

15 Useful Phrases for Starting a Professional/Personal Conversation

Most of us can talk for hours about our favorite topics, but have you ever wondered how to start the conversation?

Conversation is the process of combining questions, listening, and self-disclosure so that two strangers can build a common ground.

What You Should Do:

When requesting the interview, be clear and direct about the goal of your interview—information, not jobs.

- Be prompt.
- Dress professionally.
- Be prepared. Arrive with a list of open-ended, evaluative questions to ask the contact.
- Be enthusiastic and positive.
- Stay within the time limit you agreed upon.
- Ask questions and listen intently to your contact.
- Ask for your contact's business card.

What to Avoid:

- Don't be too pushy, by doing things such as giving out your business card before the conversation has begun or by talking about a potential job at their organization.
- Don't hesitate to contribute to the conversation.
- Don't overstay your welcome.
- Don't act in an unprofessional manner.

General:

1. Tell me about your lab/institution/company/school.
(This way you get a general idea of how you might engage the person.)
2. Tell me about your current role.
(This helps you to understand the perspective of the person you are talking with.)

3. What specifically do you love/like about your work?
(This helps to understand the motivations of the person better.)
4. What are some of the biggest challenges facing you right now?
(This helps you to see how you might help address some of the top challenges.)

At an event:

5. The first speaker had some interesting ideas, what did you think?
6. I am so glad I finally got the chance to come here. This is my first time. You?
7. Which workshop/speaker have you found the most interesting/helpful?
8. What made you decide to choose this session?

Compliment Approach:

(However, it is critical that you are sincere.)

9. I read your abstract/paper/website/blog—really interesting. Can you tell me more about...
10. Heard about your new position, congratulations...how do you like it so far?

Advice Approach:

11. Which (session, event, speaker, association, etc.) do you suggest?
12. Do you have any advice for someone just starting out?
13. What do you think about X (fill in anything relevant)?

Popular Culture Approach:

14. What do you think about social networks like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, etc.?
15. What do you think might be the next big technology break-through?