

6 Tips to Rule the Art of Conversation

By Larry Alton

How to talk to anybody, anywhere, anytime

The art of conversation is a necessary skill for almost everything in life. Conversations introduce you to people, important people who could be your mentors, employers, employees, partners or friends. Without conversations as the foundation for those relationships, you'll have a hard time building a social circle, starting a business or advancing your career.

Once a conversation gets going, you should have little problem maintaining that momentum—but for most of us, getting it started is the hardest part. Master these "talking points" to get (and keep) a conversation going:

1. Lead with a compliment.

Compliments are the best possible way to begin a conversation. Not only do they provide a perfect opening line and a possible door for discussion, they also make the person feel good about themselves. Starting the conversation off on a positive note is crucial to keep the conversation going.

Just remember, the more specific your compliment is, the better—for example, commenting that a person is well-dressed is nowhere near as satisfying or flattering as saying something like, "Your shoes are cute." It's concise, sincere and specific—and now you've opened the conversational door because your partner has something to talk about.

2. Embrace small talk.

Small talk is taboo to some people, and while it's not the most fulfilling type of conversation, it is both functional and necessary. Small talk is what leads the way to deeper conversation, much in the way that a car must gradually accelerate to a certain speed rather than hitting 60 miles an hour instantaneously.

Small talk topics are easy to pull—you can talk about the event you're attending, comment on a food or drink item, point something out about the venue, or if you're desperate, you can talk about the weather. These are all shared experiences that anyone can relate to, so they can work for any individual.

3. Ask lots of questions.

If you want to move from small talk to real conversation, you have to look for any opportunity that leads you to change the subject. Don't try to abruptly change gears and talk about something deep or substantial; instead, patiently wait for the opportunity to present itself.

Questions are conversational lubricant. Pay attention as much as you can to the conversation and use them to move it forward. You should be scouting the entire conversation for "tell me more" opportunities. Keep potential questions in the back of your mind. Try to be as specific and inquisitive as possible.

4. Be nice.

This should be obvious, but don't neglect it. Your level of friendliness can make or break the receptiveness of the other party involved. Walk into the conversation with a big smile and open body language, and keep yourself open, receptive and smiling politely for as much of the conversation as you can.

Try not to cross your arms, appear distracted or let your eyes wander. Maintain eye contact when you can and go out of your way to show that you're genuinely interested in what they have to say.

5. Let the other person do the talking.

This is another major point. If you go into a conversation and immediately begin dominating it with your own anecdotes, comments and explanations, the other person may immediately become disinterested. Instead, try to keep the focus on them as much as possible.

Utilizing frequent questions is a good strategy to this end. If you find that the conversation is dwindling, or if the person simply doesn't respond well to questions, feel free to jump in yourself. Tell an amusing story or a personal anecdote—it may be exactly what the conversation needs to keep going.

6. Keep it light.

Try to keep the conversation as light and approachable as possible. If you immediately start complaining about your job or talking about what's wrong with your life, people will want to avoid you. If you tell a joke or an amusing story, they'll be far more likely to stay.

People tend to gravitate toward others with a positive attitude, so keep your conversational material positive. If you struggle with this, try memorizing a handful of good jokes or good stories to use when you meet new people.

These tips are written from a practical perspective, so they can be used in almost any environment, from a professional networking event to a bar or restaurant. The key is to get over your preconceived notions and hesitations and to embrace the reality of small talk. With a little practice and more confidence, you should have no problem starting a conversation with anybody, anywhere.