THE CONVERSATION HANDBOOK

HOW TO SURVIVE CONVERSATIONS

SMALL TALK & BAD JOKES

TROY FAWKES
I’ve been told to look back on my life and appreciate the great things that I’ve done. That’s a wonderful feeling. But even better and more awe inspiring is to look back and attribute lessons, achievements and adventures to the people around me.

This book would not have been possible without my extensive network of mentors and friends over the years who helped me become successful socially and conversationally.

I’d like to thank Joseph Procer and Adnan Awadi for helping me understand myself, appreciate others, and make small problems out of big ones.

I’d like to thank Dominic Knight and Stuart Saddler for teaching me about my limitations, most importantly the ones I didn’t actually have, and for teaching me how powerful my mind truly can be.

I'd like to thank Jeremy Bonney, Daniel Asher and (just) Jeff for helping me understand and appreciate the women
in my life more, which leads me to happy and passionate relationships.

I learned a lot about how to apply social skills in the professional environment from Sarah Doughty, Alex Rascanu and Dev Basu. You’ve all made me rich in knowledge, friendship and experience. And pay checks!

I’d also like to thank those excellent long-term friends who I held as mentors even if they weren’t entirely aware of it. Rob Peate and Denis Max, you are fantastic role models and I learned a lot from you. Just don’t let it get to your heads. Taylor Najjar, you have influenced me for the better and made me more aware of the depth of others. You’re also a fantastic editor!

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Finally I’d like to acknowledge the patience and unending trust of my mother, Janet Jung; my father, Jean Boileau; my sister, Melanie Boileau; my aunts, Barbara Hayduk—who, years ago bought me a beautiful pen and encouraged me to write—and Carol Gudz; my friends, and my wonderful girlfriend for putting up with my silly dreams that often seem to pull me away from what a normal person might have considered a successful life.

Thank you all!
DEDICATION

To Jean Hayduk, my grandmother, who is the wisest and most faithful friend I can imagine, even when I’m miles away and forget to call...
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I read a story about a soldier who had gone on a tour of duty. It went as well as you might imagine; violence, stress, camaraderie and death. I remember trying to ignore the awfulness of what he must have gone through just so I could finish his story.

There are career soldiers, but this gentleman wasn’t one of them. He was excited to come back. He wanted a desk job, or a construction job, or pretty much anything that didn’t involve watching people he cared about get hurt. He didn’t want to be obligated to kill other human beings.

He figured that he’d love to see his old friends. It’d be a good way to get back into things, a pub night with everyone he grew up with, drinking buddies, folks from sports teams he played for, old co-workers who had common interests, even a couple family members.

The soldier showed up at the pub a bit early. Personally I’ve done the homecoming thing a couple of times and it’s fantastic to see the faces of people you care so much about. It’s even better when you realize how much they’ve
changed and what kinds of new stories they have to tell. He must have been thinking the same thing while waiting for the 20 or so people he had invited to show up.

But an hour later, they still hadn’t arrived. After two hours, he went home.

The next day, instead of finding a nice job and settling back into the life that he knew that he wanted, he signed up for another tour of duty. He went back to the violence, stress and death. Because he felt that was preferable to what he didn’t have and couldn’t survive back home.

I sat there, after having read the gentleman’s story. I thought about the fact that he felt so fundamentally unable to cope with people, people who he needed in his life, that he went back to something that he hated. Went back to something intrinsically awful. What I wouldn’t give to provide him with the tools he needs to get what he wants out of life.

Problems like this aren’t always as dramatic. Sometimes it’s just a matter of wanting to be something greater. The challenge is that social skills aren’t something you learn in school. There’s no textbook.

For example, I went to a different University than all of my high school friends. I didn’t know a single person, didn’t live on campus, and had been out of the country for Frosh Week. When I was on campus, I wanted to be part of the group amiably welcoming their friends to seats and talking about plans for the weekend. I wanted to chill with the two guys up front chatting about a video game that I played too. I wanted girls to notice me.
More recently, one of my old co-workers moved from our young, vibrant and social office full of people who had the same challenges as him, to a huge organization where he worked more or less alone. His companions were generally ten or twenty years his senior. He went from having great friendships at work to needing to find that social fulfilment elsewhere, because his office was now just a workplace.

Then everyone’s favourite question struck him, “How do I make friends?”

I recently spoke with a school teacher in Peru who, despite being incredibly social, didn’t have any friends. “How do you meet people in a new city?” He asked, adding that it was hard to concentrate on anything else until he knew he’d have people to spend time with.

I get it. It sucks to be alone.

What I’d like, more than anything in the world, is for you to be able to feel like you have control over your social life. That you are or can become who you want to be.

You should be confident that, when you speak with someone, they’ll like you and understand you. People should feel better when they’re around you; they should think about you when inviting folks to a party, movie night or private dinner. You should be able to have deep, rewarding conversations without feeling anxiety or worrying about what to say. You should feel confident that you’re a valuable, enjoyable presence with strangers, friends, family, co-workers, and romantic partners.

Did you know that there are entire fields of psychology and therapy dedicated to improving your communication skills? Those same folks have tied your social competence to
your ability to achieve academically, professionally and emotionally.¹ These experts have created training programs that try to correct and improve on your behaviours.

Studies on the success of close to a hundred of these programs show that, “modelling, coaching, behavioural rehearsal, role play, feedback and reinforcement of skill usage,” included in those training programs produced improvements in the same social skills that get you high grades, a big pay check and a calm demeanour.²

Many of these evidence-based programs are targeted at youth and children, but I’m hoping to provide the tools for adults to grow and succeed.

This book is based on the same concepts as the books targeted at youth. The goal is to stick as close to the science as possible while leaving wiggle room for you to explore some of the habits and behaviours of successful conversationalists in various spheres, from the pub to the cottage to the board room.

Consider the book to be a gym where every wall is lined with equipment for your mind. Pick it up when you’re feeling anxious. Pick it up when you’re feeling motivated. It’s just sitting here, waiting for you to begin.

¹ Coie et al., 1995; Elliott, Malecki, & Demaray, 2001; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972
² Gresham, 1981, 1985; McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, 1991
I hated tests in school. They were one of the few things that I couldn’t hide from, and the grades were generally a good reflection of whether or not I knew what was going on in the class. Tests forced me out of my comfort zone. They gave me an absolute truth that I couldn’t avoid, generally in the form of a letter or a number.

So, given my hatred for tests, I’d never force one on you, right?

Uh. Well, here’s the thing…

If you’re at all like me, you don’t even know what’s wrong with your conversation skills. You just feel like they could be better. And as much fun as it is to try random and frequently embarrassing things like having a screaming conversation with a friend across a street, which I definitely never did, it’s much quicker to just figure out what exactly is wrong and fix it.

So before we move forward, we’re going to be using a variation of the National Communication Association’s
conversational skills rating scale, slightly modified for the self-assessment of adults.

The ratings are a simple scale from 1 to 5:

1. **INADEQUATE** (awkward, disruptive, or results in a negative impression of communicative skills)
2. **FAIR** (occasionally awkward or disruptive, occasionally adequate)
3. **ADEQUATE** (sufficient but neither noticeable nor excellent. Produces neither strong positive nor negative impression)
4. **GOOD** (better than adequate but not outstanding)
5. **EXCELLENT** (smooth, controlled, results in positive impression of communicative skills)

Go through the whole score sheet and grade yourself. Don't imagine the best conversation you ever had while grading, just consider how you normally behave in conversation. Be more critical than lenient.

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<th>Metric</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>Do you speak too quickly or slowly?</td>
<td>Give yourself a five if your speaking rate varies based on emotion and the context of conversation to help convey the meaning and add some spice to the conversation. In no situation should you be rushing to get a message out, and your speaking partner should clearly understand and be able to respond to all of what you say.</td>
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<td>Do you speak fluently, with no hindrances?</td>
<td>A five goes to someone who speaks without struggling to find a word, without stuttering, omitting entire words or parts of thought, repeating words (the.. the bear...), or using noticeable filler words (um, ah, like, you know).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metric</td>
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<td>Do you speak confidently, trusting your words?</td>
<td>To get a five, your voice shouldn't shake or break pitch, and you should naturally avoid a monotone. You shouldn't sound like you're asking a question when you're not, and you shouldn't frequently validate your statements, &quot;right?&quot; You should be able to describe your voice as composed, firm, assertive and relaxed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you articulate?</td>
<td>Top points for enunciating your words fluidly, and being confident (and capable) in your choice of words to express yourself meaningfully.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you vary your voice to help express your meaning?</td>
<td>A five goes to someone who varies their speech using volume, tempo (speeding up when excited, for example), pausing and rhythm, stretching and shrinking words, and gestures. This should be a fairly regular, ingrained habit to get a five.</td>
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<td>Are you too loud or too quiet?</td>
<td>To get a five, it should be easy to hear you in a crowded room without leaning in, but you shouldn't be distracting to people nearby in a quiet environment. If you notice that people who speak the same dialect as you, especially family or close, long-term friends, ask you to repeat yourself regularly, you definitely have a problem here. A five is generally someone who speaks a small bit louder than necessary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How is your posture?</td>
<td>To get a five, you should almost never be in a safe posture (covering stomach, breasts, crotch, etc.), and have a relaxed, open posture. While you can lean back while sitting, or lean while standing in informal situations, to get a perfect score for posture you should avoid those behaviours in formal situations. Measure yourself against, &quot;How does my most confident self stand or sit in this situation?&quot;</td>
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CHAPTER 3

GOALS & BELIEFS

In the social skills realm, having the right goals and beliefs sets you above the majority of other conversationalists.

I’m not suggesting that you need to be able to think positively (or whatever it is we do for motivation these days) in order to learn to speak better. I’m telling you that there are tangible benefits to actively working on your goals and beliefs.

Why?

✓ We passively affect every social situation we’re in. Without saying anything you can calm others, excite or inspire them. The body language used to communicate this follows your mindset and beliefs.

✓ Our goals and beliefs affect every aspect of our conversation. Humans react well to gifts; Robert Cialdini showed that a free coke could get an immediate response worth three times the dollar value of the gift\(^3\). But he also showed that the same effect

\(^3\) *Influence*, Robert Cialdini
stopped applying to the Hare Krishnas handing out flowers at the airport and asking for donations, because people realized that the monks’ explicit goals were to abuse this human psychological trait to get donations. There are no tricks that will make you a good conversationalist without these goals and beliefs.

✓ The stereotypes of those with strong goals and beliefs are that they’re pillars of society, capable people, and worthy to be followed and praised. It’s not a bad category to be in.

This chapter is going to address your goals in conversation as well as how to identify and alter your overarching beliefs. Not whether you think there’s a God or what the nature of Good and Evil are, but your beliefs about yourself and others as they relate to conversation and empathizing with people.

The following chapter presents some beliefs that I hold to be valuable to any conversationalist or person who would like to become more empathetic and understanding.

Before we get right into it, though, I want you to decide right now to actively and clearly choose goals and beliefs that match your ideal self. And choose only those. Let no others slip through.

There is no shame in looking at yourself and deciding that who you are is not who you want to be.

An alcoholic arguing that they are who they are because it’s their nature has the exact same logical grounding as someone arguing that they’re shy because that’s intrinsic to who they are.

Just ask yourself, “Who do I aspire to be?”
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I like the concept of a cost of entry. A set of rules and guidelines that defines whether or not I can call myself a citizen, conversationalist, or friend. It makes me feel as if there’s a standard to meet just to participate in what I might have taken for granted.

No longer can I say, “If you can’t handle me at my worst, you don’t deserve me at my best.” Because one of the costs of entry to being a friend or employee is to not be a jerk just because I’m in a shitty mood. I may not razzle and dazzle, but I’ll wire the corners of my lips up and try to laugh at your jokes. Otherwise, I’m failing. Otherwise I haven’t paid the cost of entry, and I’m not a real friend.

This might sound disingenuous, but it’s not. If I’m spending time with a friend and I’m in an awful mood, what has gotten me into that mood will be the topic of conversation. But once we’ve passed that topic, it would be cruel of me to subject my friend to my negativity. Instead, I will actively make an effort to change my focus to something else.
Making that effort is the important distinction, whether I achieve it or not.

There’s also a bare minimum, a cost of entry, to having conversations. These rules aren’t for making you a fantastic speaker. They’re just the cost of entry.

Tip 1: Be Direct and Responsible with your Meaning

Someone has probably told you to be confident when you speak. But confidence is a magical word that holds a little too much meaning in it to be useful. It also seems like it would be a hard characteristic to learn.

Let’s expose the root of spoken confidence and use a simple parallel to learn how to show it. Specifically, let’s look at how confident writers demonstrate confidence by being direct and owning their message, as well as some common pitfalls.

“With the passive voice, the writer usually expresses fear of not being taken seriously; it’s the voice of little boys wearing shoe polish moustaches and little girls clumping around in Mommy’s high heels.”

Stephen King, On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft

The passive voice is when something was done. So, “The hotdog was eaten.”

Notice how, even though I’ve still eaten the hotdog, I’m not in the story anymore? If I wanted to tell someone that I had
eaten their hotdog but I didn’t want to take responsibility for it, I might use the passive voice. “Sorry buddy, your hotdog was eaten.”

The active voice is when someone does something. An example is, “I ate the hotdog.” That’s a hell of a lot clearer. It takes responsibility for the action. I did it. And it was a damn good hot dog.

At its simplest, this form of communication is what we’re aiming for.

Can you see the parallel between someone writing in the passive voice and how someone teetering on the verge of confidence might speak?

Say they’re upset that you’re talking over them, but they don’t want to confront you directly. They’ll likely do everything they can to avoid the simple, clear, active voice. They’ll use the passive voice. They’ll throw in extra or overly formal words. They’ll imply their meaning in such a way that they can deny their statement.

X “It’s upsetting to people when you speak over them.”
X “I’d appreciate more conformity to social norms.”
X “It would be nice if everyone could contribute.”

The message is more or less the same. Stop talking over me. What makes it sound cowardly and unsure is the avoidance of directness and responsibility.

**Clear, powerful, confident speech is direct and takes responsibility for its meaning.**

Your meaning is going to be the same whether you obscure it or not. The only thing obscuring your speech.
“When I woke up this morning my girlfriend asked me, ‘Did you sleep good?’ I said ‘No, I made a few mistakes.’”

*Steven Wright*

Besides Steven Wright, not a lot of stand-up comics tell conventional jokes. Those one liners that are easily shared with friends or at the office. It’s one of those weird misconceptions people have, even when they’ve listened to comedians multiple times. If you’re funny, you must be able to tell a joke.

To make you laugh, comedians don’t just tell jokes—they tell stories. Likewise, to connect, great conversationalists don’t just talk—they play games. You don’t go out to meet friends because you need to hear what they have to say. You go out to have a good time and the words are just part of the experience.

The games that I’m going to share in this chapter fit into almost any part of conversation. In small talk, you may
want to use the Rule of Threes to get a laugh. While listening to someone, you might want to break the tension by teasing. When you’re telling a story you might throw in a state break to catch people’s attention. When someone asks what do for work, you might lie first because it’s just more fun.

These games are the flair that make small talk, listening and sharing dynamic and exhilarating.

I’ve snuck some of my other favourite games into later chapters where they make more sense in context, such as Easter Eggs and Making Assumptions, so make sure to try out any other games you discover along the way as well.

These will not all work for you, especially not right away. Try them and see. And come up with your own. I’m sure if one were properly motivated they could dedicate an entire extremely captivating book on the topic.

**Tease**

Teasing is gently bothering a friend about a superficial situation or mistake. The objective is to get a little bit of a rise out of them, though it also helps sensitive people laugh at simple mistakes when done correctly.

- After watching a friend trip over a curb, “I understand that you have 25 years of experience walking, but you’re failing the practical portion of this interview.”
- Narrating as a friend in heels navigates erratic terrain, “behold the agile mountain goat in her natural habitat.”
- A friend struggles to get out some words, “it’s OK, talking is hard.” This one works for pretty much every
simple task—combing your hair is hard, typing is hard, etc.

✓ “I’m assuming that you have some kind of profit sharing with this place,” to the friend that chose a seedy bar to drink at.

✓ “Oh sure, throw shit everywhere,” in an exaggerated tone and a big smile to a friend who dropped their cutlery.

I follow a couple simple rules when I’m teasing.

✓ **Pick very small mistakes or superficial situations to tease**, such as wearing mismatched socks or sneezing in the middle of someone else’s story. “Oh I’m sorry, did you have something to add?” If the mistake or situation seems close to something that will bother the person, don’t tease them. Figuring out where that line is comes with practice, so push your comfort zone but pay a lot of attention to people’s reactions.

✓ **Tease off of a theme, not a specific person.** My friend doesn’t suck at walking, it’s just that walking is hard. You might be able to get away with, “having a blonde moment?” But you will rightly be kicked out of the room if you say, “You are stupid because you’re blonde.” The theme is the separation here, removing a personal insult.

✓ **Always tease from a positive state.** If you’re upset at the person or annoyed by the mistake, don’t tease them. If you think teasing someone will make others like you more, don’t tease that person. If you feel like the target of the tease will enjoy it, then it’s ok to tease them.

The quick trick to building a tease on the fly is:

1. Identify a mistake, e.g. not saying bless you when you sneeze.
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CHAPTER 7

SMALL TALK

Many people I know, even fairly confident socialites, are uncomfortable with small talk.

Some common problems are:

- Hating or being scared of small talk
- Getting past small talk into a real conversation
- Running out of conversation topics
- “I’m just not good at small talk.”

Let’s burn right through these, because small talk is a lot easier than you might think.

Why Do We Hate Small Talk?

It feels like it sits somewhere between wasting time and blatantly lying about how we feel. I’ll ask you about the weather because I think I’m being polite, but I swear to god if you start talking about the rain this weekend I’m going to knock you out.
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CHAPTER 8

LISTEN ACTIVELY

“You can make more friends in two months by becoming genuinely interested in other people than you can in two years trying to get people interested in you.”

Dale Carnegie

If you’re like I was when I first got involved in conversation skills, you’re probably thinking, “I don’t need help listening. I need help talking. Listening is easy.” You might want to be the star, to have people stand in awe of your social skills.

Well, a good conversationalist isn’t the singer or the lead guitarist. They’re the master of ceremonies, the stage manager, and the event organizer all rolled into one. For them, it’s not about being the star. It’s about improving the ambience, being inclusive, choosing the topic and motivating their best entertainers.
CHAPTER 9

SHARE YOURSELF

As much as I like to talk about the importance of listening, you have a very active role in conversation.

In small talk, you might even spend more time talking than a shy partner, just to move the conversation along. When you’re connecting with someone through active listening, you’ll need to be willing to share as much as your conversation partners. And people will always ask you questions.

So how do you go about sharing yourself—your ideas, passions and stories—with others?

We’re going to cover three major areas:

1. Easter Eggs
2. Story Telling
3. And Mastery Topics
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CHAPTER 10

KILLING MONOTONY

Let’s put our training wheels on for a moment and go back to the very first time mom showed us a word to read. We learned to enunciate every syllable, and gradually moved towards whole sentences. It was a struggle to attach sounds to what was more or less a drawing to us at the time, so it took all of our focus just to get the sounds out.

That's kind of what we revert to when we're nervous or uncomfortable. Some of us are guarded in every social situation. We’ve learned that people can be cruel, or that our voice can betray us. Showing emotion or investment in what we’re saying can get us in trouble, so we don’t.

We just focus on getting the words out.

“I'd like to quit thinking of the present, like right now, as some minor, insignificant preamble to somethin' else.”

You probably read that in your head without any special enunciation. You paused a bit at the commas and

4 From Dazed and Confused
respected the colloquialism of “somethin’” instead of “something.” But that’s about it, everything else was a dull monotone.

But it’s an interesting sentence. So we’re going to play with it a little bit and see if we can make it sound just as meaningful as possible.

**Volume**

First off, what are the words in the sentence that hold the most meaning? To me, they’re “quit” and “insignificant.”

“I’d like to **quit** thinking of the present, like right now, as some minor, **insignificant** preamble to somethin’ else.”

Let’s try to make these words stand out using the **volume** of our speech. Read the sentence again while keeping the same pace as before but this time increasing your volume for the bolded words. Repeat this two or three times until you’re comfortable.

Now try the same exercise, but this time speak quieter than normal for every other word in the sentence, and raise your voice for the bolded ones. Do this two or three times. The impact should be even greater.

If you’d like, repeat the same two exercises but use a quieter speaking voice for the bolded words and louder for the non-bolded ones. Personally I think this makes you sound like Al Pacino in the Godfather, but it works.

What we’re doing is using **volume** for **emphasis**. The method was to choose a couple of words that deserved to be prioritized in the sentence and then we used one tactic,
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