

Dating 101 Part B

How to initiate a conversation, keep it going, and conclude with asking the other person out on a date

Finding the right words to strike up a conversation with someone to whom you are attracted can be daunting, especially if you have not had much practice in that area. With the exception of a few people who are social butterflies and for whom dating may come naturally, most of us can benefit from learning and practicing skills that give us a sense of direction during interactions that may otherwise seem directionless and leave us feeling tense. In this article I will briefly discuss introductions, breaking the ice, keeping the conversation going, and concluding the conversation with a suggestion to go out on a date.

Before I begin, I would like to note that the skills suggested in this article are expected to be anxiety-provoking and initially quite difficult to implement. Anxiety-provoking tasks tend to have one characteristic in common--the more we engage in the task despite the anxiety we feel, the less anxiety-inducing the task becomes with time. It is therefore very important to practice the skills repeatedly until you notice that you are feeling more comfortable with them. It would be appropriate to first practice the skills with people around whom you feel less anxious and with time approach people around whom you feel a good deal of anxiety.

The first step in becoming successful at the dating game is being comfortable at taking the lead rather than waiting for the other person to start a conversation. When you see the person in whom you are interested, try to engage in eye contact. If the person looks at you in return, smile and head over to introduce yourself. As you approach the person, ask for his/her name (smile again as you are receiving his/her reply) and then share your name. There is a possibility that the two of you already know each other, and in that case you may decide to walk over to say hello (stay mindful of engaging in eye contact and smiling) with a few ice-breakers in mind (see below).

Ice-breakers are a great tool for the beginnings of conversations because they set the stage for a casual talk and help build cohesion between conversational partners. As part of your preparation before the interaction, think of three or four icebreakers to use. If you are concerned that you may forget them, write them down on an index card and carry the index card in your pocket. Before the interaction, review your list. If you forget your lines as you are starting a conversation, excuse yourself, find a secluded place where you can read the list, and then return to the conversation. Ideally, your list of icebreakers will include questions and statements that feel natural to use. In case you are looking for tips, you may consider some of these: "What is your favorite restaurant in Pasadena?," "Do you work in any of the labs on campus?," "What got you interested in research?," "What do you think of the __ class?," "What do you like to do on a rainy day?," "What did you do during the last break/holiday?" Alternatively, the icebreaker may be a statement (e.g.,

“On a sunny day, I like to be outside as much as I can”) followed with a related question (e.g., “What do you think of the Southern California weather?”).

Once you have started a conversation, your next goal is to think of ways to keep the conversation going a little longer. As you are listening to the answers to your icebreakers, find an opportunity within the answers for follow up questions. This is a nice way to dig deeper and learn more about the other person. While asking questions, keep in mind that there is a distinction between open-ended and close-ended questions. Open-ended questions often lead to more elaborate answers, and they give the other person an opportunity to disclose as much or as little as s/he feels comfortable disclosing. Open ended questions may begin with: “What made you interested in...?”, “Tell me about...,” “How did you...?” Close-ended questions, on the other hand, often ask for brief answers (e.g. “when did you start working in professor X’s lab?”, “How much time did you spend on that project?”). Although both types of questions have their place in conversations, using open-ended questions with a higher frequency makes for smoother and more natural conversations.

Keeping your conversation balanced demands that you also reveal something about yourself and your interests. Before you approach the person you like, make a list of your interests and recent activities (the last vacation you took, a book you read recently, or a movie you saw last week). Shortly before the conversation, review your list and elaborate in your mind on a few items that you would especially want the other person to know about you, but try to stay flexible about the information you share, so that during the conversation you have the option of focusing on facts about yourself that suggests that the two of you have similar interests.

Throughout your conversation, pay attention to the body language of your conversational partner. If your conversation seems to have gone well, and you received positive vibes from the other person (smiles, nods, signs of interest in what you had to say, etc.), conclude your conversation with a suggestion that the two of you meet for coffee or dinner sometime soon. Some people feel more comfortable with choosing activities that do not offer as much opportunity for talking (e.g., going to the movies, or a concert, etc.), as they would find a dinner conversation very anxiety-inducing. If the other person is hesitant to commit to seeing you again, offer him/her your email and phone number and suggest that s/he call you, when s/he feels like getting together.