

10 Best and Worst Small Talk Topics

Print

Small talk topics are the best source of conversation between people who don't know each other well. If you live with [social anxiety disorder \(SAD\)](#), making small talk can be anxiety-provoking. Learning to make small talk can help to build your confidence so that you can [start conversations](#), make connections, and [develop your social skills](#).

Making small talk involves not only knowing what to say, but also what is best kept private. At the same time, it's important to overcome your urge to avoid it altogether, since avoidance only serves to worsen anxiety in the long run.

Rather than being scared of small talk, make a point of overcoming your fear of it. One good way to alleviate anxiety is to prepare for the types of topics that are likely to come up.

1

Best: Weather

Cultura / Frank van Delft / Riser / Getty Images

Although talking about the weather may seem mundane, it is a good neutral topic that everyone can discuss.¹ Did a big storm just blow through? Are you in the middle of a heatwave? Look no further than outside your door for some good conversation openers, such as:

- Lovely day, don't you think?
- Looks like rain is in the forecast.
- Did you order this beautiful weather?

Practice making small talk about the weather by asking someone one of these questions the next time you find yourself in the middle of an awkward silence. They may open up other topics as the conversation progresses.

2

Best: Arts and Entertainment

Heath Korvola / Getty Images

Arts and entertainment topics that are good conversation starters include:

- Movies and television shows
- Popular restaurants
- Popular music
- Books

Examples of things you might ask include:

- Are you reading any great books? I could use some recommendations.
- Are there any podcasts you love?
- Have you tried any new apps or games lately that you really liked? I could use some suggestions.

You might have to ask several people before you get someone interested in talking to you—that's okay. Be okay with rejection, or actually seek it out. It's all just practice, after all.

Skip talking about movies, television, or books that your conversation partner has not seen or read. If no one else has seen the movie, don't go into detail about the plot or the funny scenes. Find some common ground and then build your discussion from there.

Remember that small talk is about building a bridge between you and another person. It doesn't matter so much what you talk about, but rather that you start talking.

3

Best: Sports

Mark Stahl / Getty Images

Sports topics that you can discuss with others include:

- Favorite or local teams
- Sporting events
- Tournaments or championships

Keep track of what sports are played during which seasons, such as football, soccer, hockey, and golf, so that you are on top of the current action.² For example, when the Olympics are taking place, everyone is sure to be buzzing about them.

If your conversation partner supports a rival team, avoid trash-talking their favorites. Instead, focus on keeping your discussion focused on things like team or player performance.

Ask someone, "Did you catch that golf tournament on the weekend?" While this might feel uncomfortable the first few times you do it, eventually, it will feel more natural to you.

4

Best: Family

Simon Ritzmann / Getty Images

People are likely to ask you about your family. Conversation openers about family may include:

- Do you have any brothers or sisters?
- How long have you been with your partner?
- Where does your family live?

Be prepared for these types of questions and reciprocate by asking others about their families. Engaging in this type of small talk displays your communication skills, and helps you to learn a lot about a person in a short period of time.

Family can be a great conversation starter, but do use caution when asking questions about potentially sensitive topics.

For example, asking someone if they have kids or plan on having kids can be difficult if that person is struggling with issues related to infertility. If the other person brings up their children, however, feel free to ask questions.

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Best: Food

Maskot / Getty Images

Food can be a great topic for small talk as long as you keep it neutral and focused on the positive. You might ask for recommendations for their favorite local restaurants, ask what their favorite dish to order is, or if they enjoy cooking at home.

Some examples of things you might ask include:

- Have you tried any new restaurants lately?
- What's your favorite meal to cook at home?
- Do you have any ideas for good work lunches? I'm out of ideas and I'm sick of sandwiches.

As with other conversation starters, stick to positive topics and avoid complaining about foods you dislike.

6

Best: Work

Getty / Hero Images

Another popular small talk topic is work.² You may be asked what you do and whether you like your job. If you do something unusual that is hard to explain, consider keeping business cards in your wallet. This works particularly well if your company or job has a website that people can visit. You might start a chat with:

- How long have you worked as a [insert job title]?³
- What do you enjoy most about your job?
- That is an interesting line of work. How did you get into it?

Always focus on what you'd like to learn about others and things you enjoy talking about. This will make the process of small talk feel more like fun than work.

Be careful to avoid getting into complaints or grievances about work, however. Others might develop poor perceptions of you based on these negative interactions.

7

Best: Travel

Buena Vista Images / Getty Images

People like to hear about vacations. If you travel, be ready to answer questions and give your opinions about the places you have visited. Put together albums that you can show people who visit your home.

Ask others about their favorite travel spots and what they recommend. Most people like to help and will be happy to share their experiences. This can also be a great way to put your conversation partner in a great frame of mind by allowing them to recount a joyful vacation.

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Best: Celebrity Gossip

Caiaimage / Robert Daly / Getty Images

It isn't necessary to follow celebrity gossip to make small talk.¹ However, it is a good idea to know a little bit about some of the most popular celebrities in case the topic comes up.

Save this type of small talk for informal gatherings or casual parties, not work events. Unless everyone else at your work conference is discussing a celebrity, it's best to lead with something else.

Joining a Conversation

If you are trying to break into a group conversation, always establish eye contact, smile, and introduce yourself first. Then listen and remember the names of the other people in the group.

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Best: Hobbies

Hero Images / Getty Images

People like to talk about their hobbies and are likely to be interested in yours.² If you don't have any hobbies, consider trying something new. Not only will you have something to talk about, but having a hobby will give you a chance to meet others with similar interests.

Be sure to [ask follow-up questions](#) as you listen to someone about their hobbies. Listen between the lines as well. If someone says, "That was the last time I ever went skiing," ask why.

10

Best: Hometown

Brand New Images / Getty Images

In a small talk situation, you might be asked about your hometown. For example:

- How is where you grew up different from where you live now?
- Why did you leave?

Have an interesting anecdote or story ready to tell. Ask others about their hometowns as well. You never know who might be from the same place as you and how you might begin forming a connection.

How to Remember Names

How can you remember people's names? Focus, repeat the name, think of someone you know with that name, use the name in conversation, and say it again when [leaving a conversation](#).

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Worst: Finances

Chris Clor / Getty Images

Asking personal financial questions of people that you have just met is inappropriate. It is fine to ask what someone does for work or what the positive aspects are of that career, but do not ask questions about salary. Most people will find this question intrusive and inappropriate.

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Worst: Politics and Religion

VisionsofAmerica / Joe Sohm / Getty Images

The problem with talking about politics is that you never know who in the crowd may have strong opinions. Stay away from this topic unless you want to risk ending up in the middle of a heated conversation. Religion is another extremely personal and potentially sensitive topic that should be avoided.²

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Worst: Sex

Chris Whitehead / Getty Images

Talking about sex or asking questions of an intimate nature is inappropriate during small talk. When talking with strangers, avoid talking openly about sex or making sexual innuendos. Both are likely to make others uncomfortable.

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Worst: Death

Witold Skrypczak / Getty Images

Death is another heavy topic that should be avoided during small talk. When you are in the company of strangers, do not bring up emotional topics that have the potential to be upsetting.

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Worst: Appearance

Yadira G. Morel / Getty Images

Unless you know someone well, do not ask their age. Although the question might seem simple to you, it can be a hot topic for some.

In addition, avoid questions related to appearance. Do not ask anyone if they are pregnant, or comment that someone has lost weight. You never know the reason for weight gain or loss, and could be left in an uncomfortable situation.

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Worst: Personal Gossip

Dave and Les Jacobs / Getty Images

While celebrity gossip is fair game during small talk, gossip about people that you know personally is not.¹ Gossiping about others not only paints you in a bad light, but you never know who might know each other. Avoid bad-mouthing others.

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Worst: Offensive Jokes

Plume Creative / Getty Images

Save your sensitive jokes for your [best friends](#) (or better yet, replace them with jokes that don't have time and place restrictions). In particular, making sexist or [racist](#) jokes is offensive and a quick way to end a conversation with strangers.

Sometimes people do make jokes that they don't realize are sensitive or offensive. It can be helpful to consider some of the signs that a joke may be offensive before you tell it. If the joke pokes fun at someone due to their race, culture, sex, or sexual orientation, skip it. You should also avoid jokes that touch on hot-button, controversial, or political issues.

If your joke is at the expense of someone else, including the person you're telling it to, it's best to avoid it.

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Worst: Narrow Topics

Ezra Bailey / Getty Images

Avoid talking at length about topics that are one-sided. This might include specialized expertise in a particular field or uncommon hobbies of which your conversation partner has no knowledge.

This doesn't mean you don't have to avoid mentioning those topics entirely. If someone asks you what your hobbies are, mentioning some uncommon ones can be an interesting jumping-off point for some conversations.

The key is to keep the discussion more general and skip getting into long-winded speeches about highly specialized things you are passionate about (unless the other person shares those same passions).

Watch for signs that others have lost interest and find a quick ending to your story.

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Worst: Past Relationships

PhotoAlto / James Hardy / Getty Images

Avoid talking about past relationships on a [first date](#) or other small talk conversations. When making new romantic connections, making comparisons or talking endlessly about a past love is a turnoff and a quick way to ensure you don't get a second date.

Talking about past relationships tends to focus on negative topics, which is generally something you should try to avoid when making small talk. Your conversation partner may be hesitant to talk if it seems like you might talk negatively about them in the future as well.

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Worst: Health

Westend61 / Getty Images

Health issues tend to make poor choices for small talk. While you might be tempted to share the latest health kick you're trying, the person you are sharing it with may feel less interested. Some things you should avoid include:

- Telling people how they should feel about their health condition
- Offering "quick cures" for complex medical issues
- Suggesting that people could lose weight or get fit by following your tips

Avoid discussing potentially sensitive health issues, whether they are your own or somebody else's. Asking others about their health can come off as intrusive, so it's best to avoid it.

