

Chatterbox #46 – Making small talk

Transcript

Maura: Hello everyone!

Harp: This is Harp.

Maura: And Maura.

Harp: At Culips ESL Podcast.

Maura: And don't forget to go to our website, Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com, where you can get lots of our episodes. And in addition to our episodes, you can get the transcripts, more detailed explanations about expressions, and even a quiz.

Harp: And today we're here with the Chatterbox episode, and this is where we chat. We talk about current events, we interview people, we talk about interesting topics.

Maura: Yes. You never know what you're gonna get in our Chatterbox episodes.

Harp: Yeah, it's always a little surprise for you.

Maura: And today, we are chatting about chatting. We're talking about **small talk**.

Harp: Yes. Today we're going to talk about **small talk**.

Maura: And that's the kind of conversation that you have with people that's not complicated or difficult; really easy conversation that you have with people you don't know very well.

Harp: And today we'll break down this topic into meeting new people ...

Maura: And then we're going to give you some situations where you might meet these new people or you might have **small talk**.

Harp: Exactly. And we'll finish by talking about **icebreakers**: ways to start **small talk**.

- Maura: Yeah. Different ways you can start conversations. OK, so first, we'll talk about meeting new people and the **small talk** that happens. Now, Harp, do you like meeting new people?
- Harp: I do like meeting new people, but, you know, I'm kinda shy.
- Maura: Are you?
- Harp: Yeah, I know. People are surprised, because I'm quite **outgoing**, but I'm shy when I meet new people.
- Maura: You know, Harp, I never would have guessed that, because when we met, it was in our French class, and you were in front of me, we made **eye contact**, and right away, you said, "Hey, how's it going?" So laid back.
- Harp: That's funny, 'cause I'm sure I was very nervous when I said it.
- Maura: Well, I know that I felt nervous, because I was so surprised that someone was talking to me.
- Harp: That's so funny.
- Maura: Because I would say, Harp, I'm like you. I am pretty talkative, I like being around new people, but I also feel a little bit shy when it's a **brand new** person.
- Harp: Exactly. I think it's easier when it's a one-on-one situation, when it's just you and the person. But, for example, I just started a new job, and to try to talk to a hundred new people? I'm nervous.
- Maura: Yeah, it is pretty difficult. One thing that can make it easier is if a person you know introduces you to the new person. Then you already have a connection and a reason to talk. That makes it a little bit easier.
- Harp: Yeah, definitely. You know, Maura, sometimes I'm so shy that I avoid making **eye contact** with people, or I'll pretend I'm on the phone looking at something.
- Maura: Yeah. When I'm at ... specifically a party, or even a small gathering, when there are people that I don't know, I am not good at **mingling**. I feel shy and, like you, I don't want to make **eye contact**, or I smile, but then I look away quickly.
- Harp: That's funny. I do that too.

- Maura: So yeah, that's one way, or a few ways, I think, of how you can avoid **small talk**. You can avoid **eye contact** or look away quickly. Or, like you said, Harp, do something else.
- Harp: Yeah. Pretend you're looking for something in your purse or pretend you're checking something on your phone.
- Maura: Yeah. In another situation, like on **public transportation**, you could listen to music, because then people aren't going to talk to you because you're **closed off**. Or you could read a book. Usually, even if I feel a bit shy, I like meeting new people, but sometimes I want to **close off** from the world and be left alone.
- Harp: Yeah, especially when I'm grumpy. So Maura, let's talk about different places where you have to make **small talk**.
- Maura: First of all, we should say that **small talk** conversations can happen pretty much anywhere; anywhere that you meet a new person or you **run into someone** that you know a little bit.
- Harp: Or when you're in a place that's small with someone you don't know, but it's just one person or two people, like in a small elevator.
- Maura: Right. So, an elevator is one situation where it happens maybe more often than other places. So in an elevator, I find people talk about the weather.
- Harp: Definitely. That's what I talk about.
- Maura: Usually when I'm in an elevator, I avoid **eye contact** because I don't think we need to talk in an elevator. But if people talk to me, then it's usually something like, "Hey, it's really hot out there."
- Harp: Yeah. You know, I have certain rules. Like at work, my building is 25 floors, so to me, it's too big to try to know everyone, so I can avoid anyone and not make any **small talk**. But it in my building, it's where I live, so if someone comes into the elevator, I'll make some **small talk**. Usually if they have a dog, or if they have kids, I comment on how cute they are, something like that, to make **small talk**.

- Maura: But that's true. If you can comment on something specific to that other person, that's a great way, because of course they have something to say about it. People love talking about their dogs or their pets or children, for sure. Now, if you're at work, the common place to have these **small talk** conversations is around the **water cooler**, which is the place where you go to get water, usually spring water or some filtered water.
- Harp: Yeah. And to me, I think it means, usually, the whole cafeteria, because that's where you get water, usually.
- Maura: Yeah, I was thinking about myself, and at my work, we don't have a **water cooler**, but there definitely is a common area where people come to eat or drink, make coffee. And this is where **small talk** conversation happens.
- Harp: Like I said, I just started a new job, so I've had a lot of these **small talk** conversations near the **water cooler**.
- Maura: And what kind of things have you talked about?
- Harp: Mostly people are asking me, "Oh, how's the new job?" Do I like it? So it's a good way **to segue** into a conversation, but sometimes the weather, because we have big windows, so you can see outside.
- Maura: Yeah. I think something that you can always ask your colleagues or friends at school is, "How's your day going?" because it's a regular greeting like "How are you?" but it's specific to where you are and what you're doing. And since you're working together or studying together, you can often relate to how the person's feeling, like, "Oh, I'm having such a hard day today. I'm **swamped** at work." Maybe you're both feeling that way, so it's a nice way to find a connection.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: And another place, which we already mentioned, an important place, is a party.
- Harp: Yes. Parties are **nerve-racking** for me if there are a lot of people that I don't know.
- Maura: Yeah. When you walk in and you don't know very many people, you usually **stick with** the people you know.
- Harp: Yes. I usually **stick to** the people I know and make conversation with them, and then if someone new joins the group, then I'll start talking to them. But I have a really hard time just going and talking to people I don't know at all at a party.

- Maura: Yeah, yeah. I think most Canadians do. Most people kind of keep to what they know at a party and slowly get to know the other people, maybe because of an introduction, or maybe because they both comment on something, like, "Isn't that an interesting couch?" But there are some people who do have a lot of energy and enthusiasm and go around and meet everybody. I'm a little bit jealous of those people.
- Harp: Me too. Sometimes if I'm in the right mood, I can be like that, but rarely when I don't know anyone. If it's a party and I know quite a few people, then I'm much more open to going to meet new people. And if it's a party where I know almost everyone and there are a couple of new people, I make the effort to go talk to them, because I feel so nervous when it's the opposite.
- Maura: You're very nice
- Harp: I try.
- Maura: But often, when you have that crazy, **outgoing** person, they talk to you about all kinds of different things. They don't necessarily make **small talk**. They might just ask you your opinion on some crazy, random thing because they're trying to get the party going.
- Harp: Yeah.
- Maura: All different kinds of people and all different kinds of ways to interact with each other.
- Harp: Yeah. And how do people start **small talk**?
- Maura: Well, there are all kinds of different ways, but there are some common **icebreakers** that people use to start conversations. Now, if you've ever been in an English classroom where you're learning English as a second language, I'm sure you learned about **icebreakers**: so, to break the ice between two people, so that they can get to know each other and feel comfortable. Now, talking about the weather is a big one, in Canada and abroad. You can always talk about the weather, because everyone's experiencing it.
- Harp: Yeah, it's an easy general topic to talk about. That's why it's used so often.
- Maura: Now, there's another good way you can make **small talk**, and that is to ask questions. And I do this all the time.
- Harp: Me too.

- Maura: I'm afraid that sometimes I'm a **question machine**.
- Harp: I agree. Sometimes I have to tell people, like, "Oh, I'm sorry, I ask a lot of questions. You don't have to answer if you don't want to," because I ask so many questions.
- Maura: Yeah. And it's true that most people like to talk about themselves, or they don't mind talking about themselves. So you can ask them questions like, "What's your name?" or "Where are you from?" or "How long have you lived or worked here?"
- Harp: Yeah, anything about them. If they're wearing a cool shirt, you can ask them where they got that shirt, or where they got those earrings, things like that.
- Maura: Yeah, what they think of the new boss or if they like the new apartment building. Whatever!
- Harp: If they've heard that song before, anything. Just take cues from what's going on.
- Maura: And because people do like to talk about themselves, some people make **small talk** simply by talking about themselves and telling the other person things about themselves.
- Harp: Yeah. We've had this conversation before, where we're often asking people questions and they never ask us questions.
- Maura: That's how it happens sometimes. So, you get all different kinds of ways to make **small talk**. Some people ask questions. Some people talk about themselves. It's up to you. You could also talk about current events: anything that's happening in the media or the world at the moment.
- Harp: Yeah. It's an easy way. If you read the news often, it's easy to have a general opinion about something that's going on.
- Maura: Yeah. Especially local news or something happening within your country, especially good news, might be an interesting topic to bring up. You could also talk about sports. If you're into sports or if you see that the person you're talking to is a sports fan, you can talk about the game last night or the goal that was shot. In Montreal, people are always talking about the **Montreal Canadiens** because this city is crazy for hockey, so some people, some big fans, assume that everybody knows what's going on with **the Habs**.
- Harp: And for everyone listening, **the Habs** is a slang word for the **Montreal Canadiens**, the hockey team from Montreal.

- Maura: On that note, let's review what we spoke about today.
- Harp: We started with talking about meeting new people and how we're both a bit shy.
- Maura: And if you want to meet new people, make **eye contact**, smile in their direction. But if you're feeling kind of shy, don't make **eye contact**.
- Harp: Yeah, and maybe look at your phone or check your purse or something.
- Maura: And situations where you might have to make **small talk** include parties and maybe elevators or at the **water cooler** at work, but really, it could happen anywhere.
- Harp: Yeah. And then we talked about **icebreakers**: topics you can use when you're making **small talk**.
- Maura: Right. For example, you could talk about the weather, you could ask about the person, or you could talk about some current events that are happening.
- Harp: Yeah, exactly.
- Maura: Now, don't forget: be courageous! Talk, don't be shy. That's the best way to practice English.
- Harp: Definitely. The more you speak, the better you'll get.
- Maura: And thank you for listening. Don't forget to go to our website, Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com. You can become a member or you can make a donation and support us making your ESL podcast.
- Harp: Exactly. And that's it for us today.
- Maura: See you later.
- Harp: Bye everyone!
- Maura: Bye!

Detailed Explanation

Small talk

Small talk is simple conversation about subjects that people can easily speak freely about. **Small talk** is usually made between people who do not know each other very well and for some reason a conversation is less awkward than silence. The verb that is used with this expression is *to make*, as in *to make **small talk***.

Here is a quick example:

Becky: How's the new job going?

Gordon: Great! Except I hate making **small talk** with everybody.

Instead of **small talk**, you could also say *light conversation*.

Icebreakers

Icebreakers are things that people do or say to begin a conversation with new people. In classrooms where students don't know each other, the teacher often has **icebreaker** games to play, so that the students get comfortable speaking with each other.

Outside of the classroom, in the real world, people also tend to use certain conversation starters when meeting someone new. We discuss some of these throughout this episode. Some subjects that people can easily talk about are the weather or the local news.

Outgoing

When a person is described as **outgoing**, it means that they like to talk and are not shy. This is why Harp says that people might be surprised that she feels shy because she is **outgoing**. Being **outgoing** does not necessarily mean that someone likes to go out, although **outgoing** people often do like to be social.

Here's a short list of similar words to describe someone who is **outgoing**. These words, like the word **outgoing**, can only be used to describe people, not places or things.

Friendly
Talkative
Extroverted

Brand new

The word *new* is commonly used to describe something that was recently made, or came into existence lately. People might also call something new if it is new to them. An example of this might be someone who buys a coat that is used. The coat is new for them, but it was not made recently.

To say that something is **brand new** is stronger than just saying something is new. Anything described as **brand new** is completely new, as in just bought from a store and in perfect condition.

Here are a couple examples to distinguish between new and **brand new**:

Donna: I just got a **new*** cat.

Owen: Oh, really. How old is he?

Donna: He's 5. I got him from the Humane Society.

*The cat is new to Donna, but it's already 5 years old.

Justin: I'm getting my new car this weekend.

Luke: Oh, congratulations! Did you decide to get a used car?

Justin: No, it's **brand new***. I'm excited.

*The car is new to Justin and also recently made.

Eye contact

When meeting someone new or having a conversation in North America, it is generally important to make some **eye contact**. Making **eye contact** before having a conversation can let both people know that you are open to having one. Likewise, not making **eye contact** can let others know that you are not open to having a conversation.

To mingle

When you are any place where there are a lot of people, you will probably **minge**. **To mingle** is to talk to or associate with many different people in one place. This could be people you already know or people you are meeting for the first time.

At a large gathering, people generally **minge**. You spend some time talking to some people, and then you move on to other people to have a new conversation. When you **minge**, you often make small talk because you don't have time to get into a serious conversation about anything.

Here is another example with **to mingle**:

Katherine: What were you talking about with that guy over there?

Paul: Nothing special. Just **mingling**.

To be closed off

If someone is **closed off**, they are not open or interested in having a conversation or meeting new people. One way to **close yourself off**, as we mentioned earlier, is not to make eye contact. You might also read a book or listen to music, although doing this at a social function or some kind of party would be quite unusual.

Public transportation

Public transportation includes all the modes of transportation that are communal. The bus is a form of **public transportation**, as well as commuter trains and subways. Forms of **public transportation** usually have set prices to pay and scheduled routes that they travel along.

Even though travelling by airplanes is public, it is usually not considered **public transportation**. This may be because **public transportation** refers to vehicles on the ground, a mode of transportation with a lower cost, and travel around a smaller area.

To run into someone

When one person **runs into another person**, it means that they see each other by chance, having had no prior plans to meet with each other. Of course, a person may also physically run into another person, but most often when the expression **to run into someone** is used, it simply describes an unplanned meeting.

Here are a couple examples to see the difference between the expression and the literal meaning:

Kiley: I **ran into John** at the mall yesterday.

Mike: Oh, really? How is he?

Nancy: I ran into John yesterday when we were playing Ultimate Frisbee.

Ivan: Oh, really? Did you hurt yourself?

When people **run into each other**, they are likely to make small talk. This is because the meeting was unplanned and the conversation is usually short.

The water cooler

The **water cooler**, as we explain in this episode, is a dispenser of drinking water. Many work places have them and people might meet there by chance and exchange brief conversations. Because people have conversations around the **water cooler** so often, the phrase **water cooler** is often associated with small talk or office gossip.

To segue

To segue is to move from one thing to another smoothly. A **segue**, in this episode, is a transition from one topic of conversation to another. There is usually some connection between the first topic and the following topic that makes the transition seem natural.

One important note about the word **segue** is that the spelling is very different from the pronunciation. If you want to hear what it sounds like, listen to the episode again with the transcript. It sounds like *seg-way*, with two syllables pronounced.

To be swamped

We've done an episode in the past about being **swamped**: focusing on being busy at work. **To be swamped** means that you have a lot of work to do and that you are really busy.

A swamp is an area of wetland, like a pond, but with lots of mud and vegetation. It is difficult to walk in a swamp because you can easily get stuck. If you apply this to the expression of *being swamped*, it's like you're so busy with work that you cannot move!

Nerve-racking

The adjective **nerve-racking** describes something that is difficult, annoying, or stressful. Something that is **nerve-racking** is never pleasant. In this episode, Harp says that parties are **nerve-racking** because there are so many new people and so she feels uncomfortable. This word can also be spelled as **nerve-wracking**.

Here are a couple more examples with **nerve-racking**:

Jenna: I'm studying for my test next week. It's so **nerve-racking**. I'm sure it's going to be a difficult test.

Antonio: Don't stress about it. I'm sure you'll do fine!

Carmen: Jamie was so nervous for his date tonight.

Violet: I can understand that. First dates are **nerve-racking**.

To stick with/to

As they were used in this episode, the verbs **to stick to** and **to stick with** mean *to stay with*. At a party where you don't know many people, you probably feel most comfortable **sticking with** the people you know. You can **stick to/with** people, a place, or an activity.

Here are a couple of examples with **to stick to/with**:

Michael: Do you want to go study for chemistry?

Lucy: No, I'm going **to stick to** English for now. I need to study it some more.

Benny: Can I **stick with** you at the show tomorrow night?

Matthew: Sure. No problem.

A question machine

This is a funny slang expression that can be used with friends. In this case, because someone asks a lot of questions, they could be called a **question machine**. In this phrase, the word *question* can be replaced with any word. If a person is doing a lot of a certain action, you can use that word to describe the person as a _____ machine.

For example, a person who dances a lot could be called a dancing machine. Someone who is always telling facts to their friends could be called a fact machine. If you know someone who is always telling stories, you could call them a story machine.

The Montreal Canadiens

The **Montreal Canadiens** is the hockey team in Montreal that's part of the National Hockey League (NHL), which includes teams across Canada and the United States. It is spelled **Canadiens** and not the proper English *Canadians*, because this hockey team is in the French part of Canada and so uses the French spelling of that word.

Many people in Montreal enjoy hockey, and especially love the **Montreal Canadiens**. Strangers can easily make small talk by talking about how the **Canadiens** are doing. Another term for **the Canadiens** is **the Habs**. This is also French, from the word *habitants*, meaning *inhabitants*, or people who live somewhere (in this case, in Canada).

Quiz

- 1. Which of the following is the most complete definition of *small talk*?**
 - a) short conversations
 - b) conversations where no one asks questions
 - c) Informal conversations about simple subjects
 - d) talking on elevators

- 2. Which of the following is an outgoing person MOST likely to do?**
 - a) talk to a lot of new people at a party
 - b) stay home and watch a movie
 - c) send a lot of text messages to their parents
 - d) go out dancing every night of the week

- 3. Which of the following would most likely be considered brand new?**
 - a) a coat just bought at a department store
 - b) a coat that a friend gave you
 - c) a coat just bought at a second-hand store
 - d) a coat that is a designer brand name

- 4. Brian is good at mingling. What is Brian good at?**
 - a) meeting and chatting with people at parties
 - b) dancing
 - c) cooking for large groups of people
 - d) organizing parties

- 5. Which is not a form of public transportation?**
 - a) train
 - b) bus
 - c) subway
 - d) airplane

- 6. What is the place discussed in this episode where people often stop to chat at an office?**
- a) the water fountain
 - b) the water cooler
 - c) the bathroom
 - d) the front door
- 7. How is *segue* pronounced?**
- a) seg
 - b) seg-way
 - c) seg-you
 - d) sea-gue
- 8. Which person below could most accurately be described as a dancing machine?**
- a) Bob loves to dance.
 - b) Harriet hates to dance.
 - c) Jackie only likes dancing to techno music.
 - d) Kyle only likes dancing at parties.

Answers: 1.c 2.a 3.a 4.a 5.d 6.b 7.b 8.a