

SUMMARY

THE FINE ART OF SMALL TALK

DEBRA FINE



Summary of “The Fine Art of Small Talk” by Debra Fine

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Learn how to start a conversation, keep it going,
build networking skills, and leave a positive
impression!

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Introduction

As a young girl, author Debra Fine was overweight, shy, and often sat invisible in the back of the class. It was when her third-grade classmate Rita passed out invites to her birthday party that Debra first experienced exclusion. Every girl in her class received an invitation except Debra and another very overweight girl like herself. The experience was incredibly hurtful, so Debra threw herself into a world where her only friends were her books. Consequently, she never learned how to talk to her peers. Naturally, as she got older, Debra chose a career that didn't require much conversation - an engineer. While she could comfortably make technical presentations and answer complex engineering questions, she panicked each time she was required to attend a conference or industry meeting. During those conferences and meetings, she was expected to mingle with colleagues, network, and meet clients. So she started every conversation the same by asking, "*What do you do?*" Eventually, the conversation came to a grinding halt as Debra struggled to keep it going. She struggled with the art of conversation.

It was after having two children that Debra realized many of her insecurities came from being overweight. She lost 65 pounds. As her self-image improved, Debra was desperate to have a social life and find friends she could have fun with. To do so, she would need to acquire better social skills. She began to take notes and studied those around her who were successful at cultivating friendships and mingling in crowds. Eventually, she devoted her life to uncovering the fine art of small talk and teaching others how to overcome their insecurities and hesitations. The best part? Everyone can learn the techniques, tips, and skills for successful conversations. And when you begin winning at conversations, you'll be surprised at the improvement in your quality of life. You'll begin to bring new people into your network of friends and colleagues and you'll find joy in social events rather than dread. You'll create pathways and channels for new opportunities that you never thought possible. Are you ready to win at conversations? Great. So enough small talk, let's get down to business.

Become A Better Conversationalist By Taking A Risk

How do you feel about small talk? Many people think of small talk as the lowly stepchild of *real conversation*. They believe it's meaningless and a waste of time. Small talk, however, serves an important function. Without small talk, you can never get to that *real conversation*. It allows you to break the ice and clear the way for intimate conversation and lays the foundation for a stronger relationship. The good news is that conversation skills can be learned by everyone.

When you see others with good conversational skills, how does it make you feel? Perhaps you think they just have a natural ability to mingle happily, that some biological mechanism makes them a natural at small talk. The truth is, most people have to work hard at conversation. Through practice, seminars, personal coaches, and studying books, those people learned the skills and practiced them. Take author Debra Fine, for example, who used to be a geeky, introverted engineer but simply became a pro at conversation by learning and practicing. It's that simple!

After the events of 9/11, a pilot instructed his passengers departing Denver International Airport to introduce themselves and learn about one another. This simple act proves that we have truly lost the art of conversation. But why? We have become accustomed to respecting people's space and privacy so we avoid getting to know the person sitting right next to us. In fact, the biggest reason we avoid small talk is our fear of rejection. So the first step in becoming a better conversationalist is to *take the risk* of starting one. You can't simply hope that others will approach you; instead, it's up to you to make the first move.

It's not nearly as hard as you might think, and more importantly, it puts you in charge of your own destiny. *You* get to choose. Begin your conversation with a smile. When someone smiles at you, you are naturally inclined to smile back, right? So be the first to smile and greet another

person. Smile, say a few words, and be sure that you make eye contact. In just a few seconds, you'll have begun to establish a rapport. If the mere thought of smiling and saying hello is daunting for you, there are plenty of ways that you can practice. Practice by walking through the mall and simply saying hello to ten people as you pass them. You can even do this at the grocery store by greeting three other shoppers. Practice until it feels natural for you.

In some cases, not introducing yourself can have severe consequences. Debra learned this important lesson when attending corporate events at her friend's company. At these events, Debra admired the senior vice president, Bob, who displayed grace and confidence when it came to mingling and making small talk. Unfortunately, Debra was always too intimidated to introduce herself to Bob and simply kept to herself. When Debra moved into engineering sales, she called on Bob to reintroduce herself and attempt to sell her employer's services. Before she even finished her pitch, however, Bob cut her off saying, "I can't believe you're calling me. We've been at the same parties a dozen times, and you've ignored me at every one. You're the biggest snob I know. I have no interest in buying anything from you." To her horror, Bob had interpreted Debra's shyness as arrogance but it's a mistake that can be easily made. So put forth the effort because silence is certainly not golden.

The Importance of Names

Now that you have committed to having a conversation, you must now remember the single most important rule of a good conversation: Learn and use their names. To master this skill, you'll need to stay focused during the introduction and repeat the name back in your greeting, like "*Nice to meet you, Debra.*" Unfortunately, many of us are too busy concentrating on our replies to remember the other person's name. So focus on the name, repeat it, and then formulate your answer.

If you do happen to get distracted and miss the other person's name, confess! Simply say something like "*Excuse me, I'm not sure I got your name.*" This is always a better option over faking it. Never, ever fake it. This is especially true when you run into someone who you've met previously but have forgotten their name. Simply say, "*I'm so sorry. I've forgotten your name. Please remind me.*" Be proactive and you'll prevent any impending disaster. Instead of being proactive, we typically try to avoid people because we've forgotten their names. However, if we assume the burden and tell the truth, chances are that we'll go on to have a pleasant conversation. In fact, if we ignore someone because we are embarrassed over having forgotten her name, then your behavior may be misconstrued as rude.

Sometimes we meet people with foreign or unusual names. When this happens, you must make the effort to learn the correct pronunciation, even if it means repeating the name a few times. When you take the time to learn another person's name, you are expressing a genuine interest in that person and making the person feel warm and comfortable. On the other hand, when you become too lazy to learn a difficult name, you are sending a message that learning his name is not worth your trouble.

In fact, learning names has many benefits in addition to making people feel comfortable. For example, when Debra was seated at a table of eight, she immediately introduced herself to the three sitting at the table. As the

others arrived, Debra extended her hand, introduced herself, and made the introductions to the other three. She acted as the host which put everyone at ease and created an atmosphere of warmth and appreciation that naturally encouraged conversations. Acting as a host can position you as a leader in the group.

When it comes to names, it's also important to nix the nicknames. For example, if a colleague introduces himself as "Michael" then don't call him "Mike." If he wanted you to call him "Mike," then he would have introduced himself that way. So make the effort to use their name and don't shorten it without permission. Finally, it's better to give than to receive. Think about giving your name as a random act of kindness, even if you've met him or her previously and think they should remember your name. Instead, say something like *"Hi, Patrick, Debra Fine. How are you?"* By stating your name, you let Patrick off the hook and he doesn't have to waste conversation time being distracted trying to recall your name.

Use Icebreakers and Open-Ended Questions

Of course, conversations don't just end after introductions. It's your job to keep them going, which may seem daunting, but there are many ice breakers you can use to make the conversation flow naturally and easily. Many people make the mistake of simply using a statement by itself like "*What a beautiful day.*" However, when you make a statement, you can't guarantee whether it will land or even get tossed back. Statements are indirect invitations to chat; instead, you should be direct so there is no doubt that you are starting a dialogue.

Instead of "*What a beautiful day,*" try "*What a beautiful day. What's your favorite season of the year?*" It's an easy opener that tells the person that you want to engage in conversation. In fact, many of us stress over starting a conversation because we perceive it as harder than it is. But let's look at this story. A national news show once conducted a social experiment by sending a gentleman into a party hooked up with a hidden microphone. He was instructed to start as many conversations with a ridiculous ice breaker: *Hi. What's your sign?* Yes, the infamous pick-up line from the 1970s. Surprisingly, it worked! You see, when you show genuine interest in someone, you open them up to conversation because they feel flattered and special.

This experiment also worked because the gentleman asked an open-ended question. Asking open-ended questions shows that you genuinely care about what the person has to say. Many times we find ourselves asking our partner or our children, "*How was your weekend?*" or "*How have you been?*" These questions evoke familiar responses: "*Good, how was yours?*" These exchanges are insincere so it's time to become a better conversationalist by using the power of open-ended questions.

Some of the toughest conversation partners of all are school-age kids. As parents, we try to initiate a conversation by asking "*How was your day at school?*" We receive the typical "*Fine.*" Not wanting to give up, we ask a

follow-up question like *“What did you like about today?”* The response is another dead end: *“I don’t know.”* Sound familiar? Well, the conversation doesn’t have to be over just yet. As Debra gets to this point in the conversation with her teenage son, she replies yet again, *“Really, tell me about one class you liked today.”* At this point, her son thinks about it for a minute and finally says, *“Science.”* Debra can then ask *“What did you like about science?”* Her son then launches into a conversation describing the experiment he did and the two are talking. The bottom line is that you have to show that you truly care.

Similarly, every Monday people across the country are asking each other, *“How was your weekend?”* They usually get a *“Good. How was yours?”* in return. They may even be ten steps down the hall before the reply is even uttered. This shows that many aren’t actually interested. In fact, questions like this are simply a form of greeting, not a sincere inquiry into the lives of your colleagues. So the next time someone says their weekend was great, you can reply with something like, *“What was so great about it?”* or *“Tell me about it.”* A response like this lets the person know that you are genuinely interested in hearing more.

Of course, you’ll need to gauge the situation and determine if asking an open-ended question is appropriate for the situation. For example, if you ask your coworker something personal but he immediately changes the topic back to business, then take it as a sign that he doesn’t want to engage in small talk at the moment. Respect your colleagues and talk about the preferred topics of conversation.

The Importance of Body Language and Listening

So now that you've learned about the talking part of a conversation, it's time to move on to an equally important aspect of conversation: listening. The problem in many conversations is that our human brain can take on much more information than one person can realistically divulge. This causes us to become distracted in conversation. When this happens, we begin to listen to other conversations, think about what we are going to have for dinner, and even drift away into our private thoughts. Oftentimes we drift too far, and suddenly we've missed something important!

Have you ever been having a conversation with someone and become frustrated when you feel as if they aren't listening? What is that person doing that lets you know they aren't listening? Maybe they're looking away, looking on their phone, crossing their arms, or exhibiting behavior that seems as if they're uninterested. That's because nonverbal communication is significantly more important than verbal communication. In fact, Ray Birdwhistle "estimated that in a normal two-person conversation, verbal components carry less than 35 percent of the social meaning of the situation, while nonverbal components account for over 65 percent."

For instance, when eight-year-old Nicholas comes home from school, he excitedly begins to tell his dad about his great day at school. He explains everything that happened that day, including painting a cool picture of the mountains, playing soccer in gym class and scoring a goal. Meanwhile, Nick's dad is reading the newspaper so Nick states, "Dad, you're not listening to me!" His dad then proves that he was listening by repeating everything Nick just said. Nick, unappeased, says, "No, Dad. That's not it. You're not listening to me with your eyes." Even though Nick's dad was, indeed, listening, Nick felt minimized because he didn't have his father's full attention. Nick wanted more than just his dad to hear him, he wanted to feel connected, that his dad was invested. He wanted to feel validated.

This is why it's important in conversation to be aware of your body language. You might be listening but when you exhibit a certain behavior, like looking away, crossing your arms across your chest, putting your hands on your hips, fiddling with jewelry, or even glancing away from the person who is speaking, you give the impression that you are uninterested and don't care. So what should you do instead to make the person you are talking to feel connected and validated? Some positive body language cues include leaning forward, maintaining eye contact, relaxing your body posture, facing your partner, and nodding and smiling. By exhibiting these cues, you are showing your speaking partner that you are involved and interested.

Of course, body language is just part of the conversation. You should also aim to use verbal cues to let the speaker know that you are fully engaged in the conversation. These can be anything from brief comments to open-ended questions. For example, simply saying, "*Hmmm, I see...*" while nodding your head can be a cue that you are engaged and listening. When appropriate, you can use other verbal cues to transition to another topic. Saying "*That reminds me of*" or blatantly asking "*Do you mind if I change the subject?*" can segue into another topic while still validating the person you are speaking to, allowing you to keep the conversation going.

Avoid Awkward Pauses and Search for Cues

Even when you have icebreakers, conversation-makers, and active listening skills, there are still going to be times when conversations have awkward silences and grind to a halt. All it takes is a bit of preparation to avoid these silences. Don't worry, you won't need PowerPoint slides, presentations, or laser pointers for this kind of preparation! Instead, you simply need a repertoire of questions in your mind to prepare for when things begin to slow down. Some foolproof ideas might be to ask about a recent film that just premiered or bringing up a book that you recently finished reading.

One of the toughest audiences that many people struggle to make small talk with are acquaintances we see every once in a while. You have some history together, you know a bit about them, and you have no idea what they've been up to in the year since you last saw one another. This is a great opportunity because it's best to assume that things have likely changed in the past twelve months. So instead of asking "*What's new?*" which will likely be met with "*Not much,*" try keeping the conversation rolling with something like, "*Bring me up to date on ...*," "*What's new with the family?*" "*How's your wife/husband/partner?*" or even "*What's changed in your life since we last spoke?*" By being more specific, you can open yourself up to learn more about your acquaintance. Of course, this strategy can backfire if someone has recently lost a job or experienced a death in the family. In these situations, stick with more generic questions and allow the person to bring up details on their own.

If you're still struggling to come up with conversation starters, take a look around! The location and occasion of an event offer a wide variety of information. For example, at a wedding, you can start with something like, "*I was the bride's college roommate. How do you know the couple?*" Similarly, if you're at a seminar or convention, simply asking "*What brought you here?*" is an easy way to start a conversation. Additionally, you can get a lot of information by observing people's behavior. Perhaps you notice someone is left-handed, you can inquire, "*Is it challenging being*

left-handed? What pet peeves do you have about it?" Or maybe the person has an accent, you can say, *"I thought I heard an accent. What part of the country/world are you from?"* By simply observing your surroundings and people, you can come up with many conversation points that will help you keep the small talk flowing.

However, if you struggle to come up with questions on the spot, you can help jog your memory with the acronym, FORM: Family, Occupation, Recreation, and Miscellaneous. The first three are pretty self-explanatory but the miscellaneous category can be anything, including asking about a popular film, book, or even a recent news event. The key in any category, however, is to be authentic when talking to someone. If you aren't genuinely interested, no amount of planning and preparation will save you from a doomed conversation.

How to Exit a Conversation with Ease

At some point, exiting a conversation is necessary whether you're trying to escape a conversation killer or simply want to circulate more, there are several ways in which you can artfully exit a conversation. If you're like most people, you may remain in conversation longer than you should for two reasons: 1) you feel trapped if it's just a two-person dialogue or 2) you feel so comfortable you don't want to leave. In the latter, comfort leads to complacency, so if you're somewhere like a networking event, you'll need to continue striking up conversations with others to get the most out of the event.

So if you want to skilfully leave a conversation, begin by circling back to why you connected with your conversation partner and bring the conversation back to that topic. By doing this, you are making a meaningful connection where you can then take your leave easily. This may look a little something like this: *"Tom, it's been wonderful talking with you about the changes impacting the health-care industry. I need to catch up with another client before she leaves. Thanks for sharing your expertise."* Notice that there was no excuse for leaving. When it comes to gracefully exiting a conversation, honesty is the best policy.

Even if you're itching to get out of an awful conversation, you should aim to exit tactfully, so try some diplomatic lines like *"I want to go talk to the speaker," "I need to go see the exhibits," "I want to meet some other potential clients this morning,"* and *"I promised myself that I'd meet three new people before leaving this evening,"* which are all successful exit lines because they put the focus on you. You are the reason you are leaving the conversation and by highlighting your own goals, you take the burden off your conversation partner.

You can even borrow a strategy from the late George Plimpton who planned ahead in case he ever got stuck with a bore at parties. Plimpton always carried two drinks so if he found himself wanting to escape a conversation,

he would politely excuse himself by saying he had to deliver the drink. The cardinal rule, however, is doing what you said you were going to do. For example, if you departed a conversation saying you were going to go see the exhibits, don't get sidetracked before doing so! So if Vince stops you on your way to the exhibits, it's up to you to say, *"Vince, it's so good to see you. I was just on my way to the exhibits. Would you like to join me or can I catch up with you afterward?"* If you make the mistake of getting distracted, you run the risk of insulting the person you just ended a conversation with who now believes you were never on your way to the exhibit in the first place. "Don't burn a bridge by failing to get to your next destination!"

You can even make a graceful exit by asking your conversation partner for a referral. For instance, if you've been talking to Shelly at a cocktail party but need to see more people before it ends, Shelly can help you. You can say, *"Shelly, I've been having trouble with the graphics package on my Mac at home. Do you know anyone here who uses this program on a PC?"* Shelly will either give you a good lead or say she doesn't know anyone. Either way, it gives you a clean break to either talk to her referral or to find someone else who can help you. Simply thank Shelly, tell her you want to find someone who can help you, and say good-bye. The key here is that you don't invent a problem just to end the conversation, be honest and stick to your agenda.

At the end of the day, ending a conversation may be difficult, but it can be done gracefully enough so that you leave a lasting impression, make connections, and accomplish your networking or conversational goals.

Final Summary

The power of small talk can change your life. All it takes is a bit of knowledge and practice and you'll be winning at conversations before you know it. Begin by taking charge and initiating conversations. A simple smile and nod can be enough to grab the attention of a willing participant. Next, you'll want to engage your partner with open-ended questions and genuinely become interested in their answers. Make a warm introduction, use positive body language, and prepare for pauses with an arsenal of generic questions you can ask to keep the conversation flowing. In the end, small talk is all about making your partner feel connected and validated, so pay attention to the details like their name and use it in conversation. Finally, once it's time to move on, make a graceful exit and start the cycle again with someone new. Soon, you'll be an expert, making life-changing connections and unleashing the power of small talk.



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