

**How to make small talk anywhere**

Are you already kind of dreading meeting your freshman dorm roommate for the first time, wondering what you’re going to say?

When you spot an acquaintance in a store, do you hope they don’t see you, pretend you don’t see them, and try to covertly duck into another aisle?

Does the idea of walking into a party where you only know one person fill you with dread?

Do you keep trying to summon up the courage to talk to the cute girl who makes your lattes at the local coffee shop, but whenever you get up to the counter, all you can muster is your order?

When you’re assigned to a table filled mostly with strangers at a wedding, do you talk only with your date, or sit hunched over your phone all night?

We’ve talked about the basics of good conversation before (see [here](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2010/09/24/the-art-of-conversation/) and [here](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2011/05/01/the-art-of-conversation-how-to-avoid-conversational-narcissism/)), but today we want to discuss the little dance you have to do before you get to plunge into that deeper level of communication: small talk. Small talk is the back and forth you have with strangers and acquaintances and even family members that you rarely see.

It’s easy to dismiss small talk as idle chit-chat, or superficial or pointless, and claim to only be interested in “real” conversation. But how do you get to the point of having a deeper conversation with someone in the first place? Someone you just met would be weirded out if you just walked up to them and asked, “Why do you think God allows bad things to happen to good people?” Conversation is a ladder, with small talk serving as the first few rungs. You can’t leap-frog up the ladder. That would be like trying to sprint before warming up, or cook a steak without defrosting it, or merge onto a highway without building up speed on the on-ramp, or…well you get the idea.

Think about it. How did all of your current most important non-familial relationships begin? Most likely with a bit of small talk one day. Asking about a homework assignment in chemistry class or commiserating about the pain you were in while doing bear crawls down the football field. And now you’re best buds.

Small talk is the portal through which every person you will ever meet will enter your life. That’s huge when you ponder it. You never know who you’re going to encounter in a class, at a coffee shop, at the gym, at a wedding; they could be your future business partner or boss, your future best friend or wife. You simply never know when someone you meet will send your life in a new direction. But if you can’t initiate these relationships, your circle of contacts and intimates will never expand past the current roster of friends whose Facebook updates and tweets you can’t take your eyes off of in order to meet the gaze of those sitting right next to you.

**Conversation with Strangers**

We often feel self-conscious engaging a stranger in small talk, butmost people are feeling as shy and insecure as you are. It’s a great comfort and relief when someone takes the initiative to talk to them, saving them from standing alone by the punch bowl while they feel awkward and conspicuous. People love to talk (especially about themselves), and are typically flattered when someone is paying attention to them.

Look for someone who seems approachable, who’s by himself and isn’t talking to someone else or working on something. Make eye contact, smile at them, and then go up to greet them.

But what then? Anyone who’s had their small talk disintegrate after an exchange of “What do you do?” may worry that their attempt to initiate conservation will fizzle into awkwardness. But when you know what you’re doing, you can sail right over any potential slumps.

**The ARE method of initiating small talk**.Communications expert Dr. Carol Fleming offers a three-part process to kick off a conversation: Anchor, Reveal, Encourage (ARE).

***Anchor.*** This is an observation on your “mutual shared reality” that extends the first little thread of connection between you and another person — the lightest of pleasantries about something you’re both seeing or experiencing.

Dr. Landis is hilarious.

The set list tonight has been fantastic.

This weather is perfect.

Don’t get caught up thinking that such comments are too superficial, and search in vain for something truly clever to say. Fleming calls such exchanges “friendly noises,” and you both know they’re not meaningful, but just a gradual and polite way to segue into a “real” conversation.

***Reveal.*** Next, disclose something about yourself that is related to the anchor you just threw out.

I’ve tried to get into Dr. Landis’ class for three semesters, and this is the first time I was able to land a spot.

There’s a much bigger crowd here than there was at their show last year.

I’ve been waiting for a break in the heat to go hike Mt. Whilston for the first time.

By opening up a little more, we extend to the other person a few more threads of connection and trust, while at the same time providing them fodder to which to respond.

***Encourage.*** Now you hand off the ball to them by asking a question:

Did you have a hard time getting into the class?

Did you see that show?

Have you ever done that hike?

**Keep building the conversation**. By employing the effective ARE method, you’ll successfully have exchanged a few pleasantries, but these tender threads of small talk can easily disintegrate and blow away at this point…when the dreaded awkward pause shows up.

So you want to weave those light threads into an increasingly sturdy rope. You do this by offering follow-up comments and questions that continue to build the conversation. Let’s take a look at how our three example conversations might progress:

You: Dr. Landis is hilarious. I’ve tried to get into his class for three semesters and this is the first time I was able to land a spot. Did you have a hard time getting into the class?

Person: Yeah, I actually sat on the stairs for the first few classes, and just hoped some people would drop out. Luckily they did, and he added me.

*Once the person has answered your initial question, you can use a follow-up comment or question – each designed to prompt a response. Giving a comment takes more skill, as you have to craft one that will continue the back and forth. Ideally, you should form both a comment and a back-up question in your mind so that if they respond with only a laugh or an uh-huh, you’re ready to get things moving again.*

*A clever/humorous comment is one option for your follow-up:*

You (said jokingly): I’m thinking you had something to do with their disappearance!

Person (laughs): Oh, for sure! I tell ya, people are dying to get in here.

You: Are you taking this class for your major or just because you want to?

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You: The set list tonight has been fantastic. There’s a much bigger crowd here than at their show last year. Did you see that one?

Person: No, I didn’t actually didn’t discover this band until a few weeks ago.

*There’s no good comment to give here that would keep the conversation going, so a follow-up question is most appropriate.*

You: Oh yeah? How did you find out about them?

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You: This weather is perfect. I’ve been waiting for a break in the heat to hike Mt. Wilston. Have you ever done that hike?

Person: No, I haven’t.

*Instead of being clever, another option for your follow-up comment is to share a little more about yourself.*

You: It’s one of my favorite hikes. It only takes about an hour and a half to get to the top from the trailhead and the view is awesome.

Person: Well the most I’ve hiked is up the hill on campus, but that does sound pretty doable.

You: I think me and a couple of friends will be doing it tomorrow. If you’re interested in coming along, let me know. I’m in 3B.

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Whether you follow-up with a comment or question, be sure to alternate between the two options. Strike a balance: too many questions fired one right after the other will make the conversation feel more like an interrogation, and too many comments won’t give the other person a chance to talk. That’s no good, as your interest in what they have to say is what endears you to them.

So tip the scale more heavily towards questions. Once they respond to one question, you ask clarifying questions about their answer. Start with questions that can be answered with one or two words, and then build on those to expand into open-ended questions that won’t put them on the spot, but will allow them to reveal more or less about themselves, depending on their comfort level. Use questions that begin with phrases like:

Tell me about…

What was the best part of…

How did you feel about…

What brought you to…

What’s surprised you most…

How similar/different is that to…

Why…

Here are some effective small talk chains, with the common, but less open-ended questions marked through, and a better alternative following it:

Where are you from? → ~~Did you live there all of your life?~~  What was it like to grow up there? → What brought you here? → Are any of your family members close by? →  ~~How many siblings do you have?~~ Tell me more about your family. → Is it tough being away from them? → What do you miss most about your hometown?

What are you majoring in? → What made you decide to choose that major? → ~~How do you like it?~~ What’s been the best class you’ve taken so far? → Tell me more about it. → What was the most interesting part of the class? → Do you think you might write about that for your thesis?

What do you do? → ~~Do you like your job?~~ Describe a typical day at work. → How has the economy affected business? → Why has your company thrived while others have taken a beating? → Would you recommend a young man like myself going into the field? → Do you know anyone who might be looking for an intern?

Starting some small talk with an acquaintance – someone you only chat with a bit at church each Sunday, a coworker you see around the office sometimes, an old friend you don’t keep in very good contact with but run into occasionally – requires a different approach than breaking the ice with a stranger. In an encounter with an acquaintance, you’ll likely start with a question, but how you craft that question is important.

**Ask open-ended questions.** Here’s how it usually goes: How was your weekend? How’s your day going? How have you been? Whatadya been up to? Fine. Fine. Good. Not much…cue the crickets! Questions like these are conversation killers — they only prompt a one or two word response, and are basically used by most people as rote hellos in passing, not as questions where an actual answer is expected.

So you have to follow up:

How was your weekend? *Good.* What did you do?

How’s your day going? *Good.* What’s been the best part so far?

How have you been? *Good.* What’s been going well for you?

If the acquaintance gives another abbreviated response, you can say something like, “What else? I really want to know.” People are used to going through the motions with folks, and are looking for permission to talk a little about themselves. But if they remain reticent, they may simply not want to talk, and you should always respect that.

Catching up with an acquaintance has unique pitfalls: you know only an outline of his life, but you don’t know what’s changed in it since the last time you talked. So you want to frame your questions with care and keep them neutral to avoid “stepping in it:”

~~Have you landed a job yet~~? (turns out he’s still unemployed) → What’s been going on with the job search lately?

~~How’s Jen?~~ (she just dumped him) → Bring me up to date about you and Jen.

~~I heard you took a trip out to Cali last month. That must have been awesome!~~ (he had to go to California because his dad died) à What brought you out to California last month?

~~How long have you two been dating~~? (they haven’t discussed whether they are actually dating yet) à How did you two meet?

Some of the easiest and best questions simply come from observing people and their surroundings:

I see you got your Ph.D from the University of Washington. Why did you pick that school?

Ah, you’re reading *The Great Gatsby*? That’s my favorite book. How are you liking it?

I can’t help but notice you’re a fan of the Jets. Who do you think their starting QB is going to be?

Tell me about this picture. Are you running a marathon? Who’s running with you?

How do you like your Jeep Wrangler?

Where did you get your hair cut? I’m looking for a good barber.

**Listen.** You can start a conversation by building on something someone said that wasn’t directly addressed to you, but you were privy to.

For example, in smaller classes in college, sometimes the professor will have everyone introduce themselves on the first day of class. If there’s someone in the class you’d like to get know more, you can later start a conversation by saying something like: You mentioned you were from Colorado. What part?

Or after a business presentation, go up to the speaker and say: I thought you made an interesting point about the benefits the traditional newspaper offers over the online version. What do you think is the future of print?

**Compliment.** A good way to kick off some small talk is to tie a compliment and a question together:

That’s a really nice fountain pen. Is it hard to learn to write with one?

I was really impressed with the patience you showed with those kids today. How do you stay so calm when they’re bouncing off the walls?

When complimenting a woman, stick with a behavior, accomplishment, or article of clothing rather than a body part.

If you’re at a table with a group of people and the small talk hits a snag, remember the acronym FORM:

**F**amily. Tell me about your family. Are your siblings alike or different? What new things is your kid doing these days? How’s your grandpa’s health?

**O**ccupation. What are the best and worst parts of your job? How has the economy affected your industry?

**R**ecreation. Are you still running these days? Have you gone on any camping trips lately? What’s the latest thing you’ve built in your workshop? Seen any good movies lately? Read any good books?

**M**otivation. Where do you hope to be in five years? Do you find your job satisfying? What do you like about your new church?

It’s true what Dale Carnegie said: “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years trying to get other people interested in you.”

But it’s also nice when others initiate the conversation. Sometimes you’re just not in “host” mode and raring to initiate conversation, but you’re still open for small talk. If you want strangers to strike up a conversation with you, you need to put out the vibe that you’re open to it and that you’d be an interesting person to talk with. You need to be approachable.

In figuring out how to be a more approachable, just take a look around the room. What people attract you, and which do you seek to avoid. What does each set do or neglect to do?

**Wear a conversation piece.** People often feel the most comfortable in approaching you to ask about some specific item you’re wearing. An arrestingly handsome tie (not a novelty tie), an interesting tie tack, a lapel pin, a unique (but tasteful) [ring, watch, or necklace](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/03/20/mans-guide-wearing-jewelry/), even a printed t-shirt (I’m not talking Affliction here, you know…let’s say [one with “Semper Virilis” on it](http://www.tankfarmco.com/MANLINESS-p4043-c4207.html), for example) worn in a casual setting, can all easily inspire curious questions that spark a conversation.

Our nonverbal body language accounts for the majority of how others perceive us. Body language that is warm and inviting will draw others to you and make them feel comfortable conversing.

Arthur Wassmer came up with the last acronym we’ll cover today — SOFTEN — to describe the elements of nonverbal behavior that attract others:

**S**mile. A warm, friendly smile puts others at ease. When you’re walking around, display a slight, soft smile. After you make eye contact with someone, give them a bigger, genuine smile.

**O**pen posture. Instead of standing at an angle, with your arms crossed or in your pockets, face others directly and hang your arms naturally by your sides.

**F**orward lean. When listening or speaking, leaning in shows someone you are paying attention. The more intimacy you build with someone, the closer you can lean, but at first, respect the person’s physical space.

**T**ouch by shaking hands. [A good hearty handshake](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2011/08/22/manly-handshake/), where the web between your thumb and pointer finger meets theirs, conveys confidence and vitality.

**E**ye contact. Being able to make eye contact shows you’re confident and builds intimacy with others. We’ve written some seriously great articles on [the importance of eye contact](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/02/05/look-em-in-the-eye-part-i-the-importance-of-eye-contact/) and [how to do it right](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/02/12/look-em-in-the-eye-part-ii-how-to-make-eye-contact-the-right-way-in-life-business-and-love/), that I highly recommend reading.

**N**od.  [Whenever you listen to someone speak](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/05/08/listen-up-part-ii-15-techniques-to-improve-our-listening/), nodding, along with other verbal and nonverbal forms of feedback like “uh-huhs”  and “hmmms,” show you’re focused on what the speaker has to say.

**Be well-groomed and well-dressed.** Not over dressed – that will drive folks away and make you seem uptight. But don some clean clothes that fit well and exhibit your own style and lots of confidence.

And a note about facial hair…it’s a dynamo conversation starter. Everyone wants to comment on my mustache. And beards, while they used to be the mark of the crusty backwoodsman or shifty rebel, are now often read by folks as “approachable” – the look of a super laid-back, good-humored guy.

**Offer your name to those you’ve met before.** A new acquaintance may not remember it. A former professor may have had thousands of students come through their classes. Trying to figure out your name as you talk, along with the worry that the fact they don’t know it will be revealed, will distract them from focusing on the conversation. So just offer it up when you see them:  Hi, Dr. Smith, Brett McKay from last year’s History 101!