

20 Conversation Starters That Don't Feel Forced

For quiet people who want their conversations to keep going long after hello



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“I can start conversations and ask questions, but after a while it feels like I’m just asking one question after another.”

Someone wrote that, and thousands of quiet people nodded, because that’s the real fear. Opening is easy enough.

The hard part is the moment it goes quiet, and the voice that says the silence proves something about you.

Here’s what researchers found when they recorded hundreds of strangers talking.

What hurt the conversation was the panicked jump to a brand new topic after a silence.

Friends had more long pauses than strangers did, and they felt closer coming out of them.

So the pause you dread is harmless.

It’s what you do next that counts, and one item in this guide shows you exactly what to do.

I wrote this for the quiet person who’s done standing at the edge of the room.

You want to walk into the party, the conference or the Monday meeting and have people glad you came over.

I believe you’re liked far more than you think.

In study after study, people underestimated how much the other person liked them, and the shyest people underestimated it most.

I believe learning more lines is the wrong fix.

One study found a how-to workshop made people worse at reading how well they were doing.

You need better places to put your attention, and a handful of questions that do the work for you.

And I believe the deeper question beats the weather every time.

People expect it to be awkward, then enjoy it more than anything else they talked about.

Inside you'll find

- The party opener that makes you the connector instead of the interviewer
- What to say in the two seconds after a conversation goes quiet
- The question that makes coworkers think you're smarter, not weaker
- How to skip the small talk layer without anyone feeling awkward
- Three lines to write before you walk in so you're never stuck or trapped
- How to leave a conversation so the next one is easy

You don't need all 20. Pick three, say them out loud once at home, and use one this week.

By the end you'll have a small pocket bank of lines that feel like you, and you'll know how to keep any of them going.

**AT A GATHERING WHERE YOU KNOW
ALMOST NOBODY**

1

“How do you two know each other?”

This is the best line there is for joining two people who are already chatting.

It hands them a story they share, so they get to tell it together while you just enjoy it.

It also makes you the connector rather than the interviewer, because you're giving them a reason to talk to each other with you in the circle.

And their answer shows you how the room fits together, like who came with whom and who you might meet next.

Hi, mind if I join you? How do you two know each other?

2

“What’s the story behind that?”

Ask about something they chose to wear or carry: a pin, their shoes, a tattoo, a band T-shirt, a camera.

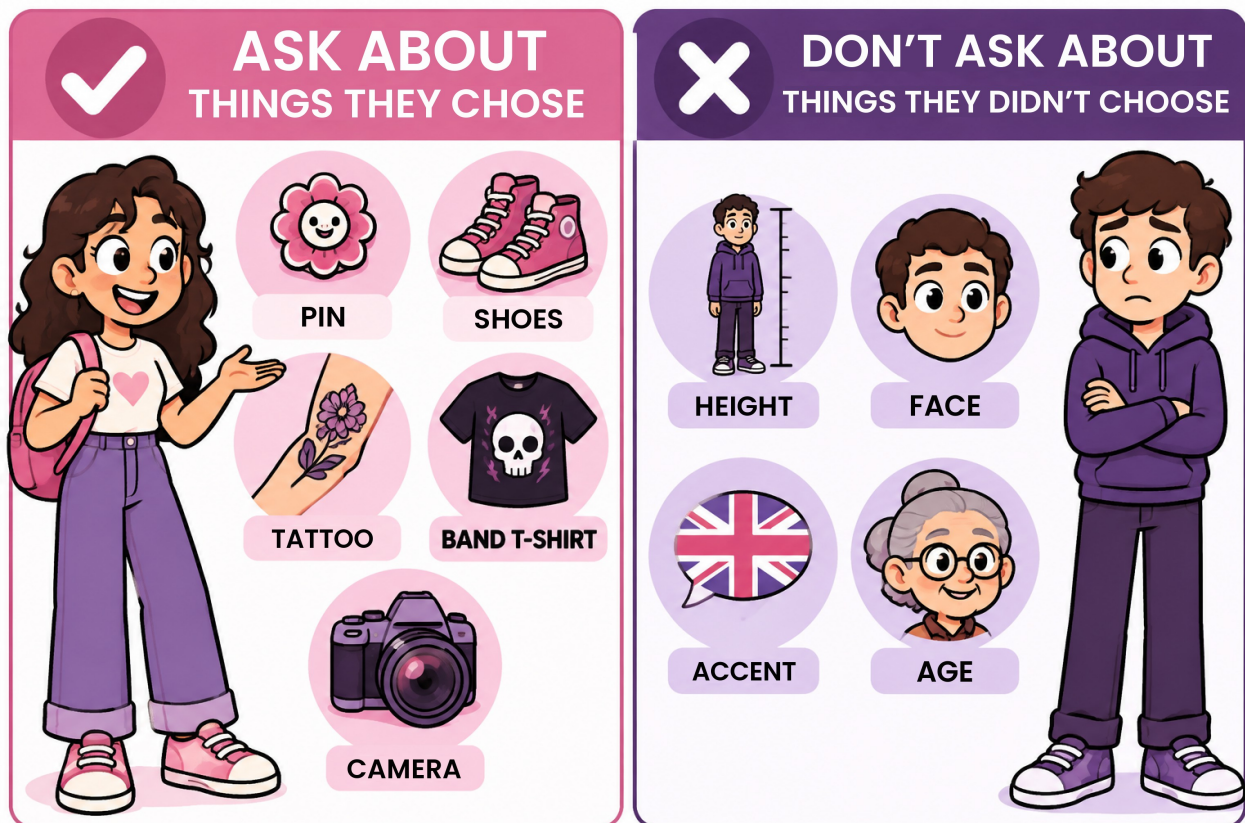
People pick these things for a reason, so there's nearly always a story waiting, and they're usually glad someone asked.

It also shows you actually noticed them, which feels good to anyone.

Keep it to choices.

Never use it on things they didn't choose, like their height, face, accent or age, because that stops feeling like interest and starts feeling like being pointed at.

I love that pin. What's the story behind it?



3

“Is this your first one of these?”

This is the safest opener in a room full of strangers. They can answer it in one word, so nobody feels put on the spot.

But whatever they say, it opens up.

If it's their first time or their tenth, you follow with the same easy second line, and now they're telling you why they're here.

Is this your first one of these? Then: What brought you along?

4

“I know exactly one person here and I’ve already lost them.”

Say the whole thing and then ask the question.

It also lets you both stop trying to look cool.

You’ve said the quiet part out loud, so they can relax too, and most people in the room are feeling exactly the same.

Keep it short and light, then hand it over to them.

I know exactly one person here and I’ve already lost them. How did you end up coming?

5

“What’s been the best thing about your week?”

This skips the usual round of complaining about traffic and work, and goes straight to good news you can actually follow up.

The way someone reacts when you share good news has a big effect on how close you feel to them.

So when they answer, react warmly and ask one more thing about it: “No way, how did that happen?”

That one warm reply does more than any clever opener.

Its sister line is “What’s the last thing that made you laugh?”

Most social talk is about having fun and feeling good together, so both questions put the fun right there from the first line.

What’s been the best thing about your week? Or: What’s the last thing that made you laugh?

6

“What’s something you’ve got into lately?”

This is the enthusiasm question.

It invites people to talk about whatever they’re excited about right now, a hobby, a show, a recipe, a new sport, and people light up when they get to do that.

A 2025 study looked at why outgoing people seem to get more out of social life.

It found the reason was simple: they show their excitement more often and in more different ways. That’s a habit, so anyone can copy it.

So when they answer, give one bit of enthusiasm back out loud, then ask how it started.

You get a better chat, and they walk away feeling great about talking to you.

What’s something you’ve got into lately? Then: Oh that’s brilliant, how did you get into it?

7

“What’s your verdict on the food?”

This asks for an opinion about something you’re both in right now: the food, the music, the venue, or that queue you’re both stuck in.

Nobody has to share anything personal, and everyone has an answer, so it’s one of the easiest lines in the room to say and to hear.

This kind of small talk is the real start of a friendship. In one study, pairs who chatted during breaks in a shared task enjoyed it more and were about three times more likely to keep talking after the task was over.

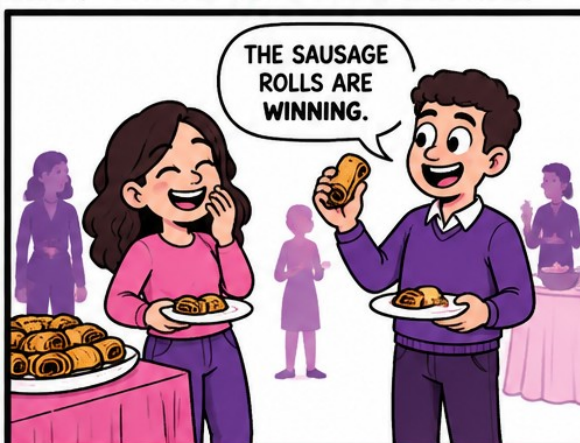
So a light line about the sausage rolls is a real way to start getting to know someone.

“What’s your verdict on the food? I’ve had three of these little pies and I still can’t tell what’s in them.”

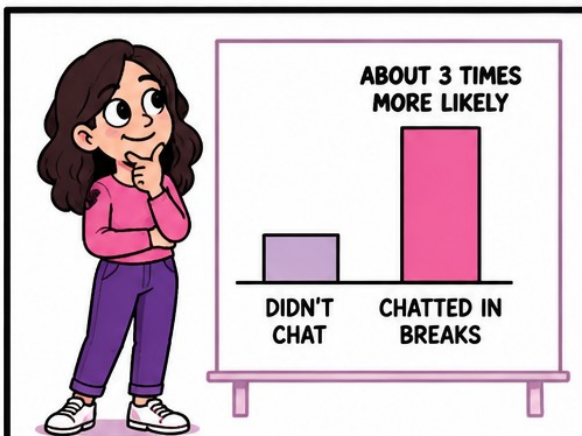
A LIGHT QUESTION ABOUT SOMETHING YOU ARE BOTH SHARING RIGHT NOW IS A REAL WAY TO START A FRIENDSHIP



SHE ASKS THE STRANGER NEXT TO HER WHAT HE THINKS OF THE FOOD.



NOBODY HAS TO SHARE ANYTHING PERSONAL, SO HE ANSWERS EASILY AND THEY BOTH LAUGH.



IN ONE STUDY, PAIRS WHO CHATTED DURING BREAKS WERE ABOUT THREE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO KEEP TALKING AFTER THE TASK WAS OVER.



NEXT EVENT

SO START WITH A LIGHT LINE ABOUT SOMETHING YOU ARE BOTH IN RIGHT NOW, LIKE THE FOOD, THE MUSIC OR THE QUEUE.

8

“Who here should I meet?”

This turns the person you’re talking to into the host. People love being asked, because it says they know the room.

You walk away with names, and you get a clean, friendly way to move on when they wave someone over or point you across the room.

Then do the same for others. When you’ve met two people who’d get on, introduce them: say both names and one thing they share.

The person who connects others ends up at the centre of the room, because so much of what’s said starts flowing through them.

“Sam, this is Priya. She’s also in design, and she just told me the funniest story about a client.”

**AT WORK, IN MEETINGS AND AT
CONFERENCES**

9

“What’s keeping you busy at the moment?”

Use this instead of “What do you do?” That question is really about status, and it has right and wrong answers, which is why people tense up when they hear it.

This one lets them answer with whatever fills their days: work, a course, a side project, a new baby, a house move.

Listen for the part where their voice lifts, and follow that. It’s the thing they actually want to talk about.

“So what’s keeping you busy at the moment?”

10

“You’ve done this before. What would you do about this?”

Asking for advice makes you look smarter, and it gives the other person a real reason to talk.

Ask someone for advice, rather than their opinion.

An opinion question can feel like a quiz, but an advice question says, “You’ve been here, and I want to learn from you.”

Most people avoid this because they think asking will make them look clueless, yet asking actually makes you look sharper.

In a set of experiments, people who asked for advice were seen as more competent than people who didn’t ask.

There are two reasons it lands so well. It flatters their experience, because you’ve picked them as someone worth asking.

And it gives them a real job in the conversation, so they aren’t hunting for something to say either.

They just help, and helping feels good.

It fits almost anywhere. In a new job: "You've been here a while. What would you do about getting the weekly report done faster?"

At a conference: "You've been to this before. Which sessions would you go to?" Before a meeting: "You've presented to this team.

What do they care about most?"

Its cousin is "I'm trying to get better at X, who should I talk to?"

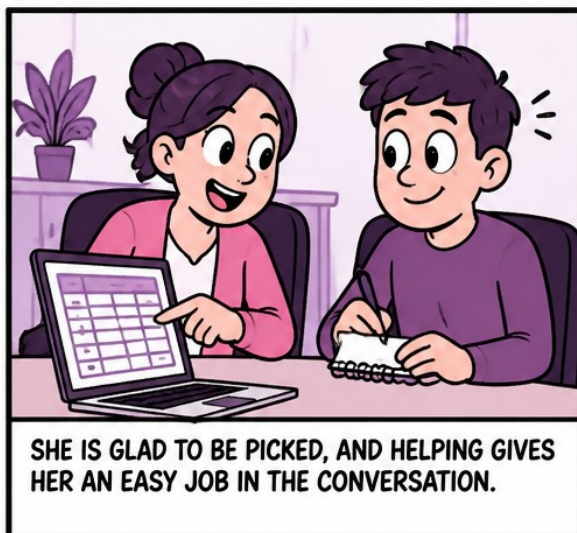
That asks for a name, which is much easier to give than a favour, and it makes them useful and you easy to remember.

So the next time you feel you have nothing to offer, ask. It's one of the quickest ways to come across well.

How to start Before your next work day or event, think of one thing you genuinely want help with. Find someone who's done it before and ask, "What would you do about this?" Follow up on their answer, and you'll notice they open up and talk longer.

"You've done this before. What would you do about getting through the first month here?"

ASKING AN EXPERIENCED PERSON FOR ADVICE MAKES YOU LOOK MORE COMPETENT, NOT LESS



11

“What’s the annoying part?”

“How’s it going?” gets you “fine” almost every time, and then the conversation stalls.

Add one short question and everything changes.

Asking about the annoying part gets you the real state of play, because everyone has one and nobody usually asks.

It also tends to get a laugh, and that laugh breaks the ice faster than anything polite.

For someone newer, try the bit of the job nobody warned them

about. It invites the truth instead of a status report.

“How’s the project going? What’s the annoying part?” “What’s the bit of this job nobody warned you about?”

ADD “WHAT’S THE ANNOYING PART?” AND A ONE-WORD ANSWER TURNS INTO A REAL CONVERSATION



SHE ASKS A COLLEAGUE HOW IT'S GOING AND GETS THE USUAL ONE-WORD ANSWER.



THE CONVERSATION STALLS RIGHT THERE.



SHE ADDS ONE SHORT QUESTION ABOUT THE ANNOYING PART, AND HE LAUGHS AND TELLS HER HOW THINGS REALLY ARE.



WITH SOMEONE NEWER, ASK ABOUT THE PART OF THE JOB NOBODY WARNED THEM ABOUT.

12

“What did you make of that?”

This is the line for straight after a meeting or a talk.

Everyone in the room has a view about what they just heard, and nobody has said it yet, so they're usually glad you asked.

Use it in the corridor, by the coffee, or walking out of a conference session together. You already share the thing you're talking about.

“What did you make of that? I didn't see the last bit coming.”

13

Tell them you're quiet at first

Say out loud that you warm up slowly, and nobody will mistake your quiet for coldness.

Quiet people carry a fear that their silence looks like snobbery.

They worry they come across as stuck up or standoffish when really they're tired, or still working out what to say.

So say it before anyone has to guess.

A 30-year-old who described himself as painfully awkward and quiet at work turned it around and became fairly social with everyone.

One of his habits was telling colleagues early on that he's reserved at first but chimes in once he's settled.

His reason was simple: if you say nothing, quiet people can come across as arrogant. One honest sentence took that risk away.

He didn't stop there.

He kept a small bank of questions he liked to ask when meeting someone new at work, so his mind never had to start from blank.

He kept a notebook of good and bad conversations, writing down

what worked so he could use it again.

And he had one rule he stuck to: don't dwell on it, because going over a conversation again and again will kill your progress.

Those three habits work together. The questions get you started, the notebook shows you what to keep, and refusing to replay every word lets you walk into the next chat fresh instead of nervous.

That means you can stop hiding your quiet and start using it, because people relax around someone who tells them what to expect.

How to start Pick the line below and say it to one new person this week. Write down five questions you like and say them out loud once at home. After any chat that stands out, jot one line about what worked. If you catch yourself replaying it, close the notebook and move on.

"Heads up, I'm a bit quiet when I'm new, but give me a week and you won't be able to shut me up."

KEEPING IT GOING AND GOING DEEPER

14

The Two-Second Anchor

The silence never killed the chat; jumping to a new topic did.

Almost everyone has the same complaint about conversation lists: you ask a question, they answer, you ask another, and soon it feels like a job interview.

The fix is surprisingly small, and it happens in the quiet moments

you probably dread most.

Researchers recorded hundreds of ten-minute chats between strangers and between friends, and had people rate how connected they felt moment by moment.

In normal talk, the gap between turns is about a quarter of a second. A long gap is anything over two seconds.

Friends actually had more long gaps than strangers, and they felt closer going into them.

Strangers felt worse, and the reason stood out: when it went quiet, strangers rushed to change the subject, and that drained the connection.

So the pauses that feel bad are the ones we jump into clumsily and then can't get out of smoothly.

A separate set of studies found the same thing from another angle.

People who asked follow-up questions were liked more, while switching to new questions did little.

Speed daters who asked more questions got more second dates.

So when it goes quiet, the silence is doing very little harm, and staying on the same topic is what brings the warmth back.

When their answer trails off, count one beat in your head.

Then stay right where you are with a follow-up such as "What was that like?" or "How did you get into that?"

Their last answer always holds your next question, so you never have to invent one from nothing.

To stop the interview feeling for good, use statement, question, follow-up.

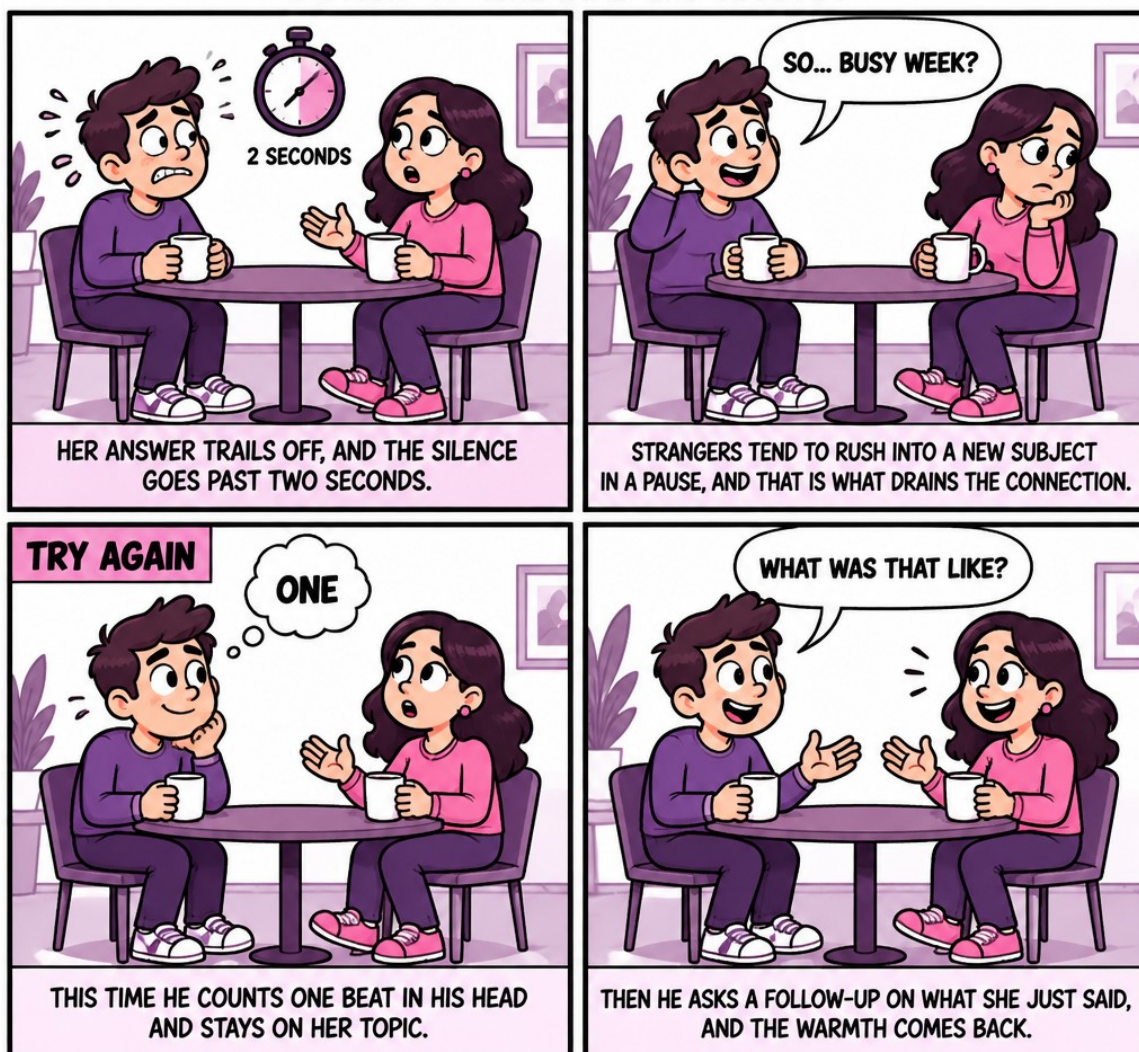
Share a small thought of your own, ask your question, then follow up on whatever they say.

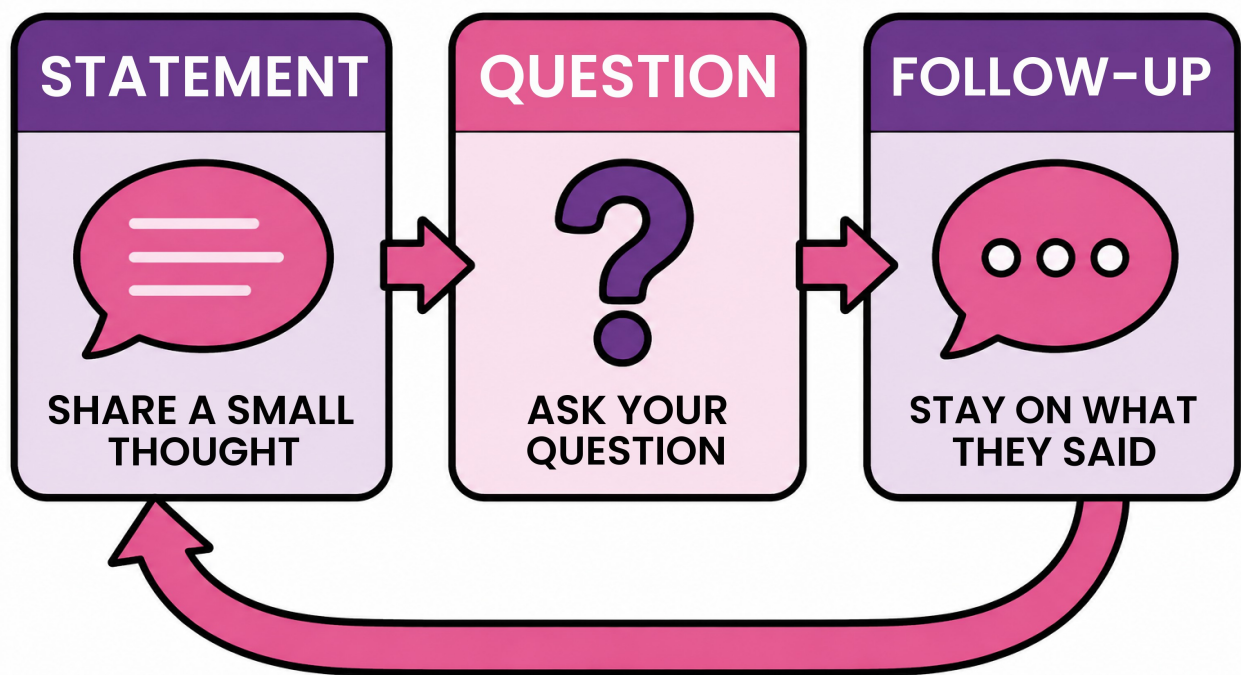
That rhythm sounds like two people talking instead of one person asking.

How to start In your next chat, when a pause comes, count “one” silently before you speak. Ask a follow-up on what they just said instead of a new question. Before your next question, add one line about yourself first. You’ll know it’s working when they start asking you things back.

Them: “I used to row at uni.” (pause) You: “Oh, I’d never have guessed. How did you get into that?”

WHEN IT GOES QUIET, COUNT ONE BEAT AND ASK A FOLLOW-UP INSTEAD OF CHANGING THE SUBJECT





15

“Say more about that.”

This is the whole of good listening in three words.

When someone feels truly heard, their nerves drop and they open up and tell you more, but it only works when you’re genuinely interested, so say it like you mean it.

The best-loved advice on getting along with people boils down to encouraging others to talk about themselves, and this line does exactly that.

“Wait, you moved here for a job you’d never seen? Say more about that.”

16

Repeat their last few words

When your mind goes blank, their own words are the best next line you have.

When someone finishes a sentence and your head empties, repeat the last one to three words they said, with a slightly rising tone, like a gentle question.

Then stop talking and let them fill the space.

This is called mirroring, and it's a favourite move of top hostage negotiators.

They teach that the person who says the least and repeats the most ends up learning the most.

People hear their own words come back and they keep going, usually with the more interesting part of the story.

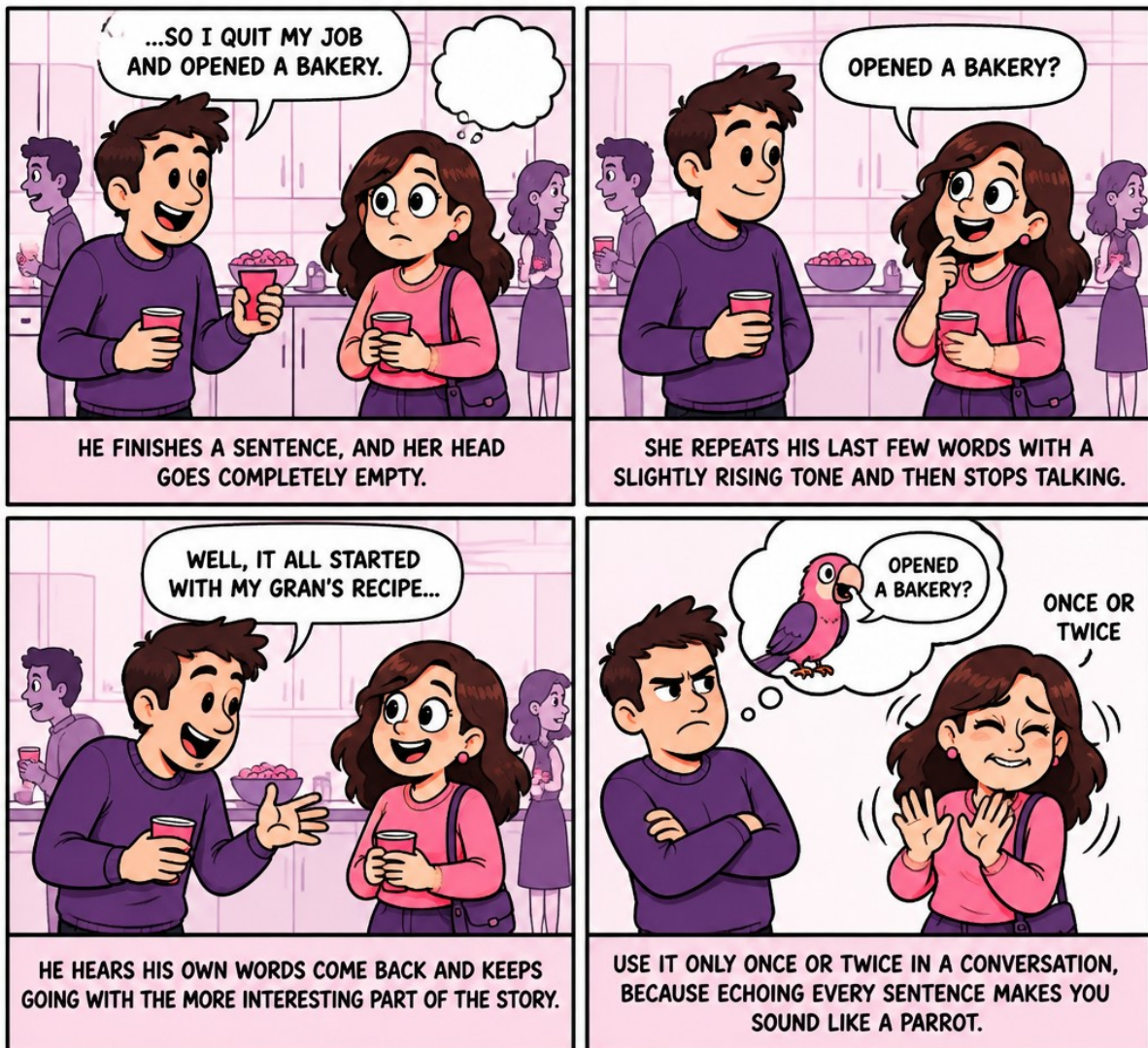
So it does two jobs at once. It buys you a few seconds to think, and it gets them telling you more without you having to come up with a single new question.

One warning. If you echo every sentence, you sound like a parrot and they'll notice.

Use it once or twice in a conversation, at the moment the talk could stall.

Them: "I just got back from a week of walking in Scotland." You: "A week of walking?" Them: "Yeah, it was meant to be a gentle trip, but my friend had planned the whole thing around climbing hills..."

WHEN YOUR MIND GOES BLANK, REPEAT THEIR LAST FEW WORDS AS A GENTLE QUESTION AND LET THEM KEEP TALKING



17

The Skipped Weather

Deep talk feels risky before you try it, and it's the part people enjoy most.

With someone you'll see again, a colleague, a neighbour, a friend of a friend, let the first few minutes of easy chat happen.

Then skip the weather and the what-are-you-watching layer, and ask something with a bit of weight to it, like "What's something you're most grateful for this year?"

Most of us hold back because we expect a question like that to feel

awkward.

But that guess is wrong, and it's most wrong for exactly the deeper questions.

Researchers paired up strangers, from graduate students to finance executives, and gave them either light topics like the weather and favourite TV shows, or deep ones like what they're most grateful for in life.

Before talking, people predicted the deep chats would be awkward and that they'd prefer the light ones.

Afterwards, they enjoyed the deep conversations more and felt more connected.

The reason is simple: we badly underestimate how interested the other person is in a real conversation.

So the other person most likely wants to go deeper too, and you're the one who gets to open the door.

Start gently.

Good first steps are "What's the best thing that's happened to you this year?" or "What would you do with a free afternoon and nothing you had to do?"

Save the heavier ones, like "When's the last time you cried in front of someone?", for later, once you know each other a little.

If you've got one long evening with someone you'll keep seeing, try the 36 questions.

They come in three sets that get more personal as you go, and take about 45 minutes.

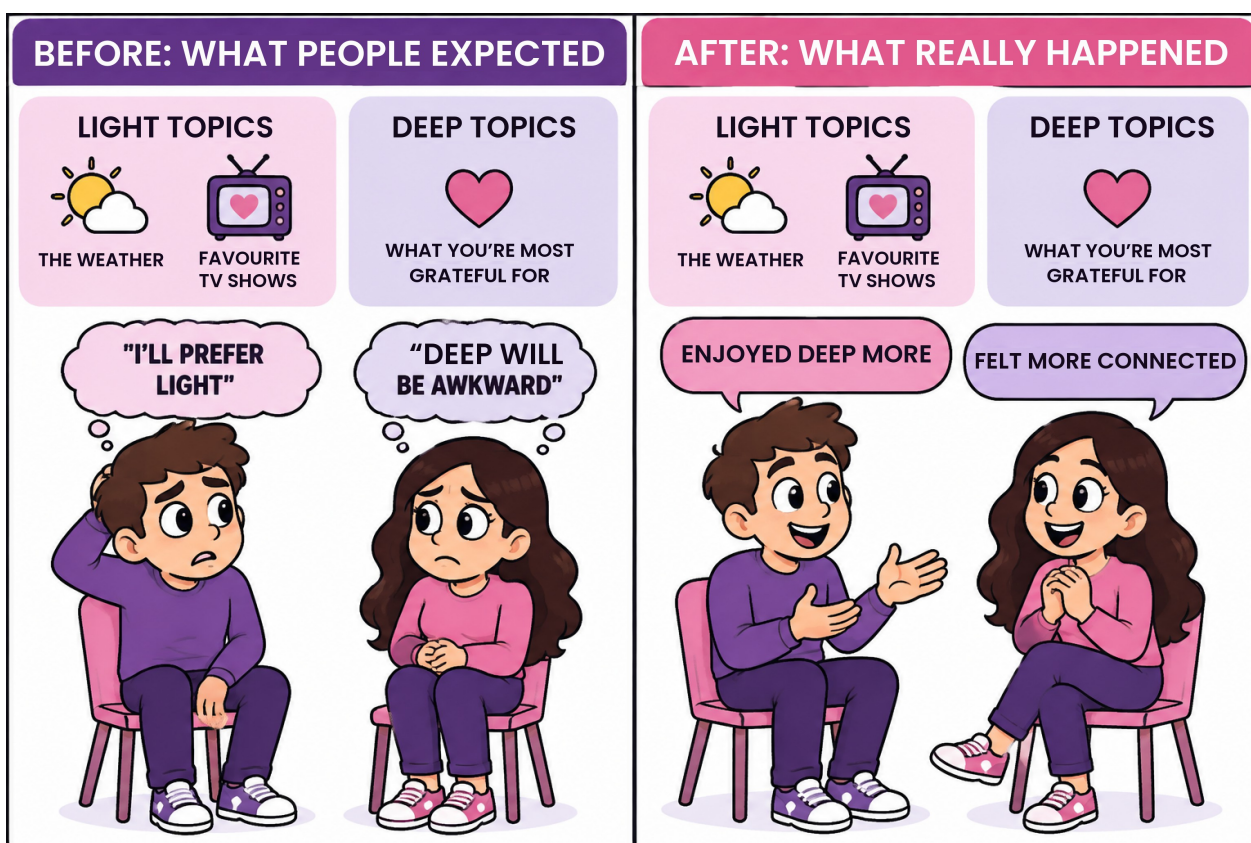
They were built to help strangers feel close, and in the lab they did exactly that.

They're about closeness, so treat the falling-in-love story you may

have heard as a fun extra.

How to start Pick one easy deep question tonight and keep it in your head. Use it on someone you'll see again, a few minutes into the chat. Answer it yourself too, so it feels like a swap. You'll know it's working when they lean in and the talk gets longer, not shorter.

"Can I ask you something a bit different? What's something you're most grateful for this year?"



18

"What are you looking forward to?"

This one points the talk at something good that hasn't happened yet, so people light up when they answer.

Better still, it hands you a ready-made reason to talk again: next time you see them, you ask "How was Lisbon?" and you're straight back in.

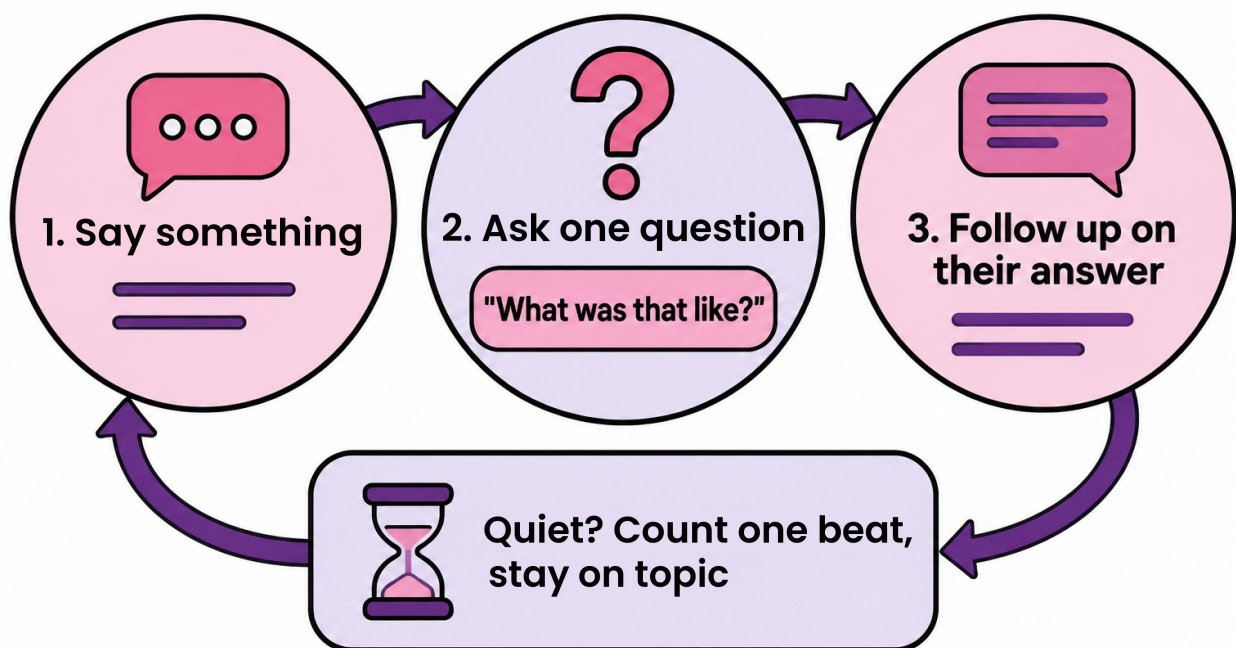
That matters more than any perfect opener.

Talking feels easy with people you already know, and a stranger only becomes someone you know through a second conversation.

So at any event you'll go back to, aim for three names and one thing each person is looking forward to, then find those three people next time.

"What are you looking forward to at the moment?" Next time: "Hey, how was the trip?"

Keep it going without the interview



Statement, question, follow-up: the loop that stops a chat turning into an interview.

WALKING IN AND WALKING OUT

19

The Pocket Preflight

Walk in with a job to do and you never have to be interesting.

Before every flight, pilots run a short checklist.

They do it so that when things get busy, they don't have to think, because the important parts are already decided.

You can do the same before any event.

Sitting in the car or riding up in the lift, open the notes on your phone and write three lines: one person to meet, one question to ask, and one thing to get done.

Then read them once and put the phone away.

Those three lines do two jobs at once. They give you your opener, because you already know who you're looking for and what you'll ask.

They also give you your honest exit, because when a chat runs its course you can say, "I promised myself I'd find the organiser," and it's true.

The biggest change is in your head. "Be interesting" is a job nobody can finish, but "do something" is a job you can tick off, and having it takes the pressure off being witty.

Two things help it work.

First, stay as long as you can, ideally about 45 minutes, because nerves rise early and then start to fall if you stay put.

People who leave in the first ten minutes leave at the worst moment and never feel the drop.

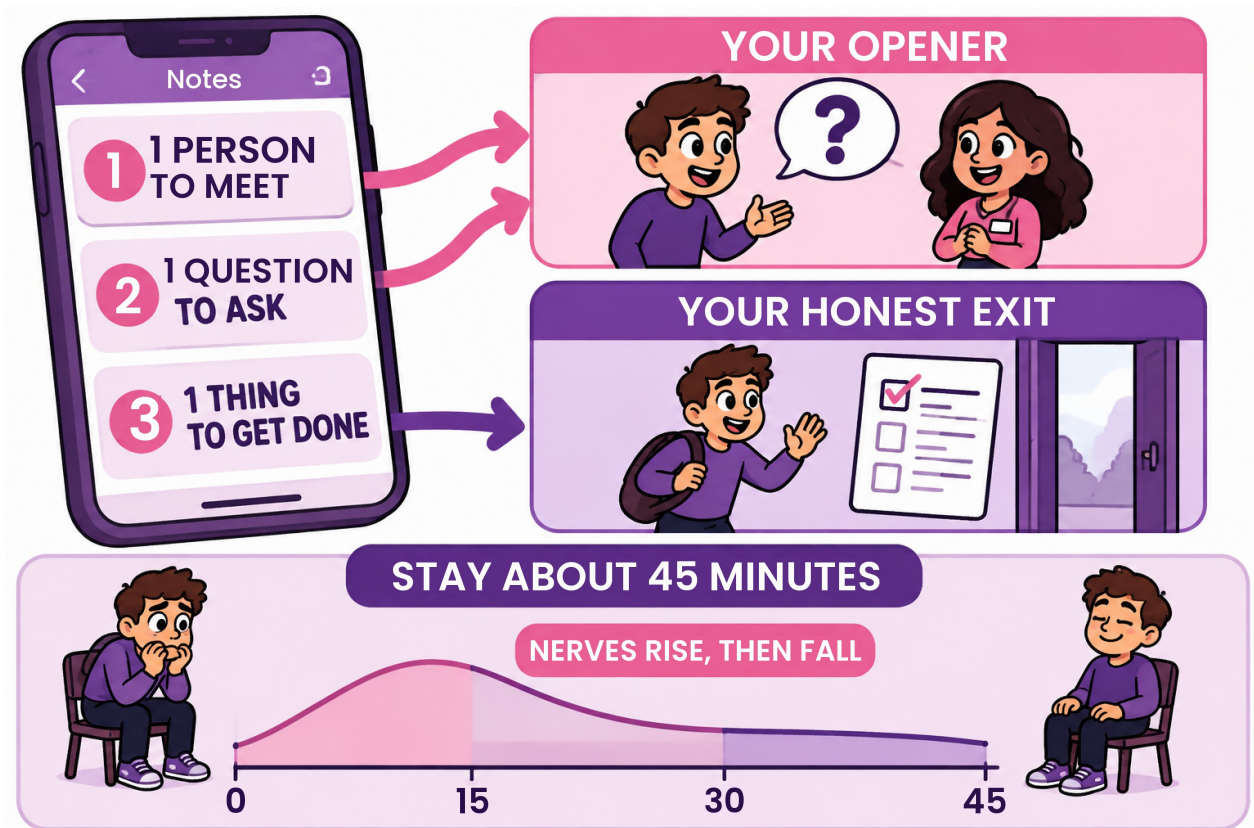
Second, keep your attention on the room, on faces, what people are saying and what's on the table, instead of on how you feel.

That's how you notice the things that show you you're coping fine.

So the three lines are your ticket in, and staying is what makes the next event easier.

How to start Before your next event, write the three lines on your phone. Read them once on the way in. Tick off the person, the question and the job before you think about leaving. You'll know it's working when you walk out with at least one name you'd be glad to see again.

Meet: the woman who ran the morning session Ask: "What's keeping you busy at the moment?" Get done: find out when the next meetup is



“I’m grabbing another drink. Come with me?”

This is the refill exit. Either they come along and the chat moves somewhere new, or they say they’re fine and you both part easily.

Neither way feels like rejection, because you’re going somewhere and you invited them.

When you do part, close with appreciation, and make sure it’s your turn to speak, so the conversation doesn’t stop mid-air.

A warm last line is what makes the next meeting easy instead of awkward.

Some famous party hosts were said to carry two drinks, so that if they got cornered they could excuse themselves to deliver the other one.

You don’t need the second drink, but you can borrow the idea of always having somewhere to be.

“I’m grabbing another drink. Come with me?” “It was really good to meet you, I’m glad I came over.”



Every line here works for one reason: it puts your attention on the other person's face, and that's where the good conversation is.

So keep three moves close: follow up on what they said, let the pause sit for a beat, and ask for advice when you'd usually ask for an opinion.

One person set out to talk to 100 strangers in 30 days and finished six short. His skills were still a lot better than when he started. You don't need a perfect run either. Go get your first three names.

If this helped, follow me for more small, easy ways to feel at home in any room.

● **Instagram @SocialPresenceLab**

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