

“Help! I’m bad at small talk!”

Whether you want to make new friends or get to know people better, connecting starts with small talk. Here, how to hone your chitchat chops

Connect fast Reframe for success

Convinced you don't have the gift of gab? Not so, says expert Diane Windingland. “Think of small talk as the first step to relationship building,” she encourages. “You might even try an affirmation like, ‘I can learn to enjoy and master small talk.’ The most interesting people are often those who are interested in others—people who pay attention with their whole selves.” In other words, there’s no magic formula to being a charming conversationalist, beyond the curiosity you already have.

Be ‘open-ended’

One of communication expert Debra Fine’s go-to ways to get to know people better? “I like to ask, ‘What is your favorite thing to do outside of X,’ be it work or church or the volunteering event we’re attending together.” This simple question broadens the scope of

your relationship so that “work friends” or “church friends” evolve beyond that specific context. “And because this question is so open-ended—leading to more than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’—people tell you what they *want* you to know, so you learn surprising things.”

Find common ground

The best conversation starters are all around you—what Fine calls “free information.” “This is your shared environment, like a party you’re attending or the soccer game you’re watching together,” she explains. “If you’re at a charity 5k walk, for example, you might ask, ‘What’s your connection to this event?’ Or, “Is this the first time you’ve walked it?” Or if you’re at a party, you might ask, “How do you know our hostess?” Finding common ground, in other words, is often easier than you may think.



Go deeper Peel away layers

To transform small talk into “big talk,” skip the common but overly broad question, “How was your day?” Instead, be specific, like, “What did you have on your plate today?” says Fine. “From there, you can go deeper, as in, ‘What’s the most challenging part of the project you’re working on?’ Such detailed questions show people that you genuinely want to know more.”

Try this approach

Take chatting up a notch with CAAA, says Windingland. Make a *comment*, then *ask* a question related to it. *Affirm* their answer by paraphrasing it, then *add* to it by extending the topic. “If you’re standing in a food line, you might say: ‘The

desserts look great! What looks good to you?’ They may say, ‘I love chocolate; I might have a brownie.’ Then you can affirm and add, ‘They *do* look yummy. Brownies were my favorite as a kid. The best part was licking the bowl. You ever do that?’ Then go from there.”

Let your guard down

The ultimate way to connect is by showing your humanity, says expert Rob Kendall. “I lost my father and sister in the last year. I don’t want to burden people, but when they’ve asked, ‘How are you?’ I’ve made a point of saying I’ve had a difficult time, and I’ve had remarkable conversations as a result.” When we share something important to us, it’s likely to be reciprocated, leading to more meaningful interactions.

Our expert panel



Diane Windingland, author of *Impromptu Speaking: 10 Strategies to Think on Your Feet Without Tripping Over Your Tongue*, is a communication coach.



Debra Fine, author of the bestselling book *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, is a keynote speaker and trainer to hundreds of audiences around the world.



Rob Kendall, author of the forthcoming book *Watch Your Language: Why Conversations Go Wrong and How to Fix Them*, is an expert on effective conversation.