

Small Talk Preparation

This is about “small talk”, or what I prefer to call “casual conversation”. Here are a few things to keep in mind about “small talk”. First, remember that Americans like “friendliness”; they like to be “friendly”. However, this does not always translate to “friendship”. Americans don’t like too much silence. Too much silence can be somewhat discomforting, so they may try to find something to say. Who’s going to break the ice? This is one place that “small talk” comes in.

Americans, also, believe that everyone is equal. Americans have a comparatively stronger sense of egalitarianism than many other people. Therefore, many Americans will invite anyone to participate in small talk. Talking to just about anyone shows that they don’t think that they’re better than anyone else; at least on the surface this is what it shows. “Me! Better? No, I’m just like everyone else”. Of course, you are. A cultural value is not always something that is part of reality 100%. Some cultural values are what people aspire to achieve or have partially achieved. However, don’t tell this to people that say, “I believe all people are equal”. Then you would be disagreeing, and some Americans don’t like to talk to people who disagree with them.

If you are not prepared for “small talk” or “friendly conversation”, then here are some tips to help you get ready for “small talk” when you encounter it. It’s better to be ready for it because if you’re not, you could seem “unfriendly”. And you don’t want to seem unfriendly, do you? Of course, you don’t.

First, let’s start with greetings. Whatever anyone asks you, be sure to reply in a positive way. If the truth is that you have something negative to say, do not say it. I repeat: Do NOT say it. If you say something in the least bit negative, you’re just asking for trouble. You have to say something positive.

Okay, let’s get back to greetings. Greetings often come in the form of a question immediately after the initial “Hi” or possibly “Hello”. Of course, these questions would come from people you’ve already met or that you know for some reason. Well, it may not be that you “know them”. It’s probable that you “know of them” and maybe a little bit “about them”. But in American, that could be enough to say that you “know them”. Here’s an example: “You know Jen, don’t you?” It would be good for you to say, “Of course, I do.” However, you might feel more like saying, “Well, we’ve met.” or “I remember Jen, yes.” Even if you don’t know Jen, just go along with it and say, “Yes, of course, I know Jen.” Or you might want to say it with some enthusiasm, as in, “Of COURSE, I know JEN! JEN, it’s good to SEE you again!” Use one of these next.

How **are** you?

How’s it **go**ing?

How have you **been**?

The way to participate in small talk successfully is to be prepared for the idea that you have to talk about yourself. You’ve got to be ready to say something about yourself. It’s a little like “tell me about yourself”, but it has nothing to do with a job interview, work, or professional life. Oh, but wait a minute. It could have to do with employment, work, or professional life if you are at a type of networking event. So remember, once again, do not say anything negative. No matter how tempted you are to use plain language in order to tell the plain truth, or to speak the truth about what you think [that means being honest], remember that you will never be successful in making “small talk” with Americans if you do not keep it positive. And, again, if you are not positive, you might seem unfriendly. So let’s practice being friendly. If you’re not comfortable talking about yourself, then it would be a good idea to start practicing. Are you ready? Here we go. Let’s practice making some small talk.

Topics for American Small Talk Practice

1. Likes - Make a list of four things that you like.
2. Dislikes - Do NOT talk about anything that you dislike. Remember that you must keep this positive.
3. Personal news - Make a list of four things that are happening in your life. Don't talk about anything that personal. The idea is to talk about, in a way, "light current events" in your life.
4. Interests - Make a list of four things that interest you.
5. Current events - What are two or three current events in the news that you find interesting? Do not talk about anything political or religious.
6. Sports - If you like sports, be sure to talk about sports. What sports do you like? If you like American sports, that's all the better. Many Americans like sports. However, be certain that you are speaking with someone that likes sports. If you talk about sports with someone that does not like sports, they won't tell you directly, "I don't like sports" or "I'm not at all interested in sports". People are more likely to say something like, "I don't like sports much", "I don't like sports that much", "I don't follow sports that much", or "I'm not really into sports". Of course, these statements indicate that, maybe, the speaker likes sports to some small degree. However, this is not so. To make a plain statement such as, "I do not like sports", would come across as too negative for most Americans. Maybe, we can talk more about this later.
7. Story - If you can tell a story, that's good. Everyone always likes a good story. What kind of story? It could be anything. It could be something that happened to you, something that happened to someone you know, or something that happened over the weekend - anything. It just has to be a story. But make sure you keep it positive.
8. Family member - You can talk a little bit about a family member. If something comes up in the conversation that reminds you of a family member, you can bring that person into the conversation.
9. Friend - The same thing goes for a friend. You can talk a little bit about a friend. If something comes up in the conversation that reminds you of a friend, you can bring that person into the conversation. Maybe, you can tell a story!
10. Here are a couple tips.
 - Compliments - Try to find a way to give someone a compliment. Say something good about someone. It could be anything. If you like someone's shirt or jacket, say so. Also, be prepared to receive compliments. No matter how insignificant or unimportant it may seem, receive a compliment with gratitude and some degree of enthusiasm.
 - Opinions - Be careful about giving opinions, especially opinions that are too honest. Maybe, we can talk more about this later.