



A **Listen First Conversation** is any conversation that prioritizes understanding and might be between two friends or among many strangers. It might be on a park bench, in a classroom, in the workplace, at home, or online. Regardless of where you are or who you're with, keep these **10 Tips** for engaging in a **Listen First Conversation** in mind.

- 1. Allow others the courtesy of silence while they are speaking.** When we are cut off while driving we get road rage; when we are cut off while speaking, we get conversation rage. One of the quickest ways to raise negative emotions in conversation is to interrupt someone. Whenever you feel the urge to express your opinion, replace that with an “mhm” or “yeah, right” to show you are listening.
- 2. Maintain a calm and respectful tone when you are speaking. If you are passionate about something it is only natural to become animated and energetic.** What seems like expressed passion to you, however, can become intimidating for your conversational partner, especially if you operate with a raised voice and hand gestures that border on pointing.
- 3. Come with an open mind, ready to learn and grow.** Part of the beauty of meeting new people and having conversations is to expand our horizons. We visit new places to gain new experiences, and we read new books to spark learning. Think of conversations as a bit of both, and come with the mindset expressed by Bill Nye, “Everyone you will ever meet know something you don’t.”
- 4. Listen to others as you want them to listen to you.** Our first three guidelines can really be summarized by this iteration of the Golden Rule. Think about how you want to be treated in conversation - with dignity and respect - and vow to treat your partner in that way.
- 5. Listen to and consider others' views before sharing your own.** It is natural to want to share your opinions and give your two cents. For many listening situations, however, your opinion does not matter. People don’t always talk to you to hear your side of the story. More often, people want to tell their own side of the story and for you to listen to it without interruption.
- 6. Be present and curious rather than thinking of how to respond.** Steven Covey is often quoted as saying, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak.” Being present means being focused on the other person, genuinely curious about them and their story. When you are present and curious, the conversation will be more meaningful for both you and your partner.
- 7. Fully engage, free of distractions.** One of the main distractions today is our cell phone, and research shows that even its presence can influence our ability to remain present. Cell phones have an off button for a reason, and if this conversation is important enough to garner your attention then it is important enough to use that button. Stay focused on your conversational partner, maintaining eye contact with them and not your surroundings.



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- 8. Restate what you heard to clarify understanding, making sure to use "I" statements ("What I heard you say was" or "The way I understand your position is").** Although you can show you are engaged by freeing yourself of distractions and maintaining eye contact, studies have revealed that what you say as a listener is crucial. When you use restatements to illustrate how you have understood the speaker, you allow them to either agree ("Yes, that is what I meant!") or to clarify their position ("Actually, what I meant was ..."). Importantly, restatements are not repetitions, meaning you should not merely repeat exactly what they said. Instead, put it in your own words, and signal that this is your understanding by starting your statement with "I."
 - 9. Ask thoughtful and respectful questions, free from judgement, assumption, or bias.** A sure fire way to get someone talking is to ask them a question – the way that our language is structured, questions demand answers. But be careful! Don't frame your questions as a form of judgment (e.g., "Don't you think that your opinion is old fashioned?"). We are judged enough in the course of our day; do your best not to add to that.
 - 10. Seek to discover common interests and areas of agreement by focusing more on why than what, more on personal experiences than positions.** There is no quicker way to end a conversation or escalate to conflict than start spouting facts. In general, facts should not be your first line of defense, even if they are your initial go-to. Research shows people are much more likely to consider other points of view when there is an emotional connection, a relationship. Rather than start with "how are we different" start with "what are our shared core values." Get your partner to tell personal stories, and listen for areas of shared experience, ways to connect on a personal level. Avoid talking positions until you get to know each other and can figure out what makes your partner tick. This is as true in conversations about mundane topics as it is in conversations about controversial ones.

About Listen First Project

Listen First Project encourages conversations that prioritize understanding to bridge divides and mend our frayed social fabric. We catalyze the #ListenFirst movement powered by more than 225 partner organizations, thousands of individuals, National Conversation Project, and local chapters around the world. LFP focuses on society at large, schools, and workplaces while recognizing those who champion the Listen First mission.

For more information, contact our Chief Listening Officer at graham@listenfirstproject.org.



Listening and Conflict

As much as we might try, we can't completely avoid talking about controversial topics. Whether at home, in the workplace, or meeting a friend for coffee, conversations can shift from small talk to talk about serious issues often without us even noticing it happening. It might come as a question, "What do you think about ...?" or your conversational partner might simply start asserting his or her opinion or repeating something they saw or heard on TV.

When you find yourself confronted with talking about a controversial issue, a natural reaction is to launch into what you believe and why you have landed on that stance. What is natural, however, can often lead to conflict or worse - hurt feelings, damaged relationships, broken homes, and dysfunctional work environments. Remember Tip 5, Listen to and consider others' views before sharing your own!

In order to be in conflict you have to care about something. Ever thought about that? How likely is it that you will spend much time arguing for a position on a topic that you find disinteresting or unimportant to your life? The problem is, however, that we may not have considered what it is that we care about. We care about the topic and find it important, or we may find ourselves with strong opinions, but have we really asked, *What is it that I care about?*

Take a step back and think about those social and political issues that currently define our most contentious debates - gun control, abortion, same-sex marriage, social justice, and taxation. For how many of these have you explored what universal human values are at the core of your opinions? It is not that you don't have opinions or that your opinions are unfounded, but do you really know what is at the core of your opinions?

Now, think of this from the standpoint of your conversational partner: your conversational partner also may not have asked these questions of him or herself. Taking our Listen First Conversation tips into practice, one of your first moves when having a difficult conversation is to **ask your conversational partner what it is they care about!** When you hear an opinion expressed or when your partner starts to diving into an emotionally-charged conversation, say something like:

"I can tell that you care deeply about this. What interested you or drew you to this topic?"

Remember Tip 9, questions demand answers. And answers demand your active attention. If you ask a question you have to be prepared to listen for the answer. Notice that last sentence does not read listen *to* the answer but listen *for* the answer. There is a difference. Grammatically, the word "to" is used when you want to express the transfer of something, such as the movement of an object from one point to another. The word "for" is used when something is done to the benefit of something or someone. While you might go *to* a party, you take a present *for* someone. Listening for means you are anticipating something, awaiting an opportunity to grow and learn (remember Tip 3). As we discussed in Tip 10, you are attempting to uncover what makes the other person tick, what are his or her core values and what lies at the heart of any opinions expressed.



The point of engaging others in difficult conversations is not to change minds or otherwise win an argument. These motives are ultimately one-sided and often leave both parties feeling misunderstood and frustrated. Instead, your motives should be to understand - to understand where they are coming from, to understand their personal experiences that have led them to their opinions, to understand the issue at hand from as many perspectives as possible.

Of course, it is also possible that your conversational partner is not ready for this type of conversation. Each person needs to honestly answer whether they are ready to (1) be fully open to what everyone has to say and (2) play fair. Being fully open has been addressed above in our 10 Tips to Listen First Conversations. We will end briefly on the idea of playing fair.

First, playing fair means being honest when you answer, What is it that I care about? If you are not fully sure, then say so, and be willing to confront and shifts in your initial stance. If you initially said you care about safety but find yourself expressing opinions that more align with belonging or some other core value, don't shy away from acknowledging that you are uncertain about the basis of your beliefs.

Second, playing fair means avoiding "kitchen sinking" or throwing all kinds of events or claims at another person even when they are largely irrelevant to the current conversation. If the conversation is about same-sex marriage, don't turn it into a conversation about women's role in the church.

Finally, playing fairly means avoiding common logical fallacies, or errors in reasoning, some of the more common of which include:

Fallacy	Definition	Example
Ad hominem	an attack on the character of a person rather than his or her opinions or arguments.	Green Peace's strategies aren't effective because they are all dirty, lazy hippies.
Slippery Slope	a conclusion based on the premise that if A happens, then eventually through a series of small steps, through B, C,..., X, Y, Z will happen, too, basically equating A and Z. So, if we don't want Z to occur, A must not be allowed to occur either.	If we impose restrictions on gun ownership because assault weapons are used in mass shootings eventually the government will take away all our guns; so we should not ban assault weapons.
Hasty Generalization	a conclusion based on insufficient or biased evidence; rushing to conclusion before you have all the relevant facts	I can tell by what you said first that you and I are going to really disagree