

## Conversational Skills

Connect Weekends offer the perfect opportunity to grow and develop our conversational skills. Many have great conversational skills, yet it is all something we can grow in and improve.

The art of conversation does not necessarily involve talking lots. More important than talking well is the ability to ask good questions, listen well and then ask more probing, open questions to learn more about the other person.

Below are some tips and ideas. A lot of the information below is from the book “Conversationally Speaking” by Alan Garner.

## Closed or Open Questions

Everyone asks questions, but few people know how to ask questions in ways that effectively promote conversation. If your questions get little response, the fault may lie in the type of questions you ask or the way you phrase them.

**Closed ended questions:** These are like true-false or multiple choice questions in that they only request a one or two word reply. Eg. Where are you from? Do you like running? Is this your first time to church?

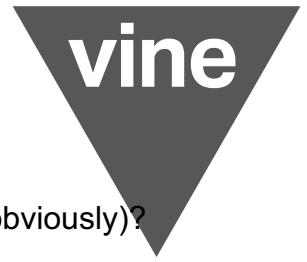
Closed questions have a role to play but they lead to dull conversations and awkward silences. It can leave people feeling like they are being interrogated by the FBI.

Open ended questions.

You have to follow up closed-ended questions with open-ended ones if you want to keep a conversation going and have conversations with greater depth and interest. Open-ended questions ask for answers that require more than a word or two. They ask for explanations and elaborations and show the person you are speaking to that you are so INTERESTED in what they have said that you want to know more.

*“Php 2:4 Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.”*

For example after speaking to someone and they tell you they are from India, you might ask open ended questions like:



What led you to move from India to Scotland?  
How does life in India compare to life in Scotland (apart from the weather obviously)?  
What was the best part about growing up in India?  
What do you love most about India?  
What is it like being a Christian in India?

Open and closed ended questions mainly begin with different words:

Closed ended: Are? Do? Who? When? Where? Which?

Open-ended: How? Why? In what way?

Both: What?

Open ended questions encourage the other person to speak freely and they are likely to answer at greater length. Open ended questions help the other person relax and shows the person you want them to open up and express themselves.

Let's suppose you are talking to someone and they tell you a teacher. Many people would make a comment but ask no further questions. But let's think of some open-ended questions:

Why did you decide to become a teacher?  
What did you have to do to become a teacher?  
Can you tell me of a memorable time of being a teacher?  
What do you enjoy about teaching?  
What do you find challenging about teaching?  
In what way do you think children today compare to children say 20 years ago?  
How do you manage to cope with working with children all day?  
To change the subject you could say: What do you do for fun when not teaching?

Only ask questions if you genuinely want to hear what the person has to say or they will suss you out. Where does this come from? LOVE! A love in your heart will express interest in others.

Strive to maintain dual perspective. This means not just asking the person about what you want to say and hear but asking about the other person's INTEREST even if that's not what interests you. This is how you learn. This is how you grow. This is how you become a more INTERESTING person by stretching yourself out of your own comfort zones. Those who are oblivious to the wants and needs of others find it difficult to engage in meaningful conversation.



Ask open-ended questions but not too open. Questions can be too broad like: What's happening? What's new? Whassup? Tell me about yourself? These are too broad and require so much effort and time that most people don't really reveal much from these questions.

It's helpful to think of and memorise some stock questions in advance rather than try and think on the spot always.

Some fun examples:

What teacher do you remember best and why?

If you could be any one in history who would you choose? Why?

If you had to choose another profession, what would it be? Why?

If you could spend a week anywhere in the world, where would you choose and what would you do there?

Come up with a list of your own stock questions, give them a go and see which ones come up with the best conversations.

Asking open-ended questions is a skill that needs learned and practiced as did walking and handwriting. If you keep practicing, it will eventually come automatically.

## Listening so others will talk

*Jas 1:19 NIV*

*"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry"*

*Jas 1:19 MSG*

*"Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear."*

*Pro 18:13 NIV*

*"To answer before listening is foolish and shameful."*

### Active listening

This is a way of responding that encourages the other person to continue speaking and helps you to make sure you understand what the person is saying.



It's been said that we hear half of what is said, we listen to half of that, and we remember half of that.

We all tend to hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see.

The message intended by the sender is often far different from the one you create from the available signs. Your impression often does not match what the other person intends to communicate.

Active listening is so important. Instead of assuming your impressions are correct (very often they are not) and responding, with this skill you can check if you have properly understood the person.

Active listening is telling the person what his message means to you. This allows the person to know you are listening and to confirm or clarify your impression.

Active listening is an excellent way to keep a conversation going. The interest you show will help people to expand their conversation. Chapter 3 of the book "Conversationally Speaking" is an excellent chapter all about Listening So Others Will Talk.

## FREE INFORMATION

"When you listen closely, you will note that your conversation partners are often dropping little pieces of free information... To take advantage of free information, all you have to do is make a comment or ask a question about it..."

For example:

Tom: "That's a decent tan you've got there Simon."

Simon: "Thanks, I got it while camping at the weekend."

Tom: (picking up on the free information about camping). "Camping is something I've not tried much. What do you enjoy most about camping?"

For more examples read "Taking Advantage of Free Information" in Chapter 4 of "Conversationally Speaking" by Alan Garner.