

Real Talk #046 – How to start a conversation with a stranger

Episode description

Meeting new people can be intimidating. It can also be the starting point for the best friendships you'll ever have. In today's edition of Real Talk, Andrew and Kassy discuss the different ways to start a conversation with a stranger.

In this episode, you'll hear a variety of conversation starters, personal introductions, and good topics to talk about. You'll also learn about using a nickname versus your real name and what to say if you are in between jobs.

This episode is perfect to help you with real-life situations that happen every day.

Fun fact

The example dialogue in this episode has two people meeting for the first time at a book club. One of the most famous book clubs in the world is Oprah's Book Club. Led by talk show host Oprah Winfrey, the club has chosen more than 70 titles since 1996. Oprah's Book Club has done a lot to popularize many books and authors.

Expressions included in the study guide

- To strike up a conversation
- I'm [name], but you can call me [nickname]
- What brings you [somewhere]?
- Born and raised
- In between jobs
- To keep it light



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello there, everyone. My name's Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

You're listening to Real Talk by Culips, the series where we teach you the English that you need to know for real-world situations. And today, I'm joined by my cohost, Kassy. Hey, Kassy.

Kassy: Hey, Andrew. How's it going?

Andrew: I'm doing well. Kassy, could you let us know what we are going to cover in this episode?

Kassy: Of course. Today, we are going to be learning about how to introduce yourself to someone new.

Andrew: That's right. So, everyone, we're going to focus today on what you need to say and what you should avoid saying in important social situations, like when you meet somebody new. This is a very important social situation, right, Kassy?

Kassy: Yeah, totally. This is a really important skill to master, guys. So I hope you really learn a lot through this episode today. And the best way to study with this episode is to follow along with the study guide. You'll get the transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations, real-life examples, and even a quiz. So become a Culips member and get the study guides at Culips.com.

Andrew: Perfect. OK, so the plan for this episode is that we're gonna listen to an example conversation. And this conversation takes place at a community book club. And this is really common in many towns and cities in English-speaking countries. There are regular book club meetups, and you could go to them maybe at a café or, in my hometown, they're hosted at local libraries. And they're free and open for everyone. And you can just go and join.

Kassy: Yeah, and it's a place where you're really likely to meet a lot of people, too. Right, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, I think so. You know, anytime you do one of your hobbies with a group of people, you're likely to meet someone new.

Kassy: And it doesn't have to be limited to a book club, right? You can do it for all sorts of hobbies, like hiking, knitting, gaming, you name it.

Andrew: Yeah, I've joined running clubs before. And you go there and you meet a bunch of people that share a similar interest as you, and you run together. And it's the same for any hobby, you just join up with people who are like-minded. Like-minded means that they have a similar interest as you, they think the same way as you. These are like-minded people. So you can just hang out, spend some time with like-minded people, and enjoy your hobby together at a meetup group.

OK. So, in our example conversation, then, two strangers meet at a book club and **strike up a conversation** with each other. **Strike up a conversation** means start a conversation. So Kassy, let's take a listen to their conversation and see how they introduce themselves to each other. And then afterwards, we can go back over the conversation, analyze it, pick it apart, and talk about the key expressions that they used.

Kassy: Sounds good. Let's take a listen.

Mike: Hi, there. Are you here for the book club?

Patti: Yeah, you too?

Mike: Yeah. Welcome. Is this your first time here?

Patti: Yeah, it is.

Mike: Well, I'm happy you joined us. My name's Mike.

Patti: Ah, nice to meet you, Mike. **I'm Patricia, but you can call me Patti.**

Mike: OK, Patti, nice to meet you, too. So **what brings you to the book club?**

Patti: Well, I'm new in town and I thought it would be a good way to motivate me to read some books and also meet some like-minded people at the same time.

Mike: Killing two birds with one stone, nice.

Patti: Yeah. And what about you, are you from here?

Mike: **Born and raised**, yup. I'm a counsellor at Central High School.

Patti: Oh, that's great. I'm kind of **in between jobs** right now. But I'm working at a coffee shop part time while I look for something.

Mike: Perfect. So did you read the book we're supposed to discuss tonight?

Patti: I did. It was a little –

Mike: Wait, wait, wait, hold that thought for the meeting. Speaking of which, I think we're supposed to get started any moment now. Should we grab a seat?

Patti: Yeah, sure. Let's do it.

Andrew: OK, everyone. So in that example conversation, we heard two people, Mike and Patti, meet for the first time at a book club. And sounds like Mike is a regular member of the book club and Patti was brand-new to the meeting. That was her first time going to the book club. So Mike saw an unfamiliar face there at the meeting, and approached Patti, introduced himself, and they **struck up a small conversation** before the meeting started.

Kassy, I think now we should go back through that example and take a look at the key expressions and language that we heard Mike and Patti use. So let's start with what you should say when you approach someone for the first time. If you are in Mike's position, you are a regular at an event or an organization or a meetup and you notice an unfamiliar face, a new person, how can you go up and start talking to this person without being creepy?

Kassy: Yes, that is an excellent distinction, right? You don't want to come off like you're trying to hit on someone or flirt with them. You're just trying to introduce yourself. So a great way to do that is to use the expression are you here for the blah, blah? So in this example, Mike said, "Are you here for the book club?" But you can use this for any meeting. Are you here for the skateboard club? Are you here for the chess club? It works in any situation.

Andrew: Yeah. And so it's almost like a way to confirm that the person is in the right place, right? So maybe, in this example—of course, it's just an audio example so we don't have a visual—but I think that maybe Patti was looking around, like am I in the right place? Maybe she looks like she's by herself. And so you could come up to somebody and it's almost like a way to confirm that they are in the right place, right? You're sort of being friendly to them and helping them to know that they're in the right place for that meetup or for that event.

Kassy, what are some other ways that we can approach someone for the first time and introduce ourselves to a stranger?

Kassy: One way you can introduce yourself to someone you've never met is by simply stating that. You can say, oh, I don't think I've seen you here before. I'm blah, blah. I'm Mike.

Andrew: Yeah. I'm Andrew. I'm Kassy, etc. Just say your name, right? So, again, I think this is a really great thing to say in this kind of context, where you're at a meetup or you're at an event, you are a regular there but you notice a newcomer and you want to talk to that newcomer, right? So let's say, for an example, you go to a regular English exchange or English conversation group at a cafe every week. And there are your friends there, you see them again and again, every week, the same regular people come out. But of course, it's open to anybody, anybody can come. And then one week, you see a new person at the event, at the English conversation club. And you want to approach them and say welcome, hello, and introduce yourself. Then this is a perfect time to say something like, "I don't think I've seen you here before. I'm Andrew. Welcome to our club."

Kassy: Yeah, exactly. And there's one more expression you could use. That is this your first time here?

Andrew: Is this your first time here?

Kassy: Yeah, again. So if it's a new person you've never seen come to the club or meeting before, you can ask them this question to see if they are, in fact, a new member.

Andrew: Perfect. OK. So this is how you can approach someone new, talk to someone new for the first time in the context of a meetup or a club or an organization, anything like that.

So, next, Kassy, I want to focus in on how to introduce yourself. And I think this is a really important part to get right, especially if your name is difficult for English speakers to pronounce. OK, now, we've talked a little bit on Culips before about whether you should use an English nickname or not. This is a question we get asked often, when I'm in an English-speaking country, should I use a nickname or not? And it's really a personal choice. I've met some people who don't care about using their real name or not, and they're happy to adopt a nickname. I've met other people who prefer to use their given name. And that's fine, it's a personal choice.

I know in one of our previous episodes of Jeremy's English Tips, he talked about this topic in more detail. So I would highly recommend anyone that's interested in maybe choosing an English nickname for themselves to go check out that episode of Jeremy's English Tips. But regardless of whether you choose a nickname or go with your given name, it's important that whoever you're meeting for the first time knows how to properly address you and what to call you. So let's focus on that for a moment. So in the example conversation, Kassy, what did Patricia say when she told Mike her name?

Kassy: She said **I'm Patricia, but you can call me Patti.**

Andrew: OK. **I'm Patricia, but you can call me Patti.** So why didn't she say, I'm Patti? Why did she say **I'm Patricia, but you can call me Patti?**

Kassy: So Patricia is her full name, of course. But maybe she knows it's quite long. Or when she's in a situation where she wants to make friends, she'll shorten it to her nickname, which is Patti.

Andrew: Yeah. And if any of our listeners are concerned about how to introduce themselves to someone in English because your name might be long or difficult for English speakers to remember or maybe difficult to pronounce, then this could be a perfect situation for sharing your given name and your nickname, right? So, Kassy, we're both here in Korea, maybe we could use a Korean name to give us a kind of example for how you could do this. Do you have an example you could share?

Kassy: Yeah, definitely. So I have a friend whose name is Hyo Ryeong. And that name is quite difficult for the average English speaker to say. So when he meets new people, he usually says something like this, "Hi, I'm **Hyo Ryeong**, but you can call me **Hugh**." His English nickname is Hugh.

Andrew: Perfect. So I like this because you're sharing what your real name is. And you're sharing that part of your culture and identity, but you're also making it easy for the person you're meeting and giving them an option, almost. It's like, well, if you know a little bit of Korean and you want to call me by my real name, go ahead. But if that's hard for you, don't worry about it. You can just call me by my nickname, which in this case is Hugh. Awesome.

Kassy, another thing I wanted to highlight here is that it is normal and almost expected to say nice to meet you when you meet somebody new. And we can change this a little bit and say, oh, it's good to meet you, or I'm happy to meet you, nice to meet you. Something like that. But a lot of my students, when they see me every week, they say nice to meet you. OK. But that is wrong, right? We can only use nice to meet you the first time we meet somebody.

Kassy: Yes, that's right, Andrew. I've heard this mistake used a lot of times, too.

Andrew: Yeah. So listeners, please be careful with this expression nice to meet you. It is only used when you meet somebody for the first time. And what should people say after if they run into somebody again and again? Like maybe at the book club, for example, you know, Mike and Patti, in the future, they'll see each other every week. When they meet each other, what should they say for that situation?

Kassy: Yeah, so if you're seeing someone again, after the first time, you would say nice to see you.

Andrew: Yeah. Nice to see you or good to see you again, something like that. All right.

Now, Kassy, once the introduction is finished, right? Mike and Patty **struck up this conversation**. They've introduced themselves, well, then they have a little conversation where they get to know each other just a little bit before the meeting starts. What kind of things did they talk about?

Kassy: Well, in this example, Mike starts out by asking **what brings you to the book club?**

Andrew: Yeah, **what brings you here?** Why did you come? Why did you decide to join the book club? And this is just a polite expression, **what brings you here?** OK, if you said something like why did you come here? Why are you here? For example, Kassy, let's pretend we met for the first time at a book club. And, Kassy, you're new and I'm a long-term member of the club and I come up to you and introduce myself. And then I say so why are you here? How would you react to that, how would you feel?

Kassy: It would make me feel really nervous and doubt myself. Like, am I allowed to be here? Is it OK?

Andrew: Right. You might think, like, did I read the invitation on the website for this book club meetup correctly? Is it open to everyone or did I do something wrong? That would be the message that's communicated. Or, like, maybe even you might think am I not smart enough to join this book club? Something like that. So instead of using why are you here? Or why did you come here? Because that can give off the wrong impression, you can use the expression **what brings you here? What brings you to the book club? What brings you to this conversation group? What brings you to this chess club?** Etc.

Kassy: Yeah, what brings you gives me this feeling of, like, why are you interested in this instead of why are you here?

Andrew: Exactly, exactly. So Patti explains that there are two reasons why she joined the book club. The first reason is that she wants motivation to read more books. And sometimes when you're part of a club, you have a bit of a push to help you read more books. And she also wants to meet some like-minded people. And again, like-minded people are people who think the same way you do or have similar interests to what you are interested in.

Kassy: Exactly. And the next thing they talk about in the conversation example is where they are from and what they do.

Andrew: So I think, everyone, this is a good rule of thumb to follow when you have a conversation with someone new. A rule of thumb is like a guideline. So this is a good guideline to follow when you meet somebody new. And that rule of thumb is that when one person talks about something, it is custom to ask the other person about the same topic. OK.

So for example, Patti introduces that she is new in town. And then she should ask Mike about where he's from. Is he new in town as well? Or has he lived here for a long time? It's good for both people to talk about the same thing. So this is almost like good manners, right, Kassy? You don't want to just talk about yourself. You want to ask other people about themselves as well. And so we see that Patti does this, she introduces that she's new in town. And then she asked Mike about this. So Mike said that he's **born and raised** in this city. What does it mean, **born and raised**?

Kassy: **Born and raised** means you were born in that place and then you grew up there, as well. So he's lived in this town or city his entire life.

Andrew: It's just another way to say I've lived here my entire life. And at this point, we see another example of this guideline being used where when one person says something, the other person should also talk about that same topic. So Mike introduces that he is a counsellor at a high school. And then Patti responds by talking about her job. And what does Patti do for a living, Kassy?

Kassy: This is another useful phrase. Patti says that she is **in between jobs**, which means that she doesn't have a main job right now, but she is working part time at a coffee shop while she looks for the next job that she's interested in.

Andrew: And this is also something you can say if you're unemployed, right? Some people when they're unemployed, maybe they feel uncomfortable saying that I'm unemployed. Depending on your age, maybe if you are a university student and you're unemployed, it's OK. But if you are older and you had no job, it's possible that you might feel embarrassed about that or a little bit ashamed that you don't have a job. So instead of saying I'm unemployed or I do nothing, you could say I'm **in between jobs** right now. I'm **in between jobs** right now. And that communicates to your listener that you are not working, but that you are looking for a new job.

Kassy: Exactly.

Andrew: Now you may be wondering, listeners, what are some other topics that are OK to talk about when you meet somebody for the first time. And usually we just share some basic details about our life and our interests, hobbies, and what we do. So talking about your job, talking about maybe where you're from. If you want to bring that up, that is totally fine. You could talk about your hobbies or interests, specifically, when you're at a meetup event. You know, if you're at a running club, you might want to ask the person you meet, well, how long have you been into running? Or if you're at a book club, you might want to ask what made you join the book club? Or if you're at a chess club, when did you get into chess? Right? Something that will allow you to connect with the person and the conversation can go from there.

Kassy: Yeah, that's right. But on the flip side, there are definitely some topics that you should try to avoid. Right, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah. And I think this is mostly common sense. I imagine that most of our listeners will already know this. But when you meet somebody new, you want **to keep it light**. You want to keep it gentle. You want to keep it easy breezy, so to speak. And so heavy, deep topics that are controversial or topics about which people hold very strong opinions, these should be avoided. So topics like religion, politics, finances, these kind of things.

Kassy: Yes, exactly. And towards everyone, but especially towards women. You should try to avoid questions about age, weight, appearance, something that might make them feel uncomfortable.

Andrew: Yes, exactly. Well, that brings us to the end of this episode. Thanks for studying English with us today, everyone. We hope you learned some new ways that you can introduce yourself to new people.

Kassy: Yes, totally. OK, listeners, now it's your turn to get out there, meet some new people, whether that be online or offline, and introduce yourself in English.

Andrew: If you like Culips and find us helpful, then please support us. The best way to support Culips and to help us keep making these English lessons is to sign up and become a Culips member. To do that, just visit our website, Culips.com.

Kassy: And you can also support us by telling your friends who are also studying English about Culips, or by following us on social media, or even by leaving us a five-star rating and a positive review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

Andrew: We'll be back soon with another brand-new episode. Talk to you then. Bye.

Kassy: Bye.

Detailed Explanations

To strike up a conversation

Idiom

The main topic of this episode is how to start a conversation with a stranger. Another way of saying the same thing is **to strike up a conversation** with a stranger. **Striking up a conversation** is when you suddenly begin a conversation with someone. The conversation is not usually pre-planned, but rather happens naturally.

You can **strike up** other things. You can say **to strike up a friendship** or **to strike up a relationship**. It also applies to music. For example, a band can **strike up a popular song**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to strike up a conversation**:

Amanda: How did you and your wife meet?

Pete: It's pretty funny, actually. We were both waiting in line for movie tickets. The line was so long, and it took so much time.

Amanda: That's the perfect opportunity **to strike up a conversation**, right?

Pete: That's right. I wasn't going to stand that long beside this beautiful woman without trying to speak with her.

Fiona: Is that your daughter's new friend?

Olive: Yes. Her name is Elizabeth.

Fiona: That's cute. Where did they meet?

Olive: My daughter told me that Elizabeth was sitting beside her on the first day of class. They **struck up a friendship** just like that. Now they're inseparable.

I'm [name], but you can call me [nickname]

Idiom

In this episode's example dialogue, Patti introduces herself by saying her real name first, and then adding her nickname after. Saying **I'm [name], but you can call me [nickname]** is a common way to introduce yourself if you have a name that is difficult for people to pronounce.

You may also simply prefer that people use your nickname instead. You might feel your full name is too formal, so you may like to use a shortened version of your name with friends and in informal situations. You can also say **please call me [nickname]**.

Here are a couple more examples with **I'm [name], but you can call me [nickname]**:

Mike: Hi, there. Is this your first time here?

Fabricio: Yes, it is.

Mike: Well, thanks for coming. I'm Mike.

Fabricio: Nice to meet you, Mike. **I'm Fabricio, but you can call me Fab.**

Alessa: Hey, Jessie. I just heard that woman call you Sheila. Why is that?

Jessie: She's an old friend from high school. Back then, I went by Sheila.

Alessa: Why Sheila?

Jessie: It's actually my real first name.

Alessa: I didn't know that. So what's your full name?

Jessie: Sheila Jessica Watson. **But you can still call me Jessie.** It's just that some of my older friends might use Sheila. It's a little confusing, I know.

What brings you [somewhere]?

Idiom

Another common conversation starter is to ask **what brings you [somewhere]**? When someone asks **what brings you [somewhere]**, it gives the impression that the other person is curious about your interests and wants to talk to you. This expression is preferred over saying, "Why are you here?" which can sound cold and unfriendly.

You can also use this expression in the past tense, as in **what brought you here?**

Here are a couple more examples with **what brings you [somewhere]**?

Sally: Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Sally.

Patrick: Nice to meet you, Sally. I'm Patrick.

Sally: So **what brings you to the fundraiser**, Patrick?

Patrick: I always try my best to support local businesses. I find it very important for the community.

Sally: That's a pretty good reason.

Patrick: But I guess most of us are here for that, right?

Dean: Hey, do you want to see a movie with me on Friday?

Samir: I'd love to, but I have plans on Friday.

Dean: What on earth could be more important than hanging out with me?

Samir: Actually, I've been going to a fencing club on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Dean: Fencing? That's a rare hobby to have. **What brought you there?**

Samir: I did a bit of fencing when I was a kid, so I wanted to revisit some of my old skills.

Born and raised

Idiom

In the example dialogue, Mike confirms that he is from the town he and Patti are currently in by saying **born and raised**. This means the town is his birthplace, as well as where he has lived most, if not all, of his life. Saying you were **born and raised** in a place often suggests a certain amount of pride in coming from that place. It also means that place has shaped the person you are today.

It is possible to say you were **born and raised** in a place where you no longer live. For example, you can say you were **born and raised** in New York City but now live in Chicago.

Here are a couple more examples with **born and raised**:

Liam: What's your favourite baseball team?

Noel: I'm a diehard Seattle Mariners fan.

Liam: Really? Why is that?

Noel: Well, I'm from Seattle, **born and raised**. I have no choice but to support the Mariners.

Liam: I guess so. I'm from a small town in Wyoming. Needless to say, we didn't have a local team to cheer on.

Kyla: Do you live here in Edmonton?

Dawn: Yes, I do. I've been living here for about 10 years.

Kyla: I see. Where are you originally from?

Dawn: I'm from Montreal.

Kyla: Really? Me too!

Dawn: **Born and raised?**

Kyla: **Born and raised**. That's funny. And now we both live in Edmonton. What school did you go to?

In between jobs

Phrase

In the example dialogue, Patti tells Mike that she is **in between jobs**. This means that she used to have a full-time job and is now looking for another one. In the meantime, she has a part-time job.

Saying you are **in between jobs** is also a subtle way to avoid telling people that you are unemployed. People might look at you differently or judge you if you say you are unemployed. Saying you are **in between jobs** shows a sense of optimism and that you think you will soon get a new job.

Here are a couple more examples with **in between jobs**:

Frances: Hey, I'm sorry to ask you this, but I was wondering if it would be possible for me to get a discount at your store.

Ilya: Actually, I'm **in between jobs** right now.

Frances: Oh. I didn't know. That's too bad.

Ilya: No, it's a good thing. I didn't really like that job, and I've lined up a bunch of job interviews for next week. Things are looking up.

Charlotte: Where are you going with that lasagna?

Jiyeong: I'm delivering it to my sister's place.

Charlotte: That's nice of you.

Jiyeong: Thanks. I try to help her and her family out as much as I can. It seems her husband is always **in between jobs**, so they can use a little help.

Charlotte: You're a good sister. Let me know if I can chip in. I make really good roast beef.

To keep it light

Phrasal verb

When meeting people for the first time in a social setting, Andrew suggests **keeping it light**. **To keep it light** is to stick with topics that are inoffensive and uncontroversial. It is best to stay away from topics such as politics, religion, and finances.

In English, we often use light and heavy to speak about the seriousness of certain topics. If someone says a movie was heavy, that means it was very serious and perhaps emotionally difficult to watch. This is opposed to a light romantic comedy, which is not too serious and is easy to watch.

Here are a couple more examples with **to keep it light**:

Nathan: It's been a long time since I've been on a date. Do you have any pointers for me?

Yeri: Yes. **Keep it light**.

Nathan: Why do you say that?

Yeri: I'm sorry, but you have a tendency to bring up inappropriate subjects at the wrong times.

Nathan: No, I don't.

Yeri: Trust me. And it's especially important to **keep things light** during a first date.

George: I'm really worried about my performance review on Thursday.

Hailey: Don't worry too much about that. It usually goes pretty smoothly. Who's interviewing you?

George: Mrs. Smith.

Hailey: That's great! She's really friendly, and she likes **to keep it light** when conducting these reviews.

George: That's good to hear. Thanks for the boost.

Quiz

1. Andrew lists some controversial topics of conversation that should be avoided when first meeting someone. According to what he said, which of the following would be an acceptable topic to discuss?

- a) politics
- b) finance
- c) sports
- d) religion

2. Which of the following is the best example of born and raised?

- a) you were born in a city and have never been to the countryside
- b) you were born in a town but raised in a city
- c) you were born in a town and lived there until you were 30 years old
- d) you were born in one city but raised in a nearby city

3. Why would you ask someone, “What brings you here?”

- a) to know what car they drive
- b) to find out their interests and the reason for coming to that particular place
- c) to find out the directions to get back to the highway
- d) to know when the meeting ends

4. The woman in this episode’s example dialogue is named Patti. Patti is a _____ for the name Patricia.

- a) knickknack
- b) nickname
- c) namesake
- d) nickel

5. What are you doing if you strike up a conversation?

- a) hitting someone
- b) ending a conversation
- c) avoiding talking to someone
- d) beginning a conversation

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. It is generally a good idea to stay away from topics like politics, religion, and finances when first meeting someone. What are other topics you think should be avoided?
2. There are many ways to meet new people. If you want to make new friends, what would be your preferred way?
3. Are you the type of person who likes to keep it light? How do you approach conversations with strangers?
4. What do you think about using a nickname instead of your given name? Do you use a nickname?
5. Were you born and raised in the same place? How much do you think the place or places you were raised affected your life?

Quiz Answers

1. c 2. c 3. b 4. b 5. d

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