

# DRAFT

(Contact: [angelaognev@gmail.com](mailto:angelaognev@gmail.com), or [speakeasycards.com](http://speakeasycards.com))

## Interesting Conversations

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**You are a key participant in each of your conversations.**

Every question and answer you speak helps to create it.

Every question and answer from your partner is an opportunity.

Every smile, nod, and knowing glance helps adds flow and engagement.

On the flip side, **if you're not enjoying a conversation, you have the responsibility AND the ability to change it.**

Here are observations about having interesting and tough conversations, and some experiments you can try!

...Of course, these are tips that I personally like, so some will resonate with you and some won't. Test them at Cut The Small Talk, try them in the wild, see what you like, and adapt!

## *What makes a conversation interesting?*

*Why are uncomfortable conversations uncomfortable?*

*Why are interesting conversations interesting?*

*I wrote this in 2016 -- I'll be editing it soon as we create this doc!:*

<http://yes.cutthesmalltalk.com/why/>

What makes a conversation interesting to you, personally?

When do you get beyond excited to listen or to share?

When do you feel that something really special is happening?

For me, personally, interesting conversations are about people and experiences -- no information about current events, no jargon, no proper nouns are needed. Interesting conversations often discover things about how we interact and relate to each other, include surprising or curious observations, or highlight how I am connected to the person I am speaking to.

....

## *Gradual transition to an interesting conversation*

You've found someone you have good energy with. You'd like to go deeper or move to a more interesting conversational space.

As you're listening to your partner's response, take a moment to see where you can **get more curious**, rather than just reciprocating. Some things I say when I am curious are below!

And, remember that when you're asked a question, you do not need to answer the question directly. You can leave out parts of "the facts" and just focus on the most important part.

It may feel strange, but you can choose an answer to takes the angle you're interested in. If you want, acknowledge the slight tangent first -- "This doesn't answer your exact question, but..."

## Examples

It may feel weird to script questions, **so the main thing is to be curious!**

Be curious of what they're thinking, feeling, doing -- wonder about where their thoughts come from, how they decide, what they consider most important or interesting. Listen closely, and ask!

### Closed versus open questions

If I could give just one tip, I'd say this -- ask open questions rather than closed ones. If your question limits the answer your partner can give, rethink it!

#### **Closed questions limit answers:**

Do you think that (opinion)? (yes/no/not really)

Would you say that (option A), (option B), or (option C)?

#### **Open questions allow for authentic responses:**

What's your thoughts on (opinion)?

There's seems to be many angles/choices/perspectives here. How would you decide?

**If you feel a desire to share your opinion**, introduce it as an idea that they can explore.... rather than a belief that you're asking them to agree (or disagree with).

My gut says (opinion or idea)... how do you feel about that?

My initial thought is (opinion or idea), and I'm want to explore other views... what do you think?

**If you're just trying to make sure you understood them correctly** -- which is a great active listening skill -- try this:

Just to confirm, you're interested in (summarise what they said)?

I'm understanding that as (summarise what they said), is that the case?

### Diving into emotion

Our first instinct when speaking is to share what we are DOING -- stories often consist of play-by-play action plans. The smoothest way to get more interesting from there is to look for emotions (usually positive, but uncomfortable, negative emotions work well too).

Go for emotions:

What is it like to (action or activity they are doing)?

What are you enjoying about (thing that they are doing)?

What are you looking forward to (specific place, person, project)?

You may also want to explore what makes something produce the emotion that it produces!

What's behind the emotion:

What makes it (positive descriptive word they used)?

What do you mean by (emotion word)?

When else do you feel (emotion word)?

## Curiosity and learning

My favorite conversations are ones where I learn something about the world, how people think or act, the take of a culture on a certain concept, a nuance in my own way of being.

To learn, you can even **ask them about learning!**

What have you learned about (the topic they're excited about)?

I'm *really* interested in two thing you just said... (brief description of each thing), what do you think about that?

The next step is to ask about what **underlying beliefs** are between the lines of what they said, and perhaps even how those beliefs were formed!

What do you mean by (key word or phrase they used)?

What do you believe about (key word or underlying concept)?

What do you think lead you to (a belief or model of the world)?

What if you could believe something besides (belief or model of the model)? What would it be? What would that new belief do for you?

## Instant transition to an interesting conversation

Feeling a bit bold? See what works for you as a smooth, but instant, transition.

What has worked well for me is “**acknowledging the norm**” -- say that you noticed something interesting or funny about how people interact, and ask for their thoughts on it! Acknowledging the norm puts what's unsaid in a bright spot light, and it helps get rid of some of the awkwardness and uncertainty of starting and interesting conversation.

Another choice is to “**comment on an interesting social phenomenon**” -- this works best if you are actually interest in the psychology of how people interact, relate, make decisions, emote, and so on. Share it as something you've learned, and ask what they think or feel.

**Both these options... move the conversation to a meta level.** This means you are not just talking to someone else, but you two are talking about the very act of talking. One you are having a self-aware conversation, you two can move smoothly into discussing human behavior, thoughts, feelings, trends, struggles, funny coincidences, and so on.

## Examples of transitions

Here's what I've said. Tweak and adopt for yourself! Say what feels good and natural to you.

These are organised by "shared context" aka where you are and what you are doing at the moment. Commenting on something related to the context is easier and more understandable.

### At a networking event / shared context

-> I've been noticing lately that I always say the same things at networking events -- where I'm from, how long I've been in Singapore. How do you feel about these kinds of events?

-> It's funny but seems like we have a lot of the same conversations at these events. What do you think? What would be a good alternative for you?

-> Is there a topic that you'd really love to discuss at these events, but hasn't been discussed so far?

-> I recently attended/heard about an event called Cut The Small Talk :) -- where people just get together to talk about important but taboo topics... like money, failure, sex, self-worth, practical happiness. What do you think about that idea?

### With a friend or colleague

-> I found these printable question cards with thought-provoking questions! Want to try drawing and answering questions at random with me?

-> I've been wanting to discuss something beyond work, but I don't know where to start. I found these printable question cards online -- want to test them out with me?

-> (with a date or partner) What do you think about cards with interesting and intimate questions on them, where we can take turns discussing? I found these online, but we can also write or add our own!

\*\*Printable cards. You can use any, but Cut The Small Talk has its own as well! There's 72 "for all occasions" and 24 "sex & relationship" ones: <http://cutthesmalltalk.com/cards>

## Stranger on the train

Hi. This is random/funny/strange/different, but would it be alright to talk for a bit?

-> It feels like we're always so silent in the train, looking at our phones. Why do you feel that is?

-> This is nerdy, but I read somewhere that talking to strangers intimidates everyone, but when people do it, they really enjoy themselves. What do you think about that? (This was a research study where subjects were asked to talk to the person next to them in the train).

## Stranger waiting in line

Do you want to talk for a couple minutes while we're waiting (in line)?

-> What do you have the most fun talking about?

-> I heard that waiting in line can sometimes make people enjoy (their food/purchase etc) more -- what do you think about that?

-> I heard that how we feel while we wait in line can make or break the shopping experience -- what do you think about that?

## With a friend

-> I've been thinking lately that we often get to know people only when we're in the right state of drunkenness, or if one of us is quite emotional, or if we go through a unique or shocking experience together... what are your thoughts on that?

-> It seems like there are some topics that are off limits in friendly conversation... maybe because we don't want anyone to dislike us, or because we don't know when is the right time to open up. It's like we're waiting for some secret signal. What do you think about that?

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