



Listen to exercises on starting a conversation on our CD/cassette

- Read the dialogues below to see how English is used in everyday situations.
- Look at the tips for the dos and don'ts of social English.
- Study the vocabulary lists and learn useful words and phrases.
- Complete the exercises and test your language knowledge.
- Pull out this page and use it as a reference tool and learning aid.

## Starting a conversation

Starting a conversation is not easy, particularly in a foreign language. You have to know what words and expressions are appropriate. Nor can conversations be planned. Read these five scenes and notes to see what tactics can be used.

### 1. Busy at the moment?

Tim and Sue, both in their mid-20s, work for the same company, but in different departments. One morning, they bump into each other outside the staff canteen.

Tim: Hi!  
Sue: Hi!  
Tim: **How are you?**  
Sue: Fine. Yourself?  
Tim: Not too bad, thanks. **You busy at the moment?**  
Sue: It's OK.  
Tim: Uh-huh.  
Sue: **So**, what's on the menu today?  
Tim: The usual **stuff**. Nothing spectacular.

#### Tips!

- Conversations often begin with speakers using the same greeting.
- In English, "How are you?" is not a real question, but part of the greeting.
- In questions, it is common to leave out words that do not carry information. Tim's "You busy at the moment?" is short for "Are you busy at the moment?"
- Sue uses the word "so" to signal the introduction of a new topic (the canteen).
- Informal conversations often contain vague words. When Tim says "stuff", he is referring to the canteen food.

**bump into sb.** [bʌmp 'ɪntə] jmdn. zufällig treffen

### 2. Chilly, isn't it?

Sam, in his late 40s, is in his front garden. Steve, his neighbour, walks past.

Steve: Morning, Sam!  
Sam: Morning!  
Steve: **Chilly, isn't it?**  
Sam: Freezing.  
Steve: **Sam, I was wondering** if you could do me a favour.  
Sam: What's that?  
Steve: Well, I want to get up on the roof and, **er, you know**, clear off the leaves.  
Sam: Do you want to borrow the ladder?

#### Tips!

- Steve's comment about the cold weather ("Chilly, isn't it?") is not a real question, but an accepted way to lead into a conversation.
- Steve says "Sam" at the beginning of his sentence to signal that he is about to put a question to him.
- Steve uses the past continuous form, "I was wondering...", to make his question less direct and easier for Sam to reply to (see Back to Basics, page 34).
- Steve hesitates, using "er" and "you know" on purpose. In this way, he doesn't have to make a direct request (about which he might be embarrassed), since Sam makes the offer himself.

### 3. Sorry to bother you

Isabel, in her early 30s, is in her local supermarket when an elderly lady walks up to her.

Lady: **Um...** excuse me.  
Isabel: Yes?  
Lady: **Sorry to bother you.**  
Isabel: **That's OK.**  
Lady: Maybe you can help me.  
Isabel: Of course.  
Lady: You see, I can't read what it says on the side of this packet.  
Isabel: **OK.**  
Lady: I left my glasses at home.

#### Tips!

- The lady's "Um" signals to Isabel that she is about to start talking to her.
- "Excuse me" is a standard way of asking for someone's attention.
- It is usual in everyday conversation for an apology ("I'm sorry to bother you") to be followed by an acceptance ("That's OK").
- Although it is clear to both parties that the elderly lady is asking for help, it is accepted that the request itself will come only after a lot of explaining and apologizing.
- By saying "OK" or "Right", Isabel is signalling that she is listening and ready for the lady to continue talking.



# LANGUAGE

Language tips to pull out and keep

## EVERYDAY ENGLISH

### 4. Looks promising

David is at work and on his way to a meeting. His boss, who is 20 years older than him, sees him.

George: Hello, David!

David: **Hello!**

George: I hear that... that things are going quite well at the moment.

David: **Yes, thanks. We're pleased.** Um, did you get the, er...

George: ... **the report?**

David: Yes, with the figures for January.

George: Yes. Thank you for that. **Looks promising.**

#### Tips!

- David avoids the problem of calling his boss "George" by just saying "hello".
- Praise, however unspecific, is always greeted with thanks (see also later: "Looks promising").
- By saying "I'm pleased" and thus taking the **credit** himself, David could sound arrogant. Instead he says "We're pleased". He clearly feels uncomfortable, and changes the subject.
- We can see that both speakers have the same thing in mind, because George completes David's question.

**credit: take the ~ for s.th** ['kredit]

die Lorbeeren einheimsen

### 5. Is this OK?

Victoria, 15, is phoning Kate, her best friend.

Kate: 'lo?

Victoria: Hello! Kate?

Kate: Yes.

Victoria: **It's me**, Vicky.

Kate: Vicky, hi!

Victoria: Hi! **Is this OK?**

Kate: Yeah, go on.

Victoria: Yeah. **You doing anything tomorrow?**

Kate: Not really. Why?

Victoria: Well, do you want to come to the cinema?

Kate: OK. When?

#### Tips!

- Although this may be a conversation between two rather uncommunicative teenagers, on the telephone everybody needs time to warm up to a conversation. The first topic in this dialogue is introduced in line 8.
- You can identify yourself on the phone by saying "It's me" and adding your name.
- Victoria's "Is this OK?" is both good telephone manners and code for "Are you alone, or shall I ring again later?"
- Victoria's "You doing anything tomorrow?" is a "pre-question", because it leads into the actual reason for phoning: "Do you want to come to the cinema?"

Spotlight 2/06

## EXERCISES

### 1. Make a six-line dialogue. Start with line c.

- |                                |                                     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a) Not too bad. And you?       | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| b) How are you?                | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| c) Hi!                         | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| d) Yeah, so am I.              | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| e) Oh, I'm fine. Busy, though. | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| f) Hi!                         | <input type="checkbox"/>            |

### 4. Select the most appropriate word.

- a) Would you do me a big **benefit – duty – favour**?
- b) The statistics look very **agreeable – promising – stirring**.
- c) Could I borrow your ladder to get up on the **ceiling – roof – shelter**?
- d) I suppose you're hungry. Shall we have a look at the **card – menu – schedule**?

### 2. Make these questions shorter and less formal.

- a) It's chilly, isn't it? \_\_\_\_\_
- b) Are you busy at the moment? \_\_\_\_\_
- c) Do you want to borrow the ladder? \_\_\_\_\_
- d) Have you got any time later? \_\_\_\_\_

### 3. Choose a reaction from the box for each statement.

Bye now. • Great. Thanks. • Hi there! • Of course.  
• Thank you. • That's OK.

- |                             |                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| a) I'm sorry to bother you. | c) Hello!             |
| b) Well done!               | d) Here's the report. |

### 5. Which two questions belong together?

- a) What are you doing tomorrow?
- b) May I ask you a personal question?
- c) Do you have hot chocolate?
- d) Did you get my postcard?
1. Could I have a large one, please? With cream.
2. How old are you?
3. Did I tell you what happened at the airport?
4. Do you want to come to the pub with us?