

CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS

Conversations are supposed to be fun. They involve personal interactions between two or more people about something of interest. But many people worry about having conversations. They are concerned that they won't be able to keep the conversation going, or about what they will say.

Keeping a conversation going is something of an art, and one which many of us now seem to lack. This page explains how you can learn this 'dying art', and have constructive and enjoyable conversations with others.

What is Conversation?

A Definition of Conversation

“Intercourse, talk, familiar discourse, behaviour or deportment”

In other words, conversation is simply talking to someone else, usually informally.

So why is it considered difficult? It certainly wasn't for our grandparents' generation. Some commentators have put the problem down to the growth of social media, with its emphasis on 'broadcasting' and its 'me' focus, and this certainly doesn't make it any easier.

But all is not lost. Not only can conversational skills be learned and developed, but it is surprisingly easy to do so, especially if you follow some simple rules.

The Rules of Conversation

1. Conversation is a Two-Way Street

For example: “What do you do?”, or even “Isn't the weather beautiful?”

This signals your intention to share the conversation.

2. Be Friendly and Polite

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Smiling, and being nice, will take you a long way in conversational terms. Everyone would rather chat to someone friendly and pleasant.

“I must just go and catch so-and-so before they go. It’s been really nice to chat to you”, or “Please excuse me, I promised to help with x and I see they need me now”.

3. Respond to What They are Saying

To respond genuinely to what someone has just said means that you have to listen. You can’t just switch off, and think about what you’re going to say next. However, if we’re honest, most of us would admit that we often do just that.

“That’s just so interesting; you’re really making me think hard!”

“Goodness, that’s challenging, I need to think about this. I’ve never thought about it that way.”

4. Use Signaling to Help the Other Person

When a conversation is flowing well, it moves naturally from one person to the other. However, if one or both are finding it more of a struggle to ‘chat’, you may find it helpful to use ‘signals’ to show the other person that it is their turn to talk.

The most common type of signal is questions. These may be either open or closed.

Closed questions invite a yes/no answer.

In conversation, they might include “Don’t you agree?”, and “Are you enjoying the party?” They are not really inviting the other person to do more than nod and agree, rather than to share the conversation.

Open questions invite more information.

They open up the conversation to the other person, and invite them to participate. For this reason, in conversation, they are often called ‘invitations’. Open questions often start ‘How...?’ or ‘Why....?’

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5. Create Emotional Connections

Of course it is perfectly possible to conduct a conversation entirely at the level of small talk, with nothing important being said.

But conversation is also a way to explore whether you wish to know someone better and build a relationship with them. It can therefore be useful to understand how to use conversation to create and build emotional connections.

The key is sharing appropriate information.

That means being prepared to be open about what interests you, what makes you into you as a person, and inspiring the other person to share too.

Conversation DO'S

Look at the person or people you are talking to

If you haven't met before, introduce yourself and ask their name

Use a person's name when talking to them

Ask questions when you don't understand something

Stick to the subject

Say nice things about people and praise those who deserve it

It's fine to disagree, but disagree politely

Conversation DON'TS

Don't fidget, look elsewhere, or wander off while someone else is talking

Don't listen in on conversations you aren't part of

Don't interrupt when someone else is talking

Don't whisper in front of another person

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Don't whine, tattletale, brag, or say mean things about others

Don't ask personal questions such as how much things cost or why someone looks or dresses the way they do

Don't point or stare

Don't argue about things that aren't important

Some Magic Words to Being Polite

"Thank You"

"Please"

"May I ... "

"Excuse Me"

"I'm Sorry"

FOUR METHODS OF DELIVERY

The easiest approach to speech delivery is not always the best. Substantial work goes into the careful preparation of an interesting and ethical message, so it is understandable that students may have the impulse to avoid “messaging it up” by simply reading it word for word. But students who do this miss out on one of the major reasons for studying public speaking: to learn ways to “connect” with one’s audience and to increase one’s confidence in doing so. You already know how to read, and you already know how to talk. But public speaking is neither reading nor talking.

Speaking in public has more formality than talking. During a speech, you should present yourself professionally. This doesn’t mean you must wear a suit or “dress up” (unless your instructor asks you to), but it does mean making yourself presentable by being well groomed and wearing clean, appropriate clothes. It also means being prepared to use language correctly and appropriately for the audience and the topic, to make eye contact with your audience, and to look like you know your topic very well.

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While speaking has more formality than talking, it has less formality than reading. Speaking allows for meaningful pauses, eye contact, small changes in word order, and vocal emphasis. Reading is a more or less exact replication of words on paper without the use of any nonverbal interpretation. Speaking, as you will realize if you think about excellent speakers you have seen and heard, provides a more animated message.

The next sections introduce four methods of delivery that can help you balance between too much and too little formality when giving a public speech.

Impromptu Speaking

Impromptu speaking is the presentation of a short message without advance preparation. Impromptu speeches often occur when someone is asked to “say a few words” or give a toast on a special occasion. You have probably done impromptu speaking many times in informal, conversational settings. Self-introductions in group settings are examples of impromptu speaking: “Hi, my name is Steve, and I’m a volunteer with the Homes for the Brave program.” Another example of impromptu speaking occurs when you answer a question such as, “What did you think of the documentary?”

The advantage of this kind of speaking is that it’s spontaneous and responsive in an animated group context. The disadvantage is that the speaker is given little or no time to contemplate the central theme of his or her message. As a result, the message may be disorganized and difficult for listeners to follow.

Here is a step-by-step guide that may be useful if you are called upon to give an impromptu speech in public.

- Take a moment to collect your thoughts and plan the main point you want to make.
- Thank the person for inviting you to speak.
- Deliver your message, making your main point as briefly as you can while still covering it adequately and at a pace your listeners can follow.
- Thank the person again for the opportunity to speak.
- Stop talking.

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- As you can see, impromptu speeches are generally most successful when they are brief and focus on a single point.

Extemporaneous Speaking

Extemporaneous speaking is the presentation of a carefully planned and rehearsed speech, spoken in a conversational manner using brief notes. By using notes rather than a full manuscript, the extemporaneous speaker can establish and maintain eye contact with the audience and assess how well they are understanding the speech as it progresses. The opportunity to assess is also an opportunity to restate more clearly any idea or concept that the audience seems to have trouble grasping.

For instance, suppose you are speaking about workplace safety and you use the term “sleep deprivation.” If you notice your audience’s eyes glazing over, this might not be a result of their own sleep deprivation, but rather an indication of their uncertainty about what you mean. If this happens, you can add a short explanation; for example, “sleep deprivation is sleep loss serious enough to threaten one’s cognition, hand-to-eye coordination, judgment, and emotional health.” You might also (or instead) provide a concrete example to illustrate the idea. Then you can resume your message, having clarified an important concept.

Speaking extemporaneously has some advantages. It promotes the likelihood that you, the speaker, will be perceived as knowledgeable and credible. In addition, your audience is likely to pay better attention to the message because it is engaging both verbally and nonverbally. The disadvantage of extemporaneous speaking is that it requires a great deal of preparation for both the verbal and the nonverbal components of the speech. Adequate preparation cannot be achieved the day before you’re scheduled to speak.

Because extemporaneous speaking is the style used in the great majority of public speaking situations, most of the information in this chapter is targeted to this kind of speaking.

Speaking from a Manuscript

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Manuscript speaking is the word-for-word iteration of a written message. In a manuscript speech, the speaker maintains his or her attention on the printed page except when using visual aids.

The advantage to reading from a manuscript is the exact repetition of original words. As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in some circumstances this can be extremely important. For example, reading a statement about your organization's legal responsibilities to customers may require that the original words be exact. In reading one word at a time, in order, the only errors would typically be mispronunciation of a word or stumbling over complex sentence structure.

However, there are costs involved in manuscript speaking. First, it's typically an uninteresting way to present. Unless the speaker has rehearsed the reading as a complete performance animated with vocal expression and gestures (as poets do in a poetry slam and actors do in a reader's theater), the presentation tends to be dull. Keeping one's eyes glued to the script precludes eye contact with the audience. For this kind of "straight" manuscript speech to hold audience attention, the audience must be already interested in the message before the delivery begins.

It is worth noting that professional speakers, actors, news reporters, and politicians often read from an autocue device, such as a TelePrompter, especially when appearing on television, where eye contact with the camera is crucial. With practice, a speaker can achieve a conversational tone and give the impression of speaking extemporaneously while using an autocue device. However, success in this medium depends on two factors: (1) the speaker is already an accomplished public speaker who has learned to use a conversational tone while delivering a prepared script, and (2) the speech is written in a style that sounds conversational.

Speaking from Memory

Memorized speaking is the rote recitation of a written message that the speaker has committed to memory. Actors, of course, recite from memory whenever they perform from a script in a stage play, television program, or movie scene. When it comes to

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speeches, memorization can be useful when the message needs to be exact and the speaker doesn't want to be confined by notes.

The advantage to memorization is that it enables the speaker to maintain eye contact with the audience throughout the speech. Being free of notes means that you can move freely around the stage and use your hands to make gestures. If your speech uses visual aids, this freedom is even more of an advantage. However, there are some real and potential costs. First, unless you also plan and memorize every vocal cue (the subtle but meaningful variations in speech delivery, which can include the use of pitch, tone, volume, and pace), gesture, and facial expression, your presentation will be flat and uninteresting, and even the most fascinating topic will suffer. You might end up speaking in a monotone or a sing-song repetitive delivery pattern. You might also present your speech in a rapid “machine-gun” style that fails to emphasize the most important points. Second, if you lose your place and start trying to ad lib, the contrast in your style of delivery will alert your audience that something is wrong. More frighteningly, if you go completely blank during the presentation, it will be extremely difficult to find your place and keep going

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There are four main kinds of speech delivery: impromptu, extemporaneous, manuscript, and memorized.

1. Impromptu speaking involves delivering a message on the spur of the moment, as when someone is asked to “say a few words.”
2. Extemporaneous speaking consists of delivering a speech in a conversational fashion using notes. This is the style most speeches call for.
3. Manuscript speaking consists of reading a fully scripted speech. It is useful when a message needs to be delivered in precise words.
4. Memorized speaking consists of reciting a scripted speech from memory. Memorization allows the speaker to be free of notes.

EXERCISES

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1. Find a short newspaper story. Read it out loud to a classroom partner. Then, using only one note card, tell the classroom partner in your own words what the story said. Listen to your partner's observations about the differences in your delivery.
2. In a group of four or five students, ask each student to give a one-minute impromptu speech answering the question, "What is the most important personal quality for academic success?"
3. Watch the evening news. Observe the differences between news anchors using a TelePrompTer and interviewees who are using no notes of any kind. What differences do you observe?