

## SMALL TALK

### Conversation starters

- Tell me about you.
- Have you been working on anything exciting lately?
- What's your story?
- What personal passion project are you working on right now?
- How do you know the host?
- How long have you been a part of this organization?
- What was the highlight of your day today?
- What was the highlight of your week?
- Have you been to an event like this before?
- What was the high-point and low-point of your day so far?
- Has this been a busy time for you?
- How's that artwork / game?

### Keep the Conversation Going

- What are you doing this weekend?
- Did you do anything fun this past weekend?
- What are your favorite restaurants around here?
- Keeping up with \_\_sport/tv show/news\_\_ recently?
- Can you recommend any unique desserts here?
- All the food looks so good... I'm not sure what to get! What are you thinking?
- What a beautiful/cool/ugly/bizarre venue. Have you been here before?
- Did you see that viral \_\_\_\_ YouTube video? It was all over my social media today.
- I'm making a coffee / going to grab a drink, does anyone else want one?

### Take Your Conversation to a Deeper Level

- If you had to pick any character in a book, movie or TV show who is most similar to you, who would you choose? Why?
- When you were growing up what was your dream job? Is any part of that still true?
- What's your biggest fear?
- What's your biggest regret?
- Who is your role model?

### Conversation Starters for Work Appropriate Topics

- Is there a charitable cause you support?
- I'm a bit nervous about the \_\_\_\_\_. Have you ever done it before?
- What has been the best thing about working here?
- Have you learned any insider tips about working here?

(Adapted from <https://ideas.ted.com/how-to-turn-small-talk-into-smart-conversation/>)

One way to get beyond small talk is to ask open-ended questions. Aim for questions that invite people to tell stories, rather than give bland, one-word answers.

Instead of . . .

“How are you?”

“How was your day?”

“Where are you from?”

“What do you do?”

“What line of work are you in?”

“What’s your name?”

“How was your weekend?”

“What’s up?”

“Would you like some wine?”

“How long have you been living here?”

Try . . .

“What’s your story?”

“What did you do today?”

“What’s the strangest thing about where you grew up?”

“What’s the most interesting thing that happened at work today?”

“How’d you end up in your line of work?”

“What does your name mean? What would you like it to mean?”

“What was the best part of your weekend?”

“What are you looking forward to this week?”

“Who do you think is the luckiest person in this room?”

“What does this house remind you of?”

“If you could teleport by blinking your eyes, where would you go right now?”

### Break the mirror

When small talk stalls out, it’s often due to a phenomenon we call “mirroring.” In our attempts to be polite, we often answer people’s questions directly, repeat their observations, or just blandly agree with whatever they say.

Mirrored example:

James: It’s a beautiful day!

John: Yes, it is a beautiful day!

See? By mirroring James’s opinion and language, John has followed the social norm, but he’s also paralysed the discussion and missed a moment of fun. Instead, John needs to practice the art of disruption and move the dialogue forward:

Non-mirrored example:

James: It’s a beautiful day!

John: They say that the weather was just like this when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. If that actually happened.

See? Now James and John are talking! Be provocative. Absurdity is underrated.

Leapfrog over the expected response

An even better way to break the boring-conversation mirror is to skip over the expected response, and go somewhere next-level:

Instead of:

Ron: How was your flight?

Carlos: My flight was good!

Beverly: It's hot today.

Gino: Yeah, it sure is hot.

Riz: What's up?

Keil: Hey, what's up?

Try:

Ron: How was your flight?

Carlos: I'd be more intrigued by an airline where your ticket price was based on your body weight and IQ.

Beverly: It's hot today.

Gino: In this dimension, yes.

Riz: What's up?

Keil: Washing your chicken just splatters the bacteria everywhere.

Go ahead, be bold. Upend the dinner table conversation! Turn small talk into big ideas at the next summer wedding reception you're forced to attend! You never know which ideas will be worth spreading next.

*This excerpt is adapted with permission from What to Talk About: On a Plane, at a Cocktail Party, in a Tiny Elevator with Your Boss's Boss by Chris Colin and Rob Baedeker (Chronicle Books).*

Other examples:

- What was the worst thing you did when you were a child?
- Which cities have you lived in? What do you like and hate about them?
- Do you have any surprising hobbies or hidden talents you want to talk about?
- If given an opportunity, which person you want to become right now and why?
- What was the funniest incident ever in your life? Can you share it with us in detail?
- What is something you are obsessed with?
- On a scale of 1-10, how strict or lenient are your parents?

## WORK AND OFFICE

Some people argue that discussions about work and school can ruin any conversation.

On the other hand, work and school top the list when you actually listen what people actually talk about. People spend a lot of time at school and office. Most often, people are really passionate about what they do.

- What would you possibly be doing if you were not working here?
- What is the best bit of advice you have ever received from your seniors or mentors?
- What do you think is the most important skill every person should have to succeed?
- How would you describe your boss? What are his strengths and weaknesses?
- What is one thing you will leave your current job for?
- What was your first job? Did you like it or hate it?

- What do you think is the strangest talent that you have?

## ENTERTAINMENT

Well nothing beats entertainment when it comes to popular topics of conversations or small talks. People are passionate about movies, TV shows and sports teams.

Sometimes they even fall in love with fictional characters or their favorite players. These topics never get boring or irritating.

- What sports do you like to watch? What is your favorite team?
- Who is better? Ronaldo or Messi.
- What is your favorite movie soundtrack and why?
- What is your favorite movie and why?
- Which songs always bring tear to your eyes? Or what are the songs you always enjoy to listen?
- Have you ever read any book in your life? What is your favorite book? What was the last book you read?
- What is the funniest TV show you have ever watched?

## TECHNOLOGY

Well, you can always talk about iPhones or Android and other technological innovations.

- Do you long to go back to your old life before Facebook, Twitter and Instagram?
- What do you prefer? Apple or Samsung?
- Would you ever wear latest gadgets such as Apple Watch or Google Glasses?
- What do you think the latest technological advancements will lead us? Are they doing more harm than good?
- If you do get a chance to learn one programming language, what would it be?

## TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Many of people's greatest memories and experiences are related to travel. People love talking about these experiences, strange cultures and places they have explored. Even those people who haven't travelled much can be mesmerized by listening to stories about travel.

- How many countries have you travelled so far? You could talk about a country for hours if both of you happened to have visited it.
- If you ever decide to relocate to another country, which country would it be?
- Do you like air travel, road travel or sea travel? Or, what is your favorite mode of transportation and why?
- How do you compare your own country with the ones you have visited? Or, what are the most striking cultural differences?

- Have you ever faced any trouble in a foreign country? Can you share your experience with rest of us?
- Which, in your opinion, is the most relaxing place in xyz country or world?
- Which is the most beautiful country you have ever visited?
- Do you like to confine yourself to famous cities or go off the beaten path when traveling abroad?

## FOOD AND COOKING

Food and cooking are perhaps the lightest and funniest topics you can think about. People enjoy talking about their favorite dishes or the foods they hate.

If you are talking to someone for the first time, figure out what kind of food he loves instead of asking him to explain meaning of life.

- What food do you love or absolutely hate? What are the reasons you like or hate a particular dish?
- Which food looks delicious but is actually pretty disgusting?
- What do you like to have in a restaurant? Can delicious food compensate for poor hygiene or lack of atmosphere?
- If you are told that you can only eat one food for rest of your life, what will you choose? Or, what is the one food you will not even taste in your life no matter what?
- Ask whether he or she only eats food from a specific culture? If yes, ask them to give you reasons?
- What is your favorite restaurant? What do you most like about that particular restaurant?

## RANDOM QUESTIONS

Finally, you can ask tones of random questions to start an exciting conversation.

Ask questions that are unexpected but not intimidating for your partner. You can choose questions from any topic in the world as long as they are light and fun.

- Everyone wastes time? How do you prefer to waste time?
- What annoys you the most? Or, name one popular thing or person whom you find really annoying?
- Have you ever worked incredibly hard in your life? When was the last time you were so committed?
- What is more important to you? Good job, a big house or a caring partner?
- What is one thing about the world you would like to change overnight?