

Let's Talk: Conversation

The purpose of the next 11 pages is to show you the type of English that is usually used in conversation. Although your English is now advanced enough so that you can speak in different situations, you may feel that you want to use more natural-sounding English. The language in the following pages will help you to say what you think and feel more exactly, more politely and in a way that sounds more natural.

These pages are in two parts. The first, 'Conversations at work', gives you phrases that are slightly formal and right for when you are at work. The second, 'Conversations with friends', gives you phrases to use with people that you know socially and can talk to more informally.

1 Conversations at work

The language you use at work is often different from the language of everyday conversation. It is often, though not always, more formal, and it includes phrases that you do not usually hear in informal conversations. Below are phrases that are often used when people have meetings in order to discuss work. These phrases will help you to speak clearly and professionally, in a way that is both confident and polite.

Opinions

Speaking up

Use these phrases when other people have been speaking and you want to say something:

Could / can I (just) say something here?

Could / can I (just) add something here?

Could / can I (just) come in here?

Could / can I (just) make a point here?

Giving an opinion

Use these phrases when you want to give your opinion. In meetings, a speaker will often introduce their opinion with one of these phrases. This 'softens' the statement, making it sound less direct and more polite.

The way I see things...

I tend to think that...

It seems to me that...

It's my feeling that...

In my experience...

It's my experience that...

Examples:

I tend to think that it's the marketing department's responsibility to sort this out.

It seems to me that we're going to waste a lot of money taking this approach.

It's my feeling that enough time has been spent on this project already.

Asking for an opinion

Use these phrases to ask someone else what they think about something:

James, what's your opinion of / about / on...?

James, what do you think of / about...?

James, what's your feeling about...?

James, could we have your input here?

Example:

James, what's your feeling about staffing levels in the department?

Agreeing

Agreeing

Use these phrases to agree with what someone has said:

I agree (with you).

(I think) you're right.

I tend to agree. / I tend to agree with Anna.

I'm with Anna on this one.

Agreeing strongly

Use these phrases when you agree strongly with someone and want to show it:

Absolutely!

Exactly!

I quite agree!

I totally agree with you.

I'm in complete agreement with you.

I couldn't agree more!

Disagreeing

Disagreeing

Use these phrases when you disagree with what someone has said:

Note: In a work meeting, people often disagree in an indirect way. They usually avoid very strong, definite phrases, such as 'I completely disagree,' as these can sound rude.

I'm afraid I don't / can't agree with you there.

I'm sorry, I don't agree with you there.

I have to say, I disagree with you there.

I'm not sure I agree with you.

I'm not sure about that.

I'm not sure that's true.

I take a (slightly) different view on this.

I don't know. I tend to think that the opposite is true.

Examples:

A: *Money spent on training is always a good investment.*

B: *I'm not sure about that. I think it depends on the quality of the training.*

A: *In my experience, customers are looking for quality in a product and they'll pay extra for it.*

B: *I take a different view on this. I think the lower price is mainly what sells the product.*

Disagreeing strongly

Use this phrase when you disagree strongly with what someone has said:

I'm sorry but...

Note that if you say 'I'm sorry but...' at the beginning of a sentence, it does not really mean that you are sorry. In fact it is a way of emphasizing that you are going to disagree with what someone has said.

Examples:

I'm sorry but I can't agree with you.

I'm sorry but I just don't think it's a good use of our time.

I'm sorry but the point you make simply doesn't apply to our department.

Listening**Listening to someone's opinion**

Use these phrases when you understand what someone has said but still disagree:

I see / get your point but...

I see / get what you mean but...

I see / get what you're saying but...

I see / get where you're coming from but...

Note that 'get' is often used in these phrases instead of 'see' but sounds more informal than 'see'.

Examples:

I see your point – it is a lot of money – but I still think it's an investment worth making.

I get what you're saying – she's not the easiest person to work with – but I don't think we have any choice here.

Responding to an interesting remark

Use these phrases when someone has said something interesting that you had not thought of:

(Yes,) that's true.

That's very true.

That's a point!

Good point!

Example:

That's very true – I hadn't thought of that.

Repeating and explaining**Repeating**

Use these phrases when you want to talk again about something that was said before:

If I could just go back to something Julia said / mentioned earlier...

Going back to what Julia said / mentioned earlier...

Thinking about what Julia said / mentioned earlier...

As Julia said earlier...

Examples:

Going back to what Julia said earlier, perhaps it would be better to keep some of this money back for training purposes.

As Julia said earlier, we can't get the staff because we don't pay enough.

Not hearing

Use these phrases when you did not hear what someone said:

(Sorry,) I missed that.

(Sorry,) I didn't catch that.

(I'm sorry,) could you repeat that, please?

(I'm sorry,) could you say that again, please?

Not understanding

Use these phrases when you did not understand what someone said:

I'm sorry, could you explain that again, please?

I'm not sure I understand what you mean (by) ...

Could you run that by me again, please?

I'm afraid I don't follow you.

I'm sorry, you've lost me.

Examples:

I'm not sure I understand what you mean by 'type A projects.' Would you mind explaining that, please?

Could you run that by me again, please? I mean the figures part.

Asking for more information

Use these phrases when you want someone to tell you more about something:

Angela, could you say a little bit more about...?

Angela, could you explain... in a bit more detail?

Examples:

I'm afraid I don't know much about the new system – could you say a little more about it, Peter?

Making sure that you understand

Use these phrases when you think you understand something but want to make sure:

So, what you're saying, Paul, is that... Is that right?

Just to recap (= repeat the main points), you would like to...? Is that right?

So, Paul, just to make sure I've understood this / got this right...

So, am I right, Paul, in saying that you want to...?

Examples:

So, Paul, what you are saying is that we need more money in the training budget. Is that right?

So, Paul, just to recap, we need a bigger training budget but we could probably reduce the marketing spend?

Being misunderstood

Use these phrases when someone has not understood you:

That's not quite what I meant.

I think you've misunderstood me.

Perhaps I didn't explain this very clearly.

Examples:

I think you've misunderstood me – I wasn't talking about the changes that are proposed in this report.

Not knowing

Use these phrases when you are not sure what you think or who you agree with:

I don't know what to think about this.

I'm in two minds about this.

I'm not sure where I stand on this.

I can see both sides of the argument.

Examples:

I'm in two minds about this issue. Certainly we need publicity but is this the best use of our money?

I'm not sure where I stand on this. Is it better to invest now or see how the market goes and decide later?

2 Conversations with friends

The next six pages will give you a range of phrases for speaking in different situations. All these phrases are used in spoken English today and will help you to speak in a way that sounds friendly, polite and natural.

Starting and ending a conversation

Meeting someone by chance

Use these phrases when you meet someone you know by chance:

Hello / Hi! I haven't seen you in ages!

Hello / Hi! I was just thinking about you the other day.

Hello / Hi! I thought I might see you here.

Hello / Hi! What a nice surprise to see you here.

**(humorous) Hello, stranger!*

**Long time, no see.*

* These two phrases are said to a person that you have not seen for a long time.

Before saying goodbye

a. Use these phrases when you have been speaking to someone but now need to leave them:

(It was) nice / good to see you.

I'm afraid I have to go now, but it's been really nice seeing you.

*I'm sorry, I have to dash
(= leave quickly).*

**Anyway, I can see that you're busy.*

**Anyway, I'll let you get on. / I'd better let you get on (= I will let you leave or do what you have to do).*

**Anyway, I won't take up any more of your time.*

* In order to seem polite, speakers often try to end a conversation by saying that the person they are talking to needs to go. Note that the word 'anyway' is often used at the start of this type of sentence.

b. Use these phrases when you have been talking to someone for a short time and you would like to see them for longer next time:

*It would be nice to catch up sometime
(= talk about things that we have done since we last saw each other).*

It would be nice to have a proper catch-up sometime.

During a conversation

Remembering and forgetting something in a conversation

a. Use these phrases when you suddenly remember something that you want to say:

I was going to / meaning to ask you...

I know what I wanted to ask you...

Oh, and while I think of it...

Oh yes, I remember what I was going to ask / tell you...

b. Use these phrases when you forget what you wanted to say:

What was I saying? Oh yes...

I've completely forgotten what I was saying.

My mind's gone blank.

I'm sure there was something I meant to tell / ask you.

Joining two parts of a conversation

Use these phrases when you want to introduce a new subject that is related to the one that you are talking about:

I've had this jacket for almost ten years.

Speaking / Talking of clothes, I like that sweater you're wearing.

He takes really good photos. While we're on the subject, did you get the photos I sent you last week?

Making arrangements

Use these phrases to talk about possible dates to meet someone. All of these phrases mean 'Can you meet during the week that starts Monday 12th?'

Is the week starting Monday 12th any good for you?

How does the week starting Monday 12th sound?

How are you fixed for the week starting Monday 12th?

Use these phrases to say that a date is not possible:

That week might be a bit tricky / difficult.

I've got a lot on (= I am busy) that week.

Actually, I'm a bit busy that week.

Making arrangements *continued...*

Use these phrases to say that a date is possible:

That week's good / fine / OK for me.

That week's a possibility.

I don't have anything / much on that week.

Use these phrases to decide a date :

Let's say Friday 16th.

OK, let's make it Friday 16th.

Friday 16th it is then.

Shall we pencil in Friday 16th (= say Friday 16th for now, although it may change later)?

Let's say Friday 16th for now (= the date may change later).

Let's say Friday 16th and I'll get back to you if there's a problem.

Use this phrase to check nearer the date that the arrangement is still possible:

Are you / we still on for (= able to do what we have planned) this Friday?

Responding when someone is speaking to you

Asking for more information

Use these phrases when you want the speaker to explain more:

Why's that?

Why do you think that is?

I wonder why that is?

Listening and interested

Use these phrases when you want the speaker to know that you are still listening and interested:

Ah!

Really?

Yes?

Is that right?

Understanding

Use these phrases to say that you understand a problem or situation that someone has been explaining to you:

I see.

Right!

Now I'm with you (= I understand now though I didn't before).

Agreeing

Use these phrases when you agree with someone's opinion:

You're (absolutely) right.

Absolutely!

True!

That's true!

That's exactly how I feel.

Sympathizing

a. Use these phrases to show that you feel sorry for someone who has a problem. Note that these phrases are not right if the problem is very serious.

Oh no!

Poor you!

What a shame!

What a nuisance / hassle!

That's awful / terrible!

That sucks! (AmE informal)

What a pain!

What a drag!

Tell me about it (= I have had the same problem as you, so I understand!)

b. Use these phrases to show sympathy for someone who has a serious problem:

I am sorry.

I'm (very / so) sorry to hear that.

Example:

A: *Karl's mother died at the weekend.*

B: *I'm so sorry to hear that.*

Showing amusement

Use these phrases to show that you think what someone has told you is funny:

That's hilarious!

That's really / very funny!

How funny!

That's made my day!

Showing surprise or shock

Use these phrases to show that you are surprised or shocked at what someone has told you:

No!

Never!

You're joking!

You're kidding!

You're not serious!

That's unbelievable!

I don't believe it!

Example:

A: *They're making a hundred and fifty people redundant.*

B: *You're kidding!*

A: *No, I read it in the paper last night.*

Dealing with an interruption

Use these phrases when someone was speaking to you and you have been interrupted, for example by a phone. You want the first person to continue speaking:

Sorry, Sara, what were you saying?

Sorry, Sara, you were saying?

Sorry, Sara, you were telling me about your mother.

Conversational 'softeners'

The phrases below are used in situations in which you do not want to upset someone or seem rude.

Refusing an offer of help

Use these phrases when someone has offered to help you but you do not need their help:

(to start a sentence)

You're all right...

It's all right / OK...

Don't worry, I'll be OK...

(to end a sentence)

...but thanks anyway.

...but I appreciate the offer.

...but thanks for the offer.

...but it's very kind of you to offer.

Example:

A: Would you like some help with the packing?

B: It's all right – my neighbour's offered to help out. But thanks anyway.

Refusing an offer of food or drink

Use these phrases to refuse food or drink that someone has offered you:

(No,) I'm all right, thanks.

(No,) I'm fine, thanks.

Not for me, thanks.

No thanks, I've just had lunch.

Example:

A: Would you like some coffee, Julia?

B: I'm all right, thanks.

Refusing more food or drink

Use these phrases when you do not want any more food or drink:

I've had plenty, thank you / thanks.

No, that was delicious but I couldn't manage any more, thanks.

Dealing with apologies

Use these phrases when someone apologizes and you want to let them know that you are not angry:

That's all right.

Not to worry.

Don't worry (about it).

It doesn't matter.

It is usual to add a sentence or two explaining why you are not angry with the person who has said sorry.

Example:

A: I'm sorry I didn't make it to your party on Friday.

B: That's all right – I know you're busy at the moment.

Of course

The following examples will show you how to use the phrase 'of course' correctly and in a way that sounds natural. Remember that the phrase 'of course' is not used for agreeing with someone else's opinion. In fact it can even sound slightly rude when used in this way. The other thing to remember is that 'of course' should not be used for accepting an offer. For example, do not say 'of course' when you are offered a drink as this can sound rude. These are the different ways in which 'of course' can be used correctly:

Of course

1. Used to say politely that someone can do or have something:

*A: Can I borrow your pen?
B: Of course (you can).*

2. Used to state a fact that most people already know:

*The Second World War ended,
of course, in 1945.*

Of course you shouldn't eat too much fat.

3. Used for saying that something that happened was not surprising:

*We got to the station half an hour late
so, of course, we missed our train.*

4. Used to mean 'certainly' when someone asks you a question or asks you to do something:

*A: Do you love me?
B: Of course I love you!*

*A: Could you help out on Saturday?
B: Of course!*

Of course continued...

5. Used for disagreeing strongly with something that someone says. Note that this use can sometimes sound rude and is generally used between people who know each other well:

*A: Your mother doesn't even like me!
B: Of course she likes you!*

*A: I'm too fat to wear anything like that.
B: Of course you're not!*

6. Used when someone tells you that they or someone else felt angry or sad and you want to show you understand how they feel:

*A: My mother was upset because my
brother wasn't there.
B: Of course.*

*A: I just feel so angry with her.
B: Of course.*