

В КОПИЛКУ УЧИТЕЛЯ

*English Club**Small talk**

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.

Read through the Who? What? Where? When? Why? page to gain a better understanding of small talk. The hardest part about making small talk is knowing how to start a conversation. Review the conversation starters and practise them with a friend. Finally, take the time to see how much you have learned about small talk by taking the Small Talk Quiz. And remember, in an English-speaking environment it is often better to make a few mistakes than to say nothing at all!

Who? What? Where? When? Why?***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 subjects that society deems controversial such as 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. At the office, people make small talk in elevators or lunchrooms and even in restrooms, especially if there is a line-up. 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

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and discuss the sports or weather. However, the next time you see each other you might just smile and say nothing. If there is very little noise, that might be an indication that it is the right time to initiate a casual conversation. You should only spark up a conversation after someone smiles and acknowledges you. 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. After someone introduces you to another person, you do not know anything about them, so in order to show a polite interest in getting to know them better, you have to start with some small talk.

Conversation starters

Talking about the weather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • We couldn't ask for a nicer day, could we? • How about this weather? • Did you order this sunshine?
Talking about current events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 Reds? Do you think they're going to win tonight?
At the office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • What do you think of the new computers?
At a social event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So, how do you know Justin? • Have you tried the cabbage rolls that Sandy made? • Are you enjoying yourself? • It looks like you could use another drink. • Pretty nice place, huh? • I love your dress. Can I ask where you got it?
Out for a walk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old's your baby? • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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? • I'll have to remember not to come here on Mondays. • How long have you been waiting?

Practice 1: At a bus stop

Read the small talk below and find the 10 mistakes. Then check your answers.

Woman: We could ask for a better day, could we?

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

Woman: Me too. The cherry blossoms are beautiful, you think?

Man: They sure are. But I heard he is calling for rain all weekend.

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

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

Woman: Ah, this bus seems to be running late. How long of a wait is it already?

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

Woman: Where are you heading today?

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

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

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

Woman: Here comes a bus now.

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

Woman: Well, it looks like we'll be waiting a little longer. I guess, I'll use this time to catch up on my reading.

Man: I love reading. Right now I'm reading a Stephen King book. Do you like Stephen King?

Woman: Not really.

Man: Oh, here's our bus.

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

Man: Say, did you catch the news today?

**Now check your answers.
Did you find all 10 mistakes?**

1	Woman: Correction:	We could ask for a better day, could we? We <u>couldn't</u> ask for a better day, could we?
2	Woman: Correction:	Me too. The cherry blossoms are beautiful, you think? Me too. The cherry blossoms are beautiful, <u>aren't they?</u>
3	Man: Correction:	They sure are. But I heard he is calling for rain all weekend. They sure are. But I heard <u>they</u> are calling for rain all weekend.
4	Woman: Correction:	Really? Oh well. I have to work all weekend anyway. I'm a doctor. <i>During small talk with a stranger, it is not common to discuss personal information relating to work.</i>
5	Man: Correction:	Wow. I'm sure you make good money with that diamond watch you have on. <i>It is not acceptable to discuss salaries while making small talk.</i>
6	Woman: Correction:	Ah, this bus seems to be running late. How long of a wait is it already? Ah, this bus seems to be running late. How long <u>have you been waiting?</u>
7	Woman: Correction:	Where are you heading today? <i>Too personal.</i>
8	Woman: Correction:	Oh, what a coincidence. So am I! Who are you voting for? <i>Politics is not a "safe" subject to discuss.</i>
9	Man: Correction:	I love reading. Right now I'm reading a Stephen King book. Do you like Stephen King? <i>The woman suggested that she wanted to end the conversation. The man did not take the hint.</i>
10	Man: Correction:	Say, did you catch the news today? <u>Thanks. You too.</u> <i>This is not an appropriate time to start a new conversation. The bus's arrival indicates that it is time to stop talking.</i>

Practice 2: At the office

Read the small talk below and find the 10 mistakes. Then check your answers.

Woman: Hi there.

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

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

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

Woman: Sales sounds like an interesting job.

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

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

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

Woman: Yes, I've listened that they are calling for blue skies.

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

Woman: No, I was working late.

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

Woman: Actually, I don't even know who was playing. I don't really follow sports.

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

Woman: I'm not sure. Well, I better get back to my desk.

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

Woman: It's nice, but I would rather get paid for my overtime hours than have new furniture.

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

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

Man: I can't wait until Spring.

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

**Now check your answers.
Did you find all 10 mistakes?**

1.	Man:	Hi. I haven't seen you around here before. Have you been working long?
	Correction:	I haven't seen you around here before. Have you <u>worked here</u> long?
2.	Man:	Oh, you must make more money than I do then. I'm in Sales.
	Correction:	<u>Oh, that must be why I haven't seen you around.</u> I'm in Sales. <i>It is inappropriate to discuss how much people make in an office during small talk.</i>
3.	Man:	It's okay. Hey, you look like you could really have a coffee.
	Correction:	It's okay. Hey, you look like you could really <u>use</u> a coffee.
4.	Man:	Tell me about it! At least it's supposing to be a nice weekend.
	Correction:	Tell me about it! At least it's <u>supposed</u> to be a nice weekend.
5.	Woman:	Yes, I've listened that they are calling for blue skies.
	Correction:	Yes, I've <u>heard</u> that they are calling for blue skies.
6.	Man:	The Chiefs! Do you think they're going to make it to the finals this year?
	Correction:	<i>The man should not continue with this subject because the woman is obviously not interested in it.</i>
7.	Man:	Speaking of desks, what do you think of the new office furniture?
	Correction:	<i>The man did not take the cue that the woman wants to end the conversation.</i>
8.	Woman:	It's nice, but I would rather get paid for my overtime hours than have new furniture.
	Correction:	<i>Giving your opinion about a controversial subject is not appropriate when making small talk with someone you don't know or trust.</i>
9.	Man:	Oh. Well, I think I'll be heading home early today. It might be snow.
	Correction:	Oh. Well, I think I'll be heading home early today. It <u>looks like it might snow</u> .
10.	Man:	Me neither! My divorce will finally come through by then!
	Correction:	<i>Private information about one's personal life is not acceptable.</i>

Practice 3: At a party

Read the small talk below and find the 10 mistakes. Then check your answers.

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

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

Woman 1: (Smiles. No response.)

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

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

Man: Don't. It's terrible.

Woman 2: Oh. Okay.

Man: So, how are you knowing Rick?

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

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

Woman 2: Actually it's about working conditions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now check your answers.

Did you find all 10 mistakes?

1.	Woman 1: Correction:	(Smiles. No response.) <i>It is rude not to say anything or answer someone, even if you are shy or don't know the person.</i>
2.	Man: Correction:	Don't. It's terrible. <i>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.</i>
3.	Man: Correction:	So, how are you knowing Rick? <i>So, how do you know Rick?</i>
4.	Man: Correction:	Nursing. Hmm. I heard on the radio today that all of you nurses are on strike. Are they not paying you enough? <i>During small talk it is not appropriate to discuss salaries.</i>
5.	Man: Correction:	No, I need to lose some weight before I put on a bathing suit. But you have a great figure. <i>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.</i>
6.	Woman 2: Correction:	Uh, thanks. Well, I better go and jingle. There are a few people I haven't said hello to yet. <i>Uh, thanks. <u>Well, I better go and mingle.</u> There are a few people I haven't said hello to yet.</i>
7.	Man: Correction:	Wait! Did you hear that the Pope is coming to town? <i>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.</i>
8.	Man: Correction:	I know. But I'm not Catholic anyway. Are you? <i>Religion is not a "safe" subject to discuss during small talk.</i>
9.	Woman 2: Correction:	Yes, I am actually. Well, it looks the sun is finally coming out. I think I'll go take that swim. <i>Yes, I am actually. <u>Well, it looks like the sun is finally coming out.</u> I think I'll go take that swim.</i>
10.	Man: Correction:	You'd better hurry. I hear they are asking for thunderstorms this afternoon. <i>You'd better hurry. <u>I hear they are calling for thunderstorms this afternoon.</u></i>

Small talk quiz

Are the following statements True or False?

- 1.** It is common to use small talk when you are waiting in a long line-up.
 True
 False
- 2.** Religion is a "safe" topic when making small talk.
 True
 False
- 3.** It is rude for both children and adults not to make small talk with strangers.
 True
 False
- 4.** It is inappropriate to make small talk with your mailman.
 True
 False
- 5.** Sport is not a "safe" topic when making small talk.
 True
 False
- 6.** One should never compliment another person's clothes in order to make small talk.
 True
 False
- 7.** Politics is a controversial subject according to society.
 True
 False
- 8.** It is common to discuss the weather in an elevator.
 True
 False
- 9.** It is rude to interrupt a conversation in order to make small talk.
 True
 False
- 10.** One reason people use small talk is to eliminate an uncomfortable silence.
 True
 False

