

Direct, Indirect and Taboo Small Talk Questions

Ask each other suitable questions from the list of direct and indirect questions below. Try to choose suitable questions for the situation that you are in (meeting for the first time, meeting again after a long time, meeting again after a short time, etc), and make sure that you avoid the taboo questions. If you ask about something which you shouldn't, your partner can use the "mind your own business" reactions at the top of the worksheet.

Ask about any questions which you don't understand, don't know how to answer or don't know about the suitability of.

Optional: Without looking at the list(s), brainstorm suitable questions into the table below.

Look at the lists with just direct questions. Cross out taboo questions and change ones which are too direct into indirect questions. If the indirect questions are still too personal, you probably need to cross them off. If the indirect questions seem too polite for that topic, they are probably okay without any changes.

Check with the suggested answers.

Indirect questions presentation

What are the differences between the direct and indirect versions of the questions?

Which questions below are more polite versions of these?

- What time is it?/ What's the time?
- Do you smoke?
- Why are you here?

Test each other on the questions by:

- Saying an indirect question below and seeing if your partner can say the direct version
- Saying the direct version of an indirect question below and seeing if your partner can say a suitable indirect version
- Saying an indirect question or a good direct question changed to be indirect, and seeing if your partner can spot if it needs to be indirect or not
- Saying a good direct question or a direct version of an indirect question and seeing if your partner can see if it needs to be changed or not
- Saying a good direct question or the direct version of an indirect question and seeing if your partner can repeat back the correct version (changed or unchanged, depending on what kind of question it is)
- Asking a good direct question, an indirect question or a taboo question and seeing if your partner correctly answers or correctly politely refuses to answer
- Asking an indirect question or an indirect version of a taboo question and seeing if your partner politely refuses to answer the correct questions
- Helping your partner make suitable indirect questions
- Roleplaying a small talk conversation with the all direct questions version below, avoiding taboo questions and changing any questions which need to be indirect

With indirect questions version

Useful phrases for politely refusing to answer questions

I'd rather not say (if you don't mind).

I'm sorry but in my country we don't talk about...

I'm sorry but in my country we don't ask about...

- Are you (also) waiting for...?
- Are you (half) Chinese/ Japanese/ African/ .../ mixed race?
- Are you (still) in touch with *(name)*?/ Are you (still) in contact with *(name)*?
- Are you ill?/ Are you sick?
- Are you married? (Why not?)
- Are you single?
- Are you religious?/ Are you Christian/ Buddhist/ Muslim/...?/ Do you go to church?
- Are you still in the same job/ department/ office/ company/...?
- (Have you) been busy (lately/ recently/ today/ this week)?
- Did you have a good weekend/ vacation/ evening/ day off/ trip/...?
- Did you have any problems getting here?/ Did you have any trouble finding us?
- Did you see/ watch... (last night)?
- Do you (still) work with *(name)*?
- Do you do (any/ much) exercise?
- Do you drink (alcohol)?/ Are you a heavy drinker?
- Can I ask if you eat pork/ eat beef/ eat seafood/ eat...?
- Do you have a light?
- Do you have (many/ any) more meetings (today)?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- Do you have any pets?
- Do you have any plans for the next holiday/ for the weekend/ for this evening?
- Do you have (any) children?/ Do you plan to have kids?
- Do you have to go (straight) back to your office (now/ after this)?
- Do you know *(name)*?/ Have you met *(name)*?
- Do you live near here?/ Do you live around here?
- Do you often use English?
- Do you often travel abroad?
- (Sorry) do you speak English?
- Do you support any (football/ baseball/ basketball/ English Premiership/...) teams?
- Have you been watching Game of Thrones/ the Champions League/...?
- Have you changed your hair?/ Have you had your hair cut?
- Have you come far (today)?/ Where have you come from (today)?
- Have you ever been to...?/ Have you ever visited...?
- Have you finished (for today/ for the day/ for the day/ for the week)?
- Have you heard from *(name)*?/ Have you been in touch with *(name)* (recently)?

- Have you put on weight?
- Have you read any good books/ seen any good movies/... any good... recently?
- Have you seen/ read/ heard (the new/ the latest)... (yet)?
- Have you tried... (food)?
- How are things?/ How are you doing?/ How's it going?/ How's life (treating you)?
- How are your family?/ How is your family?
- How do you feel about having a female boss?
- How has your day been/ week been/ stay been/ visit been/ trip been (so far)?
- (Long time no see). How have you been (since we last met)?
- How long are you here?/ How long will you be here?/ How long are you staying (in...)?
- How long have you been working here?
- Can I ask how much that coffee cost?
- How much did your house cost?
- How much did your watch cost?
- How much do you earn?/ How much money do you make?/ What's your salary?
- How much do you weigh?
- How old are you?
- How was the traffic (coming from.../ this morning/ on... road)?
- How was your (long/ three-day) weekend?
- How was your (summer/ Xmas/ New Year/ Easter/ bank) holiday/ vacation?
- How was your evening?
- How was your flight/ journey (here/ from.../ to...)?
- How was your lunch/ meal/...?
- How was your trip (to...)?
- How's (name)?
- How's business?
- How's the weather (outside/ outside now/ in.../ back in...) (now)?
- How's work?
- How's your hangover (now)?
- How's your hotel?/ What's your hotel like?
- How's your project going?/ How's... going?
- Is anyone sitting here?/ Is this seat free?
- Do you know if it's going to rain/ snow/ stay this humid/...?
- Can I ask if it is safe (to...) in...?
- Do you know whether that dish is vegetarian/ vegan/ gluten free/ halal/ kosher/...?
- Can I ask if the cafeteria/ food/ coffee/... is (any) good?
- Do you know if there is much of a gay scene/ LGBT(Q/I) scene here/ in...?
- Do you know whether this is the right train/ right bus/ right carriage/ right platform/ right... for...?
- Is this your first time (here) (in...)?

- Is your company famous?
- Can I ask if ... is a good company to work for?
- I've been looking for a... like that/ for that.... Can I ask where you got it (from)?
- What are you working on (at the moment)?/ Are you (still) working on...?
- What do you do?/ What's your job?
- What do you think about the (new) PM/ mayor/ king/ queen/ head of...?
- What does your company/ division/ department/ section/ team do?
- Can I ask what your wife/ husband/ boyfriend/ father/ mother/... does?
- What exactly do you do?/ What does your job involve?/ What do you do there?
- What is... (most) famous for?
- What kind of business are you in?/ What kind of company do you work for?
- Can I ask what kind of sandwich that is? (Is it any good?)
- Do you know what the weather forecast is (for today/ for tonight/ for this weekend/ for...)?
- Do you know what time this train leaves/ arrives (at...)?
- Do you have the time?
- Can I check your name?/ Can I ask your name?/ And you are?
- What's your TOEIC score?/ What's your... score?
- Could you tell me where I am (on this map)?
- Do you know where are toilets are?
- Where are you staying?/ Are you staying near here?
- Where are your family from?/ Where are your parents from?
- Where have you come from today?
- Where is your company based?/ Where are you based?/ Where do you work?/ Do you work near here?/ Is your office near here?/ Are you based near here?
- Which newspaper do you read?
- Which university did you go to?
- Who did you fly with?/ Which airline did you fly with?
- Who do you work for?
- What brings you here?
- You're looking good/ healthy/ tanned/.... Have you been on holiday?/ Have you been working out?/ Have you lost weight?/ Have you...?

All direct questions version

Useful phrases for politely refusing to answer questions

I'd rather not say (if you don't mind).

I'm sorry but in my country we don't talk about...

I'm sorry but in my country we don't ask about...

- Are you (also) waiting for...?
- Are you (half) Chinese/ Japanese/ African/ .../ mixed race?
- Are you (still) in touch with *(name)*?/ Are you (still) in contact with *(name)*?
- Are you ill?/ Are you sick?
- Are you married? (Why not?)
- Are you single?
- Are you religious?/ Are you Christian/ Buddhist/ Muslim/...?/ Do you go to church?
- Are you still in the same job/ department/ office/ company/...?
- (Have you) been busy (lately/ recently/ today/ this week)?
- Did you have a good weekend/ vacation/ evening/ day off/ trip/...?
- Did you have any problems getting here?/ Did you have any trouble finding us?
- Did you see/ watch... (last night)?
- Do you (still) work with *(name)*?
- Do you do (any/ much) exercise?
- Do you drink (alcohol)?/ Are you a heavy drinker?
- Do you eat pork/ eat beef/ eat seafood/ eat...?
- Do you have a light?
- Do you have (many/ any) more meetings (today)?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- Do you have any pets?
- Do you have any plans for the next holiday/ for the weekend/ for this evening?
- Do you have (any) children?/ Do you plan to have kids?
- Do you have the time?
- Do you have to go (straight) back to your office (now/ after this)?
- Do you know *(name)*?/ Have you met *(name)*?
- Do you live near here?/ Do you live around here?
- Do you often use English?
- Do you often travel abroad?
- (Sorry) do you speak English?
- Do you support any (football/ baseball/ basketball/ English Premiership/...) teams?
- Have you been watching Game of Thrones/ the Champions League/...?
- Have you changed your hair?/ Have you had your hair cut?
- Have you come far (today)?/ Where have you come from (today)?
- Have you ever been to...?/ Have you ever visited...?
- Have you finished (for today/ for the day/ for the day/ for the week)?
- Have you heard from *(name)*?/ Have you been in touch with *(name)* (recently)?

- Have you put on weight?
- Have you read any good books/ seen any good movies/... any good... recently?
- Have you seen/ read/ heard (the new/ the latest)... (yet)?
- Have you tried... (food)?
- How are things?/ How are you doing?/ How's it going?/ How's life (treating you)?
- How are your family?/ How is your family?
- How do you feel about having a female boss?
- How has your day been/ week been/ stay been/ visit been/ trip been (so far)?
- (Long time no see). How have you been (since we last met)?
- How long are you here?/ How long will you be here?/ How long are you staying (in...)?
- How long have you been working here?
- How much did that coffee cost?
- How much did your house cost?
- How much did your watch cost?
- How much do you earn?/ How much money do you make?/ What's your salary?
- How much do you weigh?
- How old are you?
- How was the traffic (coming from.../ this morning/ on... road)?
- How was your (long/ three-day) weekend?
- How was your (summer/ Xmas/ New Year/ Easter/ bank) holiday/ vacation?
- How was your evening?
- How was your flight/ journey (here/ from.../ to...)?
- How was your lunch/ meal/...?
- How was your trip (to...)?
- How's (name)?
- How's business?
- How's the weather (outside/ outside now/ in.../ back in...) (now)?
- How's work?
- How's your hangover (now)?
- How's your hotel?/ What's your hotel like?
- How's your project going?/ How's... going?
- Is anyone sitting here?/ Is this seat free?
- Is it going to rain/ snow/ stay this humid/...?
- Is it safe (to...) in...?
- Is that dish vegetarian/ vegan/ gluten free/ halal/ kosher/...?
- Is the cafeteria/ food/ coffee/... (any) good?
- Is there much of a gay scene/ LGBT(Q/I) scene here/ in...?
- Is this the right train/ right bus/ right carriage/ right platform/ right... for...?
- Is this your first time (here) (in...)?

- I'm afraid I haven't heard of... Is it famous?
- Is... a good company to work for?
- I've been looking for a... like that/ for that.... Where did you get it (from)?
- What are you working on (at the moment)?/ Are you (still) working on...?
- What brings you here?
- What do you do?/ What's your job?
- What do you think about the (new) PM/ mayor/ king/ queen/ head of...?
- What does your company/ division/ department/ section/ team do?
- What does your wife/ husband/ boyfriend/ father/ mother/... do?
- What exactly do you do?/ What does your job involve?/ What do you do there?
- What is... (most) famous for?
- What kind of business are you in?/ What kind of company do you work for?
- What kind of sandwich is that? (Is it any good?)
- What's the weather forecast (for today/ for tonight/ for this weekend/ for...)?
- What time does this train leave/ arrive (at...)?
- What's your name?
- What's your TOEIC score?/ What's your... score?
- Where am I (on this map)?
- Where are the toilets?
- Where are you staying?/ Are you staying near here?
- Where are your family from?/ Where are your parents from?
- Where have you come from today?
- Where is your company based?/ Where are you based?/ Where do you work?/ Do you work near here?/ Is your office near here?/ Are you based near here?
- Which newspaper do you read?
- Which university did you go to?
- Who did you fly with?/ Which airline did you fly with?
- Who do you work for?
- You're looking good/ healthy/ tanned/.... Have you been on holiday/ Have you been working out?/ Have you lost weight?/ Have you...?

First of all without looking at the lists, write as many questions as you can in each column below. Many questions not above are also possible.

Small talk questions which are usually good/ okay	Small talk questions which are okay but should be <u>indirect</u> questions (not just starting directly with “Wh...?”)	Bad small talk questions/ Taboo small talk questions

Look at the first and/ or second list above for ideas, then brainstorm more.

Suggested answers

*Underlined questions are normally taboo. Questions in **bold** are (and probably need to be) indirect. The other questions are usually fine (depending on the situation).*

- Are you (also) waiting for...?
- Are you (half) Chinese/ Japanese/ African/ .../ mixed race?
- Are you (still) in touch with *(name)*?/ Are you (still) in contact with *(name)*?
- Are you ill?/ Are you sick?/ Do you have a cold?/ Do you have flu?/ Do you have...?
- Are you married? (Why not?)
- Are you single?
- Are you religious?/ Are you Christian/ Buddhist/ Muslim/...?/ Do you go to church?
- Are you still in the same job/ department/ office/ company/...?
- (Have you) been busy (lately/ recently/ today/ this week)?
- Did you have a good weekend/ vacation/ evening/ day off/ trip/...?
- Did you have any problems getting here?/ Did you have any trouble finding us?
- Did you see/ watch... (last night)?
- Do you (still) work with *(name)*?
- Do you do (any/ much) exercise?
- Do you drink (alcohol)?/ Are you a heavy drinker?
- **Can I ask if you eat pork/ eat beef/ eat seafood/ eat...? (Do you eat...?)**
- Do you have (many/ any) more meetings (today)?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- Do you have any pets?
- Do you have any plans for the next holiday/ for the weekend/ for this evening?
- Do you have (any) children?/ Do you plan to have kids?
- Do you have the time?
- Do you have to go (straight) back to your office (now/ after this)?
- Do you know *(name)*?/ Have you met *(name)*?
- Do you live near here?/ Do you live around here?
- Do you often use English?
- Do you often travel abroad?
- Do you have a light?
- (Sorry) do you speak English?
- Do you support any (football/ baseball/ basketball/ English Premiership/...) teams?
- Have you been watching Game of Thrones/ the Champions League/...?
- Have you changed your hair?/ Have you had your hair cut?
- Have you come far (today)?/ Where have you come from (today)?
- Have you ever been to...?/ Have you ever visited...?
- Have you finished (for today/ for the day/ for the day/ for the week)?
- Have you heard from *(name)*?/ Have you been in touch with *(name)* (recently)?

- Have you put on weight?
- Have you read any good books/ seen any good movies/... any good... recently?
- Have you seen/ read/ heard (the new/ the latest)... (yet)?
- Have you tried... (food)?
- How are things?/ How are you doing?/ How's it going?/ How's life (treating you)?
- How are your family?/ How is your family?
- How do you feel about having a female boss?
- How has your day been/ week been/ stay been/ visit been/ trip been (so far)?
- (Long time no see). How have you been (since we last met)?
- How long are you here?/ How long will you be here?/ How long are you staying (in...)?
- How long have you been working here?
- **Can I ask how much that coffee cost? (How much did that coffee cost?)**
- How much did your house cost?
- How much did your watch cost?
- How much do you earn?/ How much money do you make?/ What's your salary?
- How much do you weigh?
- How old are you?
- How was the traffic (coming from.../ this morning/ on... road)?
- How was your (long/ three-day) weekend?
- How was your (summer/ Xmas/ New Year/ Easter/ bank) holiday/ vacation?
- How was your evening?
- How was your flight/ journey (here/ from.../ to...)?
- How was your lunch/ meal/...?
- How was your trip (to...)?
- How's (name)?
- How's business?
- How's the weather (outside/ outside now/ in.../ back in...) (now)?
- How's work?
- How's your hangover (now)?
- How's your hotel?/ What's your hotel like?
- How's your project going?/ How's... going?
- Is anyone sitting here?/ Is this seat free?
- **Do you know if it's going to rain/ snow/ stay this humid/...? (Is it going to...?)**
- **Can I ask if it is safe (to...) in...? (Is it safe...?)**
- **Do you know whether that dish is vegetarian/ vegan/ gluten free/ halal/ kosher/ ...? (Is that dish...?)**
- **Can I ask if the cafeteria/ food/ coffee/... is (any) good? (Is the... good/ any good?)**
- **Do you know if there is much of a gay scene/ LGBT(Q/I) scene here/ in...? (Is there much a... scene...?)**
- **Do you know whether this is the right train/ right bus/ right carriage/ right platform/ right... for...? (Is this the right...?)**
- Is this your first time (here) (in...)?

- I'm afraid I haven't heard of... Is it famous?
- **Can I ask if ... is a good company to work for? (Is... a good company to work for?)**
- **I've been looking for a... like that/ for that.... Can I ask where you got it (from)? (Where did you get it from?)**
- What are you working on (at the moment)?/ Are you (still) working on...?
- What brings you here?
- What do you do?/ What's your job?
- What do you think about the (new) PM/ mayor/ king/ queen/ head of...?
- What does your company/ division/ department/ section/ team do?
- **Can I ask what your wife/ husband/ boyfriend/ father/ mother/... does? (What does your.... do?)**
- What exactly do you do?/ What does your job involve?/ What do you do there?
- What is... (most) famous for?
- What kind of business are you in?/ What kind of company do you work for?
- **Can I ask what kind of sandwich that is? (Is it any good?) (What kind of sandwich is that?)**
- **Do you know what the weather forecast is (for today/ for tonight/ for this weekend/ for...)? (What is the weather forecast...?)**
- **Do you know what time this train leaves/ arrives (at...)? (What time does this train...?)**
- **Can I check your name?/ Can I ask your name?/ And you are? (What's your name?)**
- What's your TOEIC score?/ What's your... score?
- **Could you tell me where I am (on this map)? (Where am I?)**
- **Do you know where are toilets are? (Where are the toilets?)**
- Where are you staying?/ Are you staying near here?
- Where are your family from?/ Where are your parents from?
- Where have you come from today?
- Where is your company based?/ Where are you based?/ Where do you work?/ Do you work near here?/ Is your office near here?/ Are you based near here?
- Which newspaper do you read?
- Which university did you go to?
- Who did you fly with?/ Which airline did you fly with?
- Who do you work for?
- You're looking good/ healthy/ tanned/.... Have you been on holiday?/ Have you been working out?/ Have you lost weight?/ Have you...?