

Social conventions

Conversation

Greetings:

“Hello. How are you?”

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Fine.”

This whole exchange is really just an extended way of saying hello. The question, “How are you?” is just something people say to greet each other. It might be friendly, but sometimes people who don’t even like each other will still greet each other this way. In general, people do not really want to know how you are doing.

The appropriate response: just say you’re fine and ask how they are, and expect them to say fine.

Exceptions to this rule: Your parents and your closest friends really want to know how you are.

Other variations of this greeting:

“Hey, what’s happening?”

“Nothing much. What’s up with you.”

“Nothing much.” Or “It’s all good.”

Again, the people saying these things don’t really want to know what is happening or what is up. It’s just a way of greeting each other.

Small talk:

Conversations that go beyond simple greetings are almost always about trying to find some “common ground” with the other person, something you have both experienced.

Talking about the weather:

People often say things about the weather just as a way of being nice to strangers. Most people are not really interested in the weather. But still, they might say things like:

“Is it hot enough for you?”

“It’s great we had that rain.”

“That was quite a thunderstorm.” or

“Man, it’s cold today.”

With complete strangers, often the only thing you have in common that you have both experienced is the weather. When someone says something about the weather, what they mean is “I may not want to be friends, but I’m saying this to be friendly and nice.”

The appropriate response: say something about the weather back to them. For example:

“Yeah, it sure is hot. Hope it cools off soon.”

“We sure needed that rain.”

“It sure is cold out.”

The other person will take this to mean: ““I may not want to be friends, but I’m saying this to be friendly and nice.”

Exceptions to this rule: A meteorologist or a person who is planning an outdoor activity with you will really want to talk about the weather.

For more conversational tips, you can download a tipsheet on “Starting a conversation with someone you don’t know well,” at www.assesscompetency.com/tipsheets.html.

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Ending a conversation:

Sometimes people say very indirect things when what they really mean is: “I want to end this conversation now and leave you.”

They are afraid that saying what they mean so directly will be rude, so instead they “drop hints”, which might be, for example:

“I have to go soon.” (They really mean, “I have to go now.”)

“Gosh, what time is it?” (They really mean, “I have to go now.”)

“It’s been great talking to you.” (They really mean, “I am finished talking to you.”)

“It’s getting late.” (They really mean, “I have to leave now and stop talking.”)

“I have to catch my bus.” (They really mean, “I have to leave now and stop talking.”)

The appropriate response: When you hear one of these statements, say something to end the conversation politely. Any one of these statements would be OK:

“Thanks for chatting. Good-bye.”

“OK, nice talking to you. Good-bye.”

“I’ll let you go. Take care.” (“Take care” is just a nice way of saying “good-bye”).

Non-verbal gestures

Ending a conversation:

Looking at a watch, or looking at a clock. When someone does this, it is a nonverbal clue that means “I have to leave now and stop talking.”

The appropriate response: You can say something to signal that you noticed they were concerned about how much time had passed, and you can end the conversation politely.

A good thing to say is:

“We’ve been talking for a while. I’ll let you go. Thanks for chatting with me.”

Signs of annoyance:

Rolling the eyes.

Heavy sigh, with a look away.

Signs of anger

Thinning of the lips, like Erika demonstrated.

Pressing lips together.

Tensing of the lower eyelids and lifting of the upper eyelids (making the eyes look harsh).

Tense jaw, flared nostrils.

Signs of impatience

Tapping the foot, looking away a lot.

Signs of sadness

Oblique eyebrows

Lip corners turned down