

Mastering the art of small talk at work

1. What is small talk?

Discuss these questions with a partner. Teacher's note: Answers will vary. Sample answers are provided below.

- What is **small talk**? Why do people do it?

Sample answer: Small talk is polite conversation about general, unimportant topics. People use it to be friendly, build relationships with colleagues, and make situations like waiting for a meeting less awkward.

- When and where do you usually make small talk at work? (e.g., by the coffee machine, in the lift)

Sample answer: In the kitchen or break room, in the elevator, at the start of a meeting, when walking with a colleague to another part of the office.

- What topics are "safe" for small talk with colleagues?

Sample answer: The weekend, upcoming holidays, TV shows, movies, hobbies, the weather, commuting, positive comments about work.

- What topics should you avoid?

Sample answer: Politics, religion, salary/money, gossip about colleagues, personal health problems, strong negative opinions.

2. Vocabulary: Small talk topics

Match the topics on the left with the questions or comments on the right.

1. The weekend	d. "How was your weekend? Did you do anything fun?"
2. The weather	e. "I hope the rain holds off later. I forgot my umbrella."
3. Commuting	a. "Did you manage to avoid the traffic this morning?"
4. Upcoming plans	b. "I can't believe it's nearly Friday already! Any nice plans?"
5. Office life	c. "Wow, this coffee is strong today! Just what I need."

3. At the coffee machine: A typical conversation

Read the dialogue between two colleagues, Anna and Ben. Then answer the questions below.

Anna: Morning, Ben. How was your weekend?

Ben: Morning, Anna! It was good, thanks. Pretty relaxing. I just stayed at home and watched a few movies. What about you? Did you do anything special?

Anna: I went hiking with some friends on Saturday. We drove to the national park. The weather was beautiful!

Ben: Oh, that sounds fantastic! I haven't been hiking in ages.

Anna: You should go! Anyway, big week ahead? Any important meetings?

Ben: Not really, just the usual team meeting on Wednesday. I'm going to try to finish the monthly report by Thursday.

Anna: Good luck with that! Well, I should get back to my desk. Catch you later!

Ben: You too. Have a good day!

Comprehension questions:

1. What did Ben do on the weekend?

He stayed at home and watched a few movies.

2. What did Anna do?

She went hiking with friends at the national park.

3. What is Ben's main plan for the week?

He plans to finish the monthly report by Thursday.

4. How does Anna end the conversation?

She says she should get back to her desk and says, "Catch you later!"

4. Grammar focus: Talking about the past and future

We use the **Past Simple** to talk about completed actions in the past, like what you did last weekend.

- "How **was** your weekend?"
- "I **watched** a few movies."

- "We **drove** to the national park."

We use **be going to** to talk about our future plans and intentions.

- "I'm **going to try** to finish the report."
- "Are you **going to see** the new film?"

Grammar practice 1: Past simple

Complete the sentences with the Past Simple form of the verb in brackets.

1. I **had** (have) a very busy weekend.
2. They **didn't go** (not go) to the office party on Friday.
3. **Did** you **see** (see) the football match yesterday?
4. She **bought** (buy) a new car last week.
5. We **tried** (try) that new Italian restaurant, but it was closed.

Grammar practice 2: Going to

Complete the sentences with the correct form of **be going to** and the verb in brackets.

1. I **am going to start** (start) a new project next week.
2. We **are going to have** (have) a team lunch on Friday.
3. He **is not going to attend** (not / attend) the meeting tomorrow.
4. What **are** you **going to do** (do) for the public holiday?
5. They **are going to move** (move) to a new office in September.

5. Useful phrases for everyday small talk

Study these useful phrases, which are categorized by their function. Note that 'Showing interest' phrases are used to respond and keep the conversation going.

Starting a conversation (Monday):

- "How was your weekend?"
- "Did you have a good weekend?"
- "Did you get up to anything interesting?"

Starting a conversation (Friday):

- "Any plans for the weekend?"
- "Got anything nice planned for the weekend?"
- "Looking forward to the weekend?"

Showing interest:

- "Oh, really?"
- "That sounds nice/interesting/fun."
- "How was it?"

Ending a conversation:

- "Anyway, I should get back to it."
- "Well, I'll let you get on."
- "Catch you later!" / "Speak to you later!"

6. Let's talk! Role-play scenarios

Work with a partner. Choose one of the scenarios below and have a short small talk conversation. Use the grammar and phrases from this lesson. Try to keep the conversation going for at least one minute. A sample dialogue is provided

below for teacher reference.

Scenario 1: Monday morning

You meet your colleague in the kitchen while making coffee.

- **Student A:** Start the conversation. Ask about their weekend.
- **Student B:** Respond and ask about their weekend.
- **Both:** Show interest and end the conversation politely.

Sample dialogue:

A: Morning, Sarah! How was your weekend?

B: Oh, morning, Mike! It was great, thanks. Pretty quiet, actually. I just relaxed at home and read a book. What about you? Did you get up to anything interesting?

A: I did! I went to that new food market downtown on Saturday. It was fantastic.

B: Oh, really? That sounds fun. I've been meaning to go there. How was it?

A: It was really busy, but the food was amazing. You should definitely go. Anyway, I should get back to my desk. I've got so many emails to read.

B: I know the feeling! Well, I'll let you get on. Catch you later!

A: You too!

Scenario 2: Friday afternoon

You are both finishing work for the day.

- **Student A:** Start the conversation. Ask about their plans for the weekend.
- **Student B:** Tell them your plans and ask them about theirs.
- **Both:** Wish each other a good weekend.

Scenario 3: Waiting for a meeting

You and your colleague arrive early for a meeting. You have a few minutes to talk.

- **Student A:** Start a conversation about the weather or your commute today.
- **Student B:** Respond and ask a follow-up question.
- **Both:** Talk until your 'manager' (the teacher) arrives to start the meeting.