

The tulips **are sure beautiful at this time of year**, aren't they.

How do you like the new park?

Nice day to be outside, isn't it?

Waiting somewhere

I didn't think it would be so busy today.

You look like you've got your hands full (with children or goods).

The bus must be running late today.

It looks like we are going to be here a while, huh? eh(Canadian)

I'll have to remember not to come here on Mondays.

How long have you been waiting?

Small talk Techniques:

1. Echo questions

to make echo questions, repeat the verb to be, auxiliary verb, or use 'do' in the correct tense if there isn't an auxiliary verb.

For examples:

- A. I can speak three languages. / They went to Japan last week.
B. Can you? / Did they? — pitch rise and down
— more interest want to get more.
— surprise, awesome, unbelievable.
A. It was an awful party. / I've got a headache.
B. Was it? / Have you, Dear? I'll get you an aspirin.
A. He doesn't do his homework. B: Doesn't he \ he doesn't - pitch down
— unhappy, let it go quickly. don't feel well.

2. Echo words

Repetition of key words back to the speaker also helps to show interest in what the speaker is saying. Echo words can also be used to direct the conversation, depending on which echo word is used.

For examples:

- A. I have just brought a new sports car. It cost \$100,000. B: \$100,000.
A. I'm going to Italy next week. B: Italy.
A. It took me two hours to get there. B: Two hours

3. Showing attention and agreement.

When making small talk, it's a good idea to show agreement and sound curious about what the speaker is saying, what other words can you think of to show attention and agreement?

Normal response: Stronger response:

oh, I see.	Really?	Yeah.	Uh-huh.	yes.	Right.
Sure.	How interesting.		all right.	I know,	if you like,
of course.	I know what you mean.		I don't blame you.		pretty cool,
cool,	fair enough,		I take your point.		It's a deal,
how come,	oh, yeah,		wow, that's amazing!		No way!
that' incredible!		tell me about it.		absolutely!	I agree.
definitely.		I also think that.		That's interesting.	
hmm,	actually,	basically,	seriously,		you see,
You know what I mean?		At the end of the day.			Believe me.
me too,	same here,	likewise.			you too.
for sure.	That's great,	That's wonderful!	congratulations!	awesome ,	
	fantastic,	I'm really sorry to hear that.	that's terrible,	that 's awful	
	well I hope everything will be alright.		I just can't believe it.		

4. 'Wh' follow- up questions

To keep a conversation going and to help show interest ask "Wh' follow-up questions (Open question). Remember to use the other techniques along with asking 'Wh' questions, otherwise it may sound like you are 'grilling ' the other person.

For example:

A: I went to the hospital yesterday.

B: Really? Why was that, then? / I see. what did the doctor say?

A: He teaches English. B: English. Really? Where does he teach?

A She worked there for 10 years. B: Did she? How interesting, How come?

How To Agree In English.

For example :

1. I love strawberry ice cream. Me too! (to agree with a positive statement)
2. I don't can't draw very well. Me neither.(to agree with a negative statement)

A: I always sleep late on the weekends.

B: So do I. — me too,

B: Sorry /oh, I don't always sleep late.

A: I don't think that's a good idea.

B: neither do I.

B: Sorry/oh, I think that's a good idea.

So am I / Neither am I

So did I / Neither did I

So was I / Neither was I

So have I / Neither have I

So can I / Neither can I

So will I / neither will I

So Would I / neither would I

Making Invitations

1. **I would like to invite you to** a reception next Sunday at my home.
2. **I would like to invite you to** dinner at the new French restaurant(Formal)
3. **Would you care / like to** join us for dessert and coffee?
4. **Would you care /like to** got o Washington with me next month?
5. **I was wondering if you'd like to** go to the pool on Saturdays.
6. **I was wondering if you'd like to** come to dinner on Tuesday evening.

7. **How/ What about** a movie tonight?
8. **How / What about** a quick game of pool before we go home?
9. **How / What about** canoeing at the lake tomorrow afternoon?
10. **How / What about** camping out at mount Mitchell next weekend?
11. **Why not /don't you** jog with me this afternoon?
12. **Why not / don't you** stop by for a visit on your way home?

Accepting invitations

1. Thank you very much.(Formal)
2. Thanks for your invitation. I'd be delighted to / love to!
3. **Thanks. I'd like to** have dinner with you on Monday.
4. **Thanks. I'd like to** visit you next weekend at the beach.
5. Suer. That would be fun / wonderful.
6. **What a nice /terrific idea!** I'd really like that. / I 'd love to!
7. Sounds great! / Sounds like fun! (informal)
8. Sure (thing)!(informal)

Declining Invitations

1. **Thank you, but I'm afraid I have** other plans for that night.
2. **Thank you, but I'm afraid I have** an appointment that day.
3. **I'm sorry. I can't** go to the movie with you.
4. **I'm sorry. I can't** join you in New York that weekend.
5. I wish I could, But I'm busy. Maybe another time. thought.
6. I hate to turn you down, but I must(offer excuse).
7. I would love /like to any other time .but I've already made plans.
8. Thanks for asking, but offer excuse)
9. I appreciate the invitation. but I'm afraid I can't
10. I'm afraid I can't but thanks anyway.
11. I'm tied up that day /night. what about the 14th? / a rain check?

Hesitation strategies:

1. I'm not sure what my plans are at this moment. Could I let you known on Friday?
2. I may be busy that day. Do you mind if I tell you in a few days?
3. My plans for that day are still up in the air. I'll let you know by Tuesday, if that's okay with you.
4. I appreciate the invitation, but I might have an appointment at that time. Could I let you know later this week?
5. Thanks a lot for the invitation, But I'll have to check my calendar, could I get back to you tonight.

Small Talk Farewells

1. Pleasantries

1. It was a pleasure meeting you.
2. It enjoyed meeting you.(first time)
3. It enjoyed talking to you.
4. it's been good seeing you again. (no see sb a few time)
5. It's glad, I ran into you./ It's been nice talking to you.

2. Time - related expressions

1. I had better be going.(I 'd better be going)
2. It's getting late, I've got to go (to run/ to hurry)
3. Look at the time! I should go.
4. Where has the time gone. I guess, I d better be running along.
5. it's getting late, I had better run. (advice)
6. Well, I have to run. It was nice talking to you.
7. Well, I know you're busy. I won't take up any more of your time.
8. I should let you go, You get back to work.

3. Wishes to keep in touch

1. Let's get together soon.
2. give me a call sometime. (Not s)
3. keep in touch.
4. Let's have dinner soon.
5. Stop by and see me sometime.

4. Good byes

1. take care. / have a good one./ have a good day.
2. take it easy / be safe/
3. see you around.
4. catch you later / later.