

The Question That Changes Everything | Small Talk in English, Episode 3

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

275 lines

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

Two questions for you, and you have to be honest.

I am always honest.

You are never honest before your second coffee.

Question one.

Roughly how many people did you speak to yesterday?

Yesterday, the whole day?

Maybe fifteen.

Question two.

With how many of them did you have an actual conversation?

Define actual.

No.

You know exactly what I mean.

One.

My sister, on the phone, for nine minutes.

Fifteen people.

One conversation.

And the other fourteen?

You said hello.

They said hello.

Everybody moved on.

And that is not a failure of English.

That is most of adult life.



And today we are going to talk about the gap.

Because this is the moment where people get stuck for years.

You can start a conversation.

You can keep it going.

And you still do not have a single friend.

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

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

This is the third conversation in our series about small talk in English.

First, how to start.

Then, what to say after hello.

And today, the hard one.

How a conversation stops being polite and starts being real.

So I want to begin by attacking a question.

Which one?

How are you?

Go on.

Sometimes, how are you is not really a question.

It is a greeting wearing the costume of a question.

Exactly.

And here is the proof.

What is the answer?

Fine.

Very often, fine.

Fine, thanks, you?

And if somebody really answered it, you would be shocked.

Because that is not what the question was for.

And remember what we said in the first episode about the weather.

It is a ritual.



It is a ritual of approach.

And rituals are good.

We need them.

But here is the trap.

If you only ever ask ritual questions, you only ever get ritual answers.

Fine.

Good, thanks.

Not bad.

Busy.

And you can do that with the same person for two years.

Two years of fine.

And then one day they leave the company, and you realise you never knew anything about them.

So what do we ask instead?

This is the easiest change in the whole series, and it is almost unfair how well it works.

Say it.

You replace the question that has one answer with a question that has a story in it.

Give me examples.

Instead of how are you.

What have you been up to?

Instead of how was your week.

What has been the best part of your week?

Say that last one again, because it is the best one.

What has been the best part of your week?

And why is it so good?

Three reasons.

It cannot be answered with fine.

It makes the other person think.

And it asks for something specific, which is much easier than something general.

And there is a fourth reason.



Tell them.

It is a kind question.

You are asking somebody to go and find a good thing in their week.

Most people have to look for it.

And when they find it, they are pleased.

And you did that.

Now, I want to tell you about an experiment, because it explains everything that comes next.

Is this the one I think it is?

It probably is.

In the nineteen nineties, a psychologist called Arthur Aron put two complete strangers in a room with a list of thirty-six questions.

In a specific order?

Easy first.

Would you like to be famous?

What would be a perfect day for you?

And then?

And then, slowly, deeper.

What is your most treasured memory?

For how long?

Forty-five minutes.

And what happened?

In one study, pairs doing the gradually deeper tasks reported greater closeness than pairs doing small talk.

In forty-five minutes.

In forty-five minutes.

That does not mean that a lasting friendship is guaranteed.

Now, I want to be careful here, because I know what people do with this.

Please be careful.

We are not telling our listener to walk up to a colleague at the coffee machine and ask when they last cried.

No.

Please do not do that.



You will not make a friend.

You will make a story that your colleague tells other people.

The experiment is not an instruction.

It is an explanation.

Of what?

Of what closeness is actually made of.

Two useful parts of that process are worth noticing.

Taking turns.

Taking turns, and going slightly deeper each time.

One person gives a little more than the last thing that was said.

And then waits.

And if the other person gives a little more back.

Then you go again.

It is a staircase.

It is a staircase, and you climb it one step at a time.

And there are two ways to fail.

The first is giving nothing.

Two people, both polite, both waiting, and nothing ever happens.

And the second?

Giving far too much, far too early.

The person at a party who tells you about their divorce in the first four minutes.

And you do not feel close to them.

You feel trapped.

So the skill is not being open.

The skill is matching.

Right, so let us give them the tools.

And the first one is one our listeners already know, because it is the best sentence in this entire series.

You mentioned.

You mentioned you were moving house.



How did it go?

You mentioned your son had an exam.

How did he do?

And why is it so powerful?

Because it proves you were listening last time.

It proves that when they spoke, you kept it.

And remembering can make a real difference.

Small details are easy to forget.

So if you remember one small thing, and bring it back a week later, you become unusual.

In the best way.

And here is the practical trick, and it is not romantic at all.

Write it down.

In your phone.

Priya, dissertation on Friday.

That is not cold.

That is caring, with a system.

And the second tool is the one that actually opens the door.

Honesty.

A small, specific piece of honesty.

Not a confession.

Not your whole life.

One true thing, instead of the polite thing.

To be honest, I found that really hard.

To be honest, I have no idea what I am doing yet.

To be honest, I was dreading it.

And notice how English announces it.

To be honest with you.

Honestly.

Can I be honest?



Those phrases are a signal.

They tell the other person, the next sentence is real.

And people respond to that signal.

Because now they are allowed to be real too.

You have given them permission.

And here is something worth remembering about friendship.

Somebody has to go first.

So.

Juan.

Juan, five months into Wolverhampton now.

And doing well, on paper.

On paper, extremely well.

He has about forty people in his phone, and he is in six group chats.

So what is wrong?

In February, he got ill.

How ill?

Not dangerous.

Just properly ill.

Three days in bed, in a flat where everybody else had gone home for the week.

And who did he tell?

Nobody.

Nobody in England?

Nobody in England.

And he did not tell his parents either, because he did not want his mother to worry from nine hundred miles away.

So he had forty contacts and nobody to message.

And he told himself it was because his English was not good enough yet.

It was not his English.

It was never his English.

He had forty acquaintances.



An acquaintance.

Somebody you know, but not well.

Forty acquaintances and no friends.

And those are different words for a reason.

So what changed?

Priya.

From the café.

From the café.

The following week she asked him how his week had been.

The ritual question.

The ritual question.

And he opened his mouth to say fine.

And?

And he said, honestly, it was bad.

I was ill and I did not tell anyone.

And what did she say?

She said, why not?

Oh, that is a good question.

It is a brilliant question.

And he said, because I did not want to be a problem.

And then?

And then Priya said, I did the same thing in my first year.

I had tonsillitis and I lay on the floor and watched three seasons of something.

She went up the staircase.

She went straight up the staircase.

And now?

And now she texts him when she is going to the library.

That is all.

That is the whole friendship so far.



She texts him when she is going to the library.

Which is approximately nine hundred times more than forty acquaintances.

Right.

Three tools.

Listen, and repeat in the pause.

Tool one, the question that cannot be answered with fine.

What has been the best part of your week?

Tool two, the one that proves you remembered.

You mentioned you had an exam.

How did it go?

Tool three, the one that opens the door.

To be honest, I found that really hard.

All three again.

What has been the best part of your week?

You mentioned you had an exam.

How did it go?

To be honest, I found that really hard.

Notice that none of these are difficult English.

Not one of them is difficult English.

There is no advanced grammar in this episode at all.

The hard part was never the language.

The hard part is going first.

And our sentence of the day.

Ready?

Somebody has to go first.

It might as well be you.

Somebody has to go first.

It might as well be you.

One more time, with us.



Somebody has to go first.

It might as well be you.

So here is your task this week.

Two parts, and both are small.

One, ask somebody what the best part of their week has been.

And two, write down one thing they tell you.

In your phone.

One line.

And next week, ask about it.

That is it.

That is one way an acquaintance can become a friend.

Next time, the fourth conversation in our five-part series.

How to get out of a conversation politely.

And what to say when you have not understood a single word.

Plus the week Juan finally got the job.

And the thing that got it for him was not his English.

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

With translations, flashcards and downloadable PDFs, completely free.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

What has been the best part of your week?

See you in the next one.

