

Speaking of Nothing

Why we talk about the weather and other trivial topics

- A** Some workers are happier in their jobs than others, but it's not only to do with the work itself. For example, security guards, truck drivers and salespeople—year after year, these jobs appear on lists of the unhappiest careers. It's true that many factors can make a job cheerless, including unusual hours, low pay and a lack of chances for advancement. However, these three types of work stand out for another reason: they're characterised by a lack of conversation or by meaningless small talk, which unfortunately represents an obligatory part of the job. Examples of such small talk include comments about the weather, holiday destinations and food. Psychologists have long said that connecting with others through meaningful exchanges is central to well-being, but just how much conversation we require is under investigation.
- B** Matthias R. Mehl and Simine Vazire of the University of Arizona in the United States wanted to investigate the types of conversations people have. The team used a device to periodically record short verbal exchanges while participants went about their daily tasks. In the study, the researchers eavesdropped on undergraduates for four days, then catalogued each overheard conversation as either 'small talk' ("What do you have there? Popcorn? That looks good!") or 'substantive' ("So did their proposal get funding?" "How did you feel?"). They found that people who had more substantive conversations were more likely to say they were feeling happy and fulfilled overall. In fact, the happiest students had roughly twice as many substantive talks as the unhappiest ones. Small talk, meanwhile, made up only 10 per cent of their conversation, versus almost 30 per cent of conversation among the least content students.
- C** However, small talk still has a role to play. Rather than convey information, scientists believe that it can promote bonding. Ipek Kulahci and her team of researchers at University College Cork in Ireland tested the relationship between vocal exchanges and grooming in lemurs. The researchers reported that the animals reserve their call-and-response conversations, equivalent to human chitchat, for the animals they groom the most—suggesting that small talk maintains closeness with loved ones, and isn't merely for awkward exchanges with strangers. It appears that, even among animals, vocal exchanges indicate strong social bonds between the group members.

- D Connecting with others seems to increase happiness, but strangers in close proximity routinely ignore each other. To examine the experience of connecting to strangers, psychologists Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder from the University of Chicago in the United States gave volunteers varying directions about whether to talk with other commuters who usually took the same train to work every day—something they typically avoided. Those told to chat with others reported a more pleasant journey than those told to “enjoy your solitude” or do whatever they normally would. All of the volunteers in the study who initiated conversations reported a positive reaction from the people they spoke to. Participants had predicted precisely the opposite outcome. They expected that the others on the train would have preferred to be left alone.
- E When we buy a cup of coffee at a café, we sometimes chat with the service staff, but on other occasions we say as little as possible so as not to waste time. Every day we have opportunities to transform potentially impersonal exchanges into genuine social interactions; in other words, treating a service provider like we would an acquaintance might make us happier. In a study by Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn, people who had a social interaction with a server in a coffee shop felt better emotionally than people who were in a rush to get everything done. As well as feeling happier, the first group had a stronger sense of belonging. These results suggest that, although people are often reluctant to have a genuine social interaction with a stranger, they are happier when they do. In similar studies, when volunteers broke the silence at a gallery to chat with other visitors, the visitors felt happier and more connected to the paintings than those who were not approached. The pleasure of connection seems contagious; in a laboratory waiting room, participants who were talked to had equally positive experiences as those instructed to talk to them.
- F Of course, some of us are better than others at small talk. In a study by Todd Kashdan and his team from George Mason University in the United States, people who were rated by the researchers as ‘less curious’ about all aspects of life had trouble getting a conversation going on their own. However, they had greater luck building closeness with others when they were supplied with topics that encouraged people to open up about themselves and their lives. But people who were deemed ‘curious’ needed no help transforming conversations about ordinary things like favourite holidays into other areas of conversation that allowed for intimate exchanges. The study showed that curious people expect to generate closeness during intimate conversations but not during small talk; less curious people anticipated poor outcomes in both situations. In an experiment by William Fleeson at Wake Forest University in the United States, participants were divided into two groups—those who were naturally outgoing, and those who were more reserved in social situations. They were then instructed to behave in the opposite manner to their usual nature. Participants reported more positive feelings when instructed to act extroverted than when instructed to act introverted. The overall conclusion, therefore, is that everyone can benefit from more conversation; the more meaningful, the better.

READING PASSAGE 2

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 14–29**, which are based on Reading Passage 2 on the following pages.

Questions 14–19

Reading Passage 2 has six paragraphs, **A–F**.

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph from the list of headings below.

Write the correct number, **i–ix**, in boxes 14–19 on your answer sheet.

List of Headings

- i How sounds and physical contact strengthen social connections
- ii A cross-cultural study of superficial interaction
- iii An experiment that led to surprising results
- iv A study that categorised types of spoken exchanges
- v The personality types that find small talk more difficult
- vi The effect of social media on conversation skills
- vii Some occupations involve little or no interesting conversation
- viii A campaign to improve interaction in the workplace
- ix A range of common situations that were enhanced by small talk

14 Paragraph **A**

15 Paragraph **B**

16 Paragraph **C**

17 Paragraph **D**

18 Paragraph **E**

19 Paragraph **F**

Questions 20–25

Look at the following statements (Questions 20–25) and the list of people below.

Match each statement with the correct person, **A–E**.

Write the correct letter, **A–E**, in boxes 20–25 on your answer sheet.

NB You may use any letter more than once.

- 20 Interacting socially is preferable to hurrying through a transaction.
- 21 If someone is truly uninterested in the wider world, they'll find small talk more difficult.
- 22 People who had been unwilling to start a conversation ended up enjoying a social exchange.
- 23 People whose conversations are mainly of a personal and meaningful nature are more satisfied with their lives.
- 24 There is more than one species whose members communicate for social reasons.
- 25 Some people find it easier than others to change the subject of a conversation.

List of Researchers

- A** Matthias R. Mehl and Simine Vazire
- B** Ipek Kulahci
- C** Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder
- D** Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn
- E** Todd Kashdan

Questions 26–29

Complete the sentences below.

Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the passage for each answer.

Write your answers in boxes 26–29 on your answer sheet.

- 26 In the case of salespeople, some meaningless small talk is _____ when dealing with customers.
- 27 In a study that took place on a train, volunteers approached people who were regular _____.
- 28 In an experiment in an art gallery, people related more to the _____ when they were drawn into a conversation.
- 29 Introverted people found it helpful to be given _____ which they could use to start conversations.

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一、匹配标题 (14–19)

题号	答案	题干翻译	精确定位句	定位句详细翻译	详细解释
14	vii	(vii) Some occupations involve little or no interesting conversation = 某些职业几乎没有或没有有趣的交谈	"However, these three types of work stand out for another reason: they're characterised by a lack of conversation or by meaningless small talk, which unfortunately represents an obligatory part of the job." (第A段)	"然而, 这三种工作还有另一个显著特点: 要么缺少交谈, 要么只有无意义的寒暄, 而且不幸的是, 这种寒暄还是工作中不可或缺的一部分。”	第A段以保安、卡车司机、推销员为例, 核心信息就是这些职业“没有谈话/只有无意义的闲聊”, 与(vii)完全对应。排除: 不是(iv)分类研究; 也不是(i)声音+身体接触。
15	iv	(iv) A study that categorised types of spoken exchanges = 把口头交流按类型进行分类的研究	"the researchers... catalogued each overheard conversation as either 'small talk' ... or 'substantive' ..." (第B段)	"研究者.....把偷听到的每段谈话归类为‘闲聊’或‘实质性交谈’.....”	关键词“catalogued... as either... or...”正是“按类型分类”。随后又比较两类谈话与幸福感的关系。
16	i	(i) How sounds and physical contact strengthen social connections = 声音与身体接触如何强化社会联结	"tested the relationship between vocal exchanges and grooming in lemurs... animals reserve their call-and-response conversations... for the animals they groom the most" (第C段)	"(研究) 测试狐猴的发声交流与互相梳理之间的关系.....它们把类似人类闲聊的你来我往的叫声留给梳理关系最密切的个体。”	第C段同时出现“vocal (声音)”与“grooming (身体接触)”, 说明二者共同巩固社会纽带, 完全契合(i)。
17	iii	(iii) An experiment that led to surprising results = 产生出乎意料结果的实验	"Those told to chat with others reported a more pleasant journey... Participants had predicted precisely the opposite outcome. They expected that the others... would have preferred to be left alone." (第D段)	"被要求与人聊天的参与者表示旅途更愉快.....而参与者事前的预测恰恰相反。他们以为别人宁愿被独自留下。”	实验前后预期与实际相反, “出人意料”非常明显; 同时出现“train commuters”场景。
18	ix	(ix) A range of common situations that were enhanced by small talk = 多种常见情境因闲聊而更美好	"In a study... in a coffee shop... In similar studies, when volunteers broke the silence at a gallery... In a laboratory waiting room, participants who were talked to..." (第E段)	"在咖啡店.....在类似研究中, 当志愿者在美术馆打破沉默.....在实验室候诊室里, 被搭话的参与者.....”	一口气给出三种日常情境 (咖啡店/美术馆/候诊室), 都因交谈而更积极, 与(ix)完全对应。
19	v	(v) The personality types that find small talk more difficult = 某些人格更难进行闲聊	"people rated as 'less curious'... had trouble getting a conversation going... people who were deemed 'curious' needed no help..." (第F段)	"被评为**‘不太好奇’的人.....很难自己把谈话开展起来.....而被评为‘好奇’**的人则不需要帮助。”	第F段对比“less curious/curious”(亦涉及外倾/内倾操纵), 说明不同人格在闲聊能力上差异显著。

二、配对研究者 (20–25)

题号	答案	题干翻译	精确定位句	定位句详细翻译	详细解释
20	D (Gillian Sandstrom & Elizabeth Dunn)	把一次交易匆匆了结, 不如进行社交互动。	"people who had a social interaction with a server in a coffee shop felt better... than people who were in a rush to get everything done." (第E段)	"在咖啡店与服务员发生社交互动的人比那些赶时间把事情做完的人情绪更好。”	直接比较“互动”vs“赶紧做完”, 结论是前者更好 → 选D。
21	E (Todd Kashdan)	如果一个人对更广阔的世界缺乏兴趣, 他会很难进行闲聊。	"people who were rated as 'less curious'... had trouble getting a conversation going on their own." (第F段)	"被评为**‘不太好奇’的人.....很难自己把谈话开展**起来。”	"less curious (不太好奇/不感兴趣) → 小谈话更困难”, 与题意一致。
22	C (Nicholas Epley & Juliana Schroeder)	那些起初不愿主动开口的人, 最后也享受了这次社交。	"Those told to chat with others reported a more pleasant journey... Participants had predicted precisely the opposite outcome. They expected the others... preferred to be left alone." (第D段)	"被要求与人攀谈的人报告旅途更愉快.....参与者先前预测恰好相反; 他们以为别人宁愿独处。”	参与者原本以为别人不想被打扰 (不愿开口/不愿开始), 但真正去聊后, 反馈积极、旅程更愉快 → 与题干“最后享受社交”吻合。
23	A (Matthias R. Mehl & Simine Vazire)	主要进行个性化且有意义的谈话的人对生活更满意。	"people who had more substantive conversations were more likely to say they were feeling happy and fulfilled overall." (第B段)	"拥有很多实质性交谈的人更可能表示自己整体上感到幸福且满足。”	"substantive (有实质/有意义)”与“幸福满足”正向相关 → 选A。
24	B (Ipek Kulahci)	不止一种物种会为了社交而交流。	"tested the relationship between vocal exchanges and grooming in lemurs... It appears that, even among animals, vocal exchanges indicate strong social bonds." (第C段)	"在狐猴身上测试发声交流与梳理的关系.....看起来, 即便在动物当中, 发声交流也表明强社会纽带。”	文段明确: 动物 (至少狐猴 + 对比人类) 也用“闲聊式”发声维系关系 → “不止一种物种”。
25	E (Todd Kashdan)	有些人比另一些人更容易把谈话引向新的主题。	"people who were deemed 'curious' needed no help transforming conversations about ordinary things... into other areas of conversation that allowed for intimate exchanges." (第F段)	"被评为**‘好奇’的人无需帮助就能把关于日常话题的谈话转到其他领域**, 从而达成更亲密的交流。”	关键词“transforming... into other areas (把话题转向别处)”, 体现“更容易换话题”。因此选E。

三、句子填空 (26–29)

(每题 ONE WORD ONLY)

题号	答案	题干翻译	精确定位句	定位句详细翻译	详细解释
26	obligatory	就推销员而言，与顾客打交道时，一些无意义的寒暄是_____的。	"...meaningless small talk, which unfortunately represents an obligatory part of the job." (第 A 段)	".....无意义的闲聊，不幸的是这是工作中必不可少的一部分。”	题干指“与顾客交往的推销员”，属于 A 段三类职业之一；原文给出“obligatory (必需/硬性)”。
27	commuters	在一项发生在火车上的研究中，志愿者接近的是经常乘坐该线的常规_____。	"...talk with other commuters who usually took the same train to work every day..." (第 D 段)	".....与其他通勤者交谈，那些人通常每天乘同一趟列车去上班....."	空格名词复数，原词即“commuters”。
28	paintings	在美术馆实验中，当人们被带入谈话时，他们对_____的共鸣更强。	"...the visitors felt happier and more connected to the paintings than those who were not approached." (第 E 段)	".....被搭话的参观者比未被搭话者更快乐，也与这些画作建立了更强的联结。”	“connected to the paintings ” 对应 “related more to the _____”。
29	topics	内向者发现，被给予可以用来开启谈话的_____很有帮助。	"they had greater luck building closeness with others when they were supplied with topics that encouraged people to open up..." (第 F 段)	"当他们被提供一些话题以鼓励对方敞开心扉时，更容易与他人建立亲近感。”	文中 “less curious/更内向保守的人” 在被**提供话题 (topics)**时更容易开展谈话。题目用 “introverted” 概括此类人群，填原词 “topics”。