

Making Small Talk

Let's Learn

Small talk refers to light conversation. It is an important aspect of socializing in English. In this lesson, you will learn useful expressions and suitable topics to use when making small talk. Let's begin!

Warm-Up

WEATHER

One of the most common subjects of small talk is weather. Turn to a classmate or two and *strike up* a conversation about today's weather.



Ways to Begin Small Talk

Listen to your teacher say these common phrases for beginning small talk. Then repeat them together as a class.

- Nice day, isn't it?
- Long time no see.
- How's it going?
- How are the kids?
- How's work?
- What's new?
- Did you watch the game last night?
- Still keeping busy?
- Have you been waiting long?
- Any big plans for the weekend?

Note:

To strike up means "to begin" (often suddenly). Here are some things we strike up:

- a conversation
- a friendship / relationship
- a song / the music

Reading

A. Subjects for Small Talk

There are certain subjects that are suitable for small talk.
There are also some subjects to avoid.

Dos	Don'ts
• weather • current events • celebrities • sports • food • family	• pets • school • hobbies • holidays • hometown • work • politics • religion • finances • pregnancy • weight • personal problems

B. The Purpose of Small Talk

The subject of small talk may be unimportant or light, but the purpose is important. Here are the three main reasons people make small talk:

1. to be friendly
2. to fill an uncomfortable silence or to make a situation feel more comfortable
3. to lead into a more serious matter or discussion

C. Situations for Small Talk

People often make small talk when they are waiting for something to happen. It is also common to make small talk when you first see or meet someone on a specific day. Here are some locations where small talk often takes place:

- at bus stops
- in line-ups
- in waiting rooms
- in staff rooms
- at conferences
- at parties or get-togethers
- in gyms or recreation centers

If you see the same person later in the day, it is not necessary to make small talk again. However, you can do one of the following:

- say "Hi!" again
- say "Bye."
- say "Nice chatting with you."
- smile or wave

Dialogues

Dialogue 1

Practice making small talk with the person sitting next to you on an airplane.

- A: Nice day, isn't it?
B: Sure is.
A: Is Paris home, or are you from Toronto?
B: I'm going to Paris for work. How about you?
A: I'm visiting family.
B: Nice. Let's hope the weather is like this in Paris.
A: It's supposed to be hot and sunny all week.
B: Good to know!

Dialogue 3

Now practice a dialogue and answer the questions.

Dialogue

- A: Good morning!
Did you catch the game last night?
B: Of course. What a game!
A: Sure was. You think we'll make it to the finals?
B: I sure hope so.
A: Me too. Any big plans for the weekend?
B: Just some yard work. You?
A: My in-laws are coming over.
B: Nice. Well, I guess we should get this meeting started.

Dialogue 2

Now practice making small talk with a neighbor that you know.

- A: Hey! Long time no see.
B: Hi there. How are things?
A: Pretty good. How are the kids?
B: Good. They're happy that school is almost out. Hey, did you get a new puppy?
A: Yes! He's a golden retriever.
B: Aw. He's so cute. What's his name?
A: Jack. He's cute, but he's a lot of work!

Questions

1. Do these people know each other?
2. What is the subject of the conversation?
3. Where do you think this conversation takes place?

Pronunciation Practice

STRESS

In English, we place more emphasis on important words in a sentence.
This gives our language rhythm and helps us understand each other better.

A. Dialogue

Work with a partner.
Practice reading this conversation with the correct stress.

- A: Nice **day**, **isn't** it?
- B: **Sure** is.
- A: Is **Paris** home, or are you from **Toronto**?
- B: I'm going to Paris **for work**. How about **you**?
- A: I'm visiting **family**.
- B: **Nice**. Let's hope the **weather** is like this in **Paris**.
- A: It's supposed to be **hot** and **sunny all** week.
- B: **Good** to know!

B. Practice

What are the most important words in this conversation? Underline them.

- A: Hey! Long time no see.
- B: Hi there. How are things?
- A: Pretty good. How are the kids?
- B: Good. They're happy that school is almost out.
Hey, did you get a new puppy?
- A: Yes! He's a golden retriever.
- B: Aw. He's so cute. What's his name?
- A: Jack. He's cute, but he's a lot of work!

Try this!

Try this with your partner:

1. First, read the conversation like a robot.
Give each word equal stress.
2. Now read it out loud again.
Emphasize the words you underlined.
Does the conversation sound better?

Writing & Speaking Practice

A. Complete the Dialogue

Complete the dialogue, and practice with a partner.

A: Nice day, _____ ?
1.

B: Sure _____ .
2.

A: Any _____ for the weekend?
3.

B: I'm going golfing. _____ you?
4.

A: My in-laws are coming over.

B: Let's hope the _____ stays like this.
5.

A: Yes. I hear it's _____ to be sunny all weekend.
6.

B. Write a Dialogue

Work with a partner. Write a short dialogue between two neighbors making small talk. Perform it for your class.

A: _____

B: _____

A: _____

B: _____

A: _____

B: _____

C. Strike Up a Conversation

Imagine your classroom is a staff party. Your teacher will write one topic on the board. Make small talk with someone at the party.

When your teacher says "Switch!" find a new person to talk to. Look for the next prompt on the board. If your teacher writes a prompt that is not appropriate for small talk, stay silent!

Review

Task 1

READING COMPREHENSION

Share the information that you learned in this lesson.

1. What are the three main reasons people make small talk?

2. Identify three places you often go where people make small talk.

3. What are some good topics for small talk?

4. What are some topics to avoid when making small talk?

Review cont.

Task 2

COMPLETE THE DIALOGUE

Now complete the dialogue between two people at a bus stop and perform it with your teacher. Make sure to emphasize the important words.

A: _____ day, isn't it?
1.

B: Sure _____ !
2.

A: I see you're a Yankees fan. Did you watch the game last night?

B: Of course! What a _____ !
3.

A: Let's hope they keep winning in New York.

B: I sure hope so. I'm going to the game on Saturday.

A: Lucky you! It's _____ to be sunny and warm. Go Yankees!
4.

Task 3

ROLE-PLAY

Work with a partner. Choose a situation where small talk often takes place. Choose one or more subjects. Perform a role-play for your class. Your teacher or classmates will answer the following questions:

1. Did the people know each other before today?
2. Where are the people making small talk?
3. What subject(s) do they discuss?

Role-Play Assessment Tool

Student / Group: _____

Date	Level	Assessed By	Role-Play Scenario	Skill
			Making Small Talk	Speaking

Criteria	Achieved 	Achieved With Help 	Needs Improvement 
strikes up a conversation with an appropriate question or phrase			
chooses appropriate subjects for small talk			
makes small talk in an appropriate situation			
emphasizes important words in a sentence			
takes turns speaking			

Notes
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Learner Reflection

MAKING SMALL TALK

Add check marks (✓) to show what you've learned in this lesson.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Can I...	Yes (very well) 	Yes (with help) 	Not yet 
strike up a conversation using small talk?			
choose light subjects for small talk?			
make small talk in a variety of appropriate situations?			
stress important words during a light conversation?			

My Notes

Answer Key

LESSON DESCRIPTION:

In this lesson, students review language and useful expressions for making small talk. They learn appropriate subjects and practice making small talk in a variety of situations. Includes pronunciation practice and assessment tasks.

LEVEL: Low Int – Int

TIME: 1.5–2 hours

TAGS: functional English, useful expressions, socializing, making small talk, small talk

Let's Learn

Go over the learning objective with your students.
Introduce the verb “strike up.”

Warm-Up

Give your students time to practice talking about the weather.

Ways to Begin Small Talk

Recite the phrases and have your students repeat after you for intonation practice.

Reading

Go through the guidelines with your students.

Dialogues

Read the dialogues out loud or in pairs.

DIALOGUE 3

Questions

1. Yes, they do.
2. They are talking about weekend plans.
3. This conversation takes place at work.

Pronunciation Practice

A. DIALOGUE

Go through the first dialogue with your students and have them practice placing stress on the important words (and on the stressed syllables). Answers will vary.

B. PRACTICE

Now put students in pairs and ask them to underline the important words in the dialogue (answers will vary). Have them practice the dialogue first with no stress and then with stress on the important words. Have a few pairs (that chose different words to stress) perform in front of the class and compare them. Which conversations are easier to understand?

Writing & Speaking Practice

A. COMPLETE THE DIALOGUE

Answers may vary.

- | | |
|-------------|---------------------|
| 1. isn't it | 4. And / How about |
| 2. is | 5. weather |
| 3. plans | 6. supposed / going |

B. WRITE A DIALOGUE

Answers will vary.

(continued on the next page...)

Answer Key cont.

Writing & Speaking Practice cont.

C. STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION

Your students will pretend to be at a staff party (or let them choose the setting). Use the topics from page 2, writing one at a time on the board and yelling “Switch!” every minute or so. Choose topics from both lists (Dos & Don’ts). Your students should remain silent when you write a topic that is not recommended for small talk. Make sure that your students are talking to new classmates each time you yell “Switch!”

Review (Assessment Tasks)

The last three tasks are optional and can be used for assessment purposes and/or review practice. Task 3 includes an assessment tool that you can share with learners so that they understand your expectations.

TASK 1

Give students a few minutes to write the answers to the questions based on information from page 2.

1. People make small talk to be friendly, to fill an uncomfortable silence, or to lead into a more serious matter or discussion.
- 2–4. Answers will vary.

TASK 2

Have students complete the text based on words and expressions they learned in this lesson. Then have them practice the dialogue with you. Check that they are placing stress on the important words. Answers may vary.

1. Nice
2. is
3. game
4. supposed / going

TASK 3

If you want to use this task for summative assessment, hand out the ready-made Role-Play Assessment Tool (page 8), or personalize your own from a template in Shared Criteria for Success: <https://esllibrary.com/resources/2352>

Place students in pairs and have them do a role-play for the class (or just for you) using the guidelines from page 2. Alternatively, you could provide a different scenario for each pair using your own ideas.

Learner Reflection

When you are finished with this lesson, have your students reflect on their learning by filling in the chart.

SPELLING NOTES:

This lesson shows the American spelling of the words *Centers*, *Neighbor*, and *Practice*. Most other English-speaking countries spell these words this way: *Centres*, *Neighbour*, and *Practise* (when used as a verb; *Practice* when used as a noun). Make it a challenge for your students to find these words in the lesson and see if they know the alternate spellings.

ABOUT THE EMOJI:

The emoji (and their derivatives) used in this lesson are from Twemoji, an open-source project by Twitter. They are licensed under CC-BY 4.0. <https://github.com/twitter/twemoji>