

The First 10 Seconds: How to Start Any Conversation | Small Talk in English 1

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

240 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Yesterday I went up four floors in a lift with my neighbour.

Four floors.

Four floors, in complete silence.

Both of us looking at the ceiling.

Both of us pretending the numbers were fascinating.

And did either of you say anything?

He said, going up?

And I said, yes.

And then we both looked at the ceiling again for eleven seconds.

Eleven seconds.

I counted.

And when the doors opened I walked to my flat thinking, I am forty years old and I do not know how to start a conversation.

And you are a native speaker.

I am a native speaker.

In your own language.

In your own building.

With a man I have lived above for three years.

So if it is that hard in your own language.

Imagine doing it in English.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

And today we begin a new series, and it is one of the most useful ones we have ever made.



Small talk in English.

Five conversations about the small talk that opens doors.

How to start one, how to keep it alive, how to get closer, and how to get out.

And through all five, we are going to follow one person.

You will hear about him today.

And in the final episode, you will meet him.

Today, the hardest part of all.

The first ten seconds.

Let us start with the weather.

Of course we start with the weather.

Because everybody knows the joke.

British people talk about the weather.

And our listeners think, how boring.

What a waste of time.

Why can they not talk about something real?

And that is where everybody goes wrong.

Because here is what is actually happening.

When a British person says, terrible weather today, they are not telling you about the weather.

They are not giving you information.

You can see the weather.

You are standing in it.

So what are they saying?

They are saying, I am a safe person.

I am not going to ask you anything difficult.

Would you like to be near me for a moment?

It is a ritual.

It is a ritual of approach.

It is how two strangers agree to be friendly without risking anything.

And when you understand that, something enormous happens.

Tell them what it is.



You are free.

Because you do not have to be interesting.

That is the pressure that keeps people silent.

The feeling that you need a clever opening line.

You do not need a clever opening line.

You need a safe one.

Small talk does not have to be interesting.

It has to be safe.

But I want to defend small talk a bit more, because people still think it is a waste of time.

Go on.

It is not a waste of time.

It is the toll you pay to get to the real conversation.

Nobody has ever told you something important about their life without talking about the traffic first.

Nobody.

Real conversations do not start deep.

They start at the weather, and then they go down.

The weather, then the bus, then the job, then the city you moved from, then the reason you moved.

And that last one is the conversation you actually wanted.

But there is no door into it except the weather.

So if you skip small talk, you do not get the deep conversation.

You get nothing.

You get eleven seconds of ceiling.

Now I want to tell you about Juan.

Our man for this series.

Juan is twenty-three, he is from Barcelona, and three weeks ago he arrived in Wolverhampton, in England, to study.

And he needs a job, because he is paying for the course himself.

And sending money home to his parents.

So he has reasons to talk to people.

He has every reason to talk to people.

Here is his English.



His grammar is better than mine.

That is not difficult.

It is not difficult, but it is true.

He knows the third conditional.

He knows when to use the present perfect.

And how many words has he said out loud in three weeks?

He counted once.

In a whole Tuesday, he said about forty words.

Forty.

Thank you, sorry, yes please, no thanks, one coffee, excuse me.

That is not a life.

That is a transaction.

And there is one more detail I need you to hear.

Go on.

He practises in the shower.

Out loud?

Out loud.

Full sentences.

He has one prepared, word for word, for the young woman who works in the library café.

What is it?

It does not matter what it is.

What matters is that he has been carrying it for eleven days and he has not used it once.

Because the longer you carry a sentence.

The heavier it gets.

And his mother phones him on Sundays and asks if he has made any friends.

And he says yes.

Right.

Tools.

Tools.

And the first one is the most British thing in the English language, and it is pure grammar.



The tag question.

Lovely day, isn't it?

Cold today, isn't it?

Busy in here, isn't it?

And the pattern we are using today is simple.

It is very simple.

For these conversation openings, start with a positive statement and add a short negative tag.

It is lovely, isn't it?

He is late, isn't he?

That was good, wasn't it?

And why do they work so well?

Because they do not ask for information.

That is the key.

A question like, where are you from, asks the other person to work.

A tag question asks them to agree.

And agreeing is one of the easiest things a human being can do.

All they have to say is, yes, it is.

Or, I know.

Or just, mmm.

And you have had a conversation.

A tiny one.

A tiny one.

But ten seconds ago you were two strangers looking at a ceiling.

Now, the second tool, and this is the principle underneath everything.

Say it slowly.

Comment on something you are both experiencing, right now.

Both of you.

In this moment.

The rain.

The queue.



The machine that is not working.

The bus that is nine minutes late.

And why is this one of the safest openings?

Because it needs no information.

You do not have to know anything about them.

You do not have to be clever.

You are just two people in the same situation, and you said so out loud.

And it gives them something easy to answer.

Which is a kind thing to do for a stranger.

And if they do not answer, that does not mean you failed.

It may simply mean they do not feel like talking today.

So let us put it in places.

The bus stop.

The lift.

The supermarket queue.

The room before the class starts.

The launderette.

And in every one of those places, there is something you can both see.

My favourite opening is a grunt.

A grunt.

When the bus is late, I look at the person next to me and I go, hmmff.

That is not a tag question.

It communicates.

It communicates something.

It is not English.

Three openings.

Listen, and repeat in the pause.

Number one, the classic.

Lovely day, isn't it?

Number two, the shared complaint, which is even stronger.



This bus is never on time, is it?

And number three, the easiest of all, because it comes with an excuse.

Sorry, do you know if this is the right queue?

All three again.

Lovely day, isn't it?

This bus is never on time, is it?

Sorry, do you know if this is the right queue?

Notice the third one.

Asking for help is one of the easiest openings in the world.

Because you have a reason to speak.

They immediately understand why you are talking to them.

And here is the secret about asking for help.

Many people are happy to answer a small, easy question.

It gives them a clear role in the conversation.

And our sentence of the day.

Ready?

Small talk doesn't have to be interesting.

It has to be safe.

Small talk doesn't have to be interesting.

It has to be safe.

One more time, with us.

Small talk doesn't have to be interesting.

It has to be safe.

So.

Juan.

Did he ever use the sentence from the shower?

No.

No?

Last Thursday, at the bus stop on the Penn Road, in the rain, with an older woman under the same shelter.

And he did not use it.



He forgot it completely.

What he said was much worse, and much simpler.

What did he say?

He said, this rain.

That is not even a sentence.

It is not even a sentence.

It has no verb.

And what happened?

She said, I know, it has not stopped since Monday.

And then she told him that her sister lives in Spain, near Alicante, and that she has never visited because of the flights.

How long did they talk?

Forty seconds.

Forty seconds.

Forty seconds, and then the bus came.

And how did he feel?

His hands were shaking.

After forty seconds of talking about rain.

After forty seconds of talking about rain.

And that is not a small thing.

That is the first ten seconds, survived.

So here is your task this week.

One opening.

One person you do not know.

About something you are both living in that exact moment.

The rain, the queue, the broken machine, the late bus.

And it does not have to be a sentence.

Juan's did not have a verb.

Next time, the problem that comes immediately after.

You say your sentence.

They answer.



And then your mind goes completely blank.

What to say after hello.

Everything from today, the transcript, the vocabulary and the three openings, is waiting for you at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

With translations, guided practice and downloadable PDFs, completely free.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

Terrible weather, isn't it?

See you in the next one.

