

Some simple tips for “small talk” for international conferences and meetings

Small talk is essentially, polite, trivial conversation. Yet it is vital in making contact with colleagues, during conferences or other international meetings. Small talk helps avoid silences. It breaks the ice. It establishes contact when meeting someone new.

The “does and don’ts” of small talk

According to “mmmEnglish” key topics of small talk are: work, life, travel, food and weather.¹

According to “Speak Confident English”, there are three rules:²

1: you can talk about hobbies, interests, families, movies, travel. Avoid religion, politics and money.

2: ask about personal information, but only in general. In English-speaking cultures, people often speak about their work.

3: discuss other things going on at meeting, a conference, joint programmes etc.

Be positive 😊

Some examples of conversation starters:

Hello, my name is Juliette Lacoste? How do you do?

I was very interested by your presentation. Have you been working on this subject for a long time?

Hello, my name is Rachel O’Brien. I’m pleased to meet you.

Where are you from?

How was your trip?

Hello, my name is Zahra Hamdi, I’m an associate professor in history/economics/philosophy, etc.

Are you presenting at the conference? / Have you already spoken?

What do you do? / What do you teach?

What are your areas of interest? / What are your areas of research?

Some tips to continue a conversation:

Have you been here/to Brussels/to Paris.../ before?

Where are you staying?

How is your hotel?

Do you know of anywhere convenient to eat?

Can you recommend something I should see?

Have you got any good shopping tips? I have to take home some presents for my family.

Can I get you some more coffee/tea?

Would you like another drink or something else to eat?

Conversations about the weather:

What wonderful/terrible weather we have this morning.

Yes, but it is a bit hot/cold.

I got caught in the rain. I hope it won’t rain

Do you know what the weather will be like tomorrow?

What was the weather like at home?

¹ mmmenglish: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGoLoDuf83o>

² Speak confident English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2CMI8oaBL0>; see also *Small talk secrets – Speak Better English*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWH8bqS3Y6I> (with subtitles in English).