

I want to talk while waiting in this line, but I don't know what to say . . .

Ugh, I hate trying to make small talk!

# How to Talk to Anyone

AWKWARD MUCH? DON'T SWEAT IT. EVERYONE IS.

GET READY TO MASTER THE ALMOST-LOST (BUT LIFE-CHANGING!) ART OF FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATION.

By ANDREA BARTZ • Photo Illustrations By JOHN UELAND

**If** we told you that, much like Diana Prince or Peter Parker, you could persuade people to do things for you and gain their admiration, you'd say we're crazy, right? Well, you don't need a **stint** on Themyscira Island or a bite from a spider to do just that. "**Communication** skills are your superpower," says Emily Roberts, a therapist and author of *Express Yourself*. "You want your mom to go easy on you for hitting a fly ball through the window, you want someone to stop teasing you, you want a busy friend to hang out with you—these things come from expressing yourself effectively."

In other words, conversation skills are your ticket to getting what you want, making people like you, and becoming a better friend or family member. (We're focusing on face-to-face conversation, but the same rules apply to the phone.) Anyone can become great at expressing themselves, even if they aren't naturally chatty—all you need is this tool kit of doable hacks. You've got this!

## THE TOUGH-CONVERSATION PLAYBOOK

Take a deep breath and follow our sample scripts to come across as confident—and, fingers crossed, get what you want from the conversation.

Does this scenario look familiar to you? Conversation doesn't have to be this painful—we promise!

BRAD PETER/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT GIRL); ALAN SHRODER/ONYX/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT GIRL)



**SCENE 1** It's time to make small talk with people you don't know.

**STEP ONE:** Figure out your goal. "Think of something positive you want out of this conversation," says Roberts—like learning something new about your parents' friends, or getting to know a group of kids. Don't start with a negative goal, like "I don't want to look like a dork," Roberts warns. "Then you'll already be focusing on seeming like a dork!"

**STEP TWO:** Find some common ground. Maybe you're both in the world's longest line at Starbucks. Or maybe these people all know your friend Emma, since they are, after all, at her birthday party. Smile and make a comment on whatever you all share, whether that's "Can you believe this weather/line/Funfetti cake?" or "How do you guys know Emma?"

**STEP THREE:** Keep asking questions! "If talking is challenging, be a question-asker and a great listener," says Michelle Skeen, therapist and co-author of *Communication Skills for Teens*. "Then ask follow-up questions to keep the conversation going."



Sometimes a call just isn't enough.

**5 CONVERSATIONS YOU SHOULD ALWAYS HAVE FACE-TO-FACE\***  
\*or via FaceTime!

- Breaking up
- An argument (No, really! Make a FaceTime call as soon as texting turns into a fight.)
- Asking for a big favor
- Letting someone know you feel angry or hurt
- Saying "I love you" for the first time

**SCENE 2** You're about to admit to your parents, or a friend that you screwed up big time.

**STEP ONE:** Start by owning up to it: "Look, I did XYZ and it was not cool of me and I'm really, really sorry." Expect them to be surprised. "You're totally disarming them so they can't be mad at you," Roberts says. "They're expecting an argument, and you throw in a total plot twist."

**STEP TWO:** Avoid trying to spread the blame ("You never told me you'd care if I borrowed that without asking") or apologizing for how you made the other person feel ("I'm sorry you were upset"). Instead, apologize for what you actually did wrong—and mean it. "The apology must show you're taking responsibility," Skeen says.

**STEP THREE:** Ask how you can make it right. "Say, 'I want to make it up to you,' and then suggest a fix or ask what you can do," Roberts says. "Then act on it."



HUGO FELIX/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (CALLING); DRBIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (NERVOUS); JAGJAMIE GRILL/BLIND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (COUPLE)

KOPACZ ANNA/MARIA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (GIRLS); PAKSELSTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (BOY)

**SCENE 4** A friend did something hurtful and you want to talk about it.



**STEP ONE:** Even if whatever happened wasn't your fault, the whole conversation will go more smoothly if you start by owning up to your own involvement. You might say, "Hey, I know I've been saying no a ton when you ask me to hang out, so maybe you got the impression I'm never around these days."

**STEP TWO:** Now make what Roberts calls a conversation sandwich: Start with something nice ("Your friendship means a lot to me"), put the tough thing in the middle ("I was hurt when you organized a movie outing and didn't invite me"), and finish with a second sweet wafer ("I love hanging out with you, so I just thought I'd bring it up").

**STEP THREE:** Hush up and listen to your friend's response. You can be so stressed out from giving your speech that you forget to listen to what your friend's saying back. Maybe she had no idea you were hurt, or maybe she's been stressed about the incident too. Your friendship can grow from this!

**SCENE 3** It's go time—you're finally asking your crush out.



"Umm . . ."

"This is awkward. I think I'll ask if he's going to the dance too."

**STEP ONE:** Choose a quiet moment when you aren't in a crowd (say, when you're both heading out after school), and start with a quick recap of what you like about him or her: "I think you're super-funny and I've had the best time hanging out with you in jazz band rehearsals." Explains Skeen: "This leaves the other person feeling open."

**STEP TWO:** Make the ask, and keep it simple: A full-day hike might be intimidating, but the two of you could get smoothies at a juice bar or meet up for a movie.

**STEP THREE:** Listen to what they say! "Stress and anxiety actually make it harder for you to hear," Skeen warns. Smile and wait for a yes or a no response—and remember, even if it's a pass, you just did something brave and totally got through it like a boss.

**COMMUNICATE BETTER WITHOUT SAYING A WORD!**

It's not just *what* you say—it's *how* you say it.

**MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT—BUT DON'T BE CREEPY!**

Try to look at the person 80 percent of the time, but take breaks and look elsewhere while you're listening.

**JUST BE REAL.**

Many people speak in an unnaturally high voice when they're nervous. A lower voice carries more authority, so listeners will more likely believe what you say.

**SIT UP.**

Straighten your spine by imagining a balloon string pulling up the top of your head and relax your shoulders back and down. This projects confidence.

**KEEP EVERYTHING UNCROSSED.**

That includes your arms, your knees, even your ankles. You want to look open—which will help the person you're speaking with trust you and want to open up too.

\*SOURCE: Evy Poumpouras, a body language expert

