



# Co-Writing Stories of Conversations

SUBMITTED BY **TANIS HARMS**

**Preparing well for intentional conversations contribute to engaging stories.**

## The Authors

Authors often co-write stories, just like conversations involve more than one person in order to result in a strong narrative. By having an engaging introduction, interesting plot hooks, essential chapter development, a plan for blank pages or writer's block and ending with a strong conclusion, conversationalists—like authors—are equipped to co-create strategic conversations that leave those involved wanting more. Similar to an empty page of a book, each story begins with ideas of where the author wants to go or what they might want to include in the narrative, but these are held loosely as the story always develops as it goes. In conversations, it is important not to make any assumptions

about where the story will go, or what will be contributed to it, but rather to focus on really listening so that the writing of the story is a shared experience.

## The Introduction

A great beginning to any story starts with the introduction, as it sets the tone, context or setting of what is about to happen and invites readers in. In conversations, each person involved is a co-writer, where both parties actively collaborate in the writing process by including their ideas into a shared narrative. Thinking about your setting—the physical location of where a conversation will take place—is important.

- Are you in a space that feels safe for all who are involved in the conversation?
- Are the chairs comfortable?
- Is there anything physically between anyone (like a desk)?
- Are there things that might distract from actively listening to one another?

**“These brief but pleasant exchanges can enhance health and happiness, lifting mood, energy and overall well-being. They often promote learning, expand people’s world views and contribute to a sense of belonging. Plus, they’re good for both parties... research indicates that people view “minimal social interactions” such as a smile, compliment or quick chat as an act of kindness.”**

*<https://time.com/6280607/small-talk-tips-benefits/>*

Once you have set up a great physical setting, it’s time to set up the conversational setting. It is important to start the conversation with light topics as these are the essential foundation for engaging the other person in conversation and beginning to develop a safe conversational space and relationship to build upon. Some examples of these topics might include things like the weather, food, locations or specific items such as, “How are you feeling about the weather today?” or “Have you had a good cup of coffee or tea yet today?” or “Wow—I love your mug!”

## The Plot Hooks

When reading a story, it is the plot hooks that motivate the reader to keep reading on to find out more. These hooks deepen and guide the direction of the storyline. If a story does not have these unknown mysteries or problems to be solved, a reader might not be as engaged to keep going. Like a story without hooks, closed-ended questions in a conversation block the motivation to carry on, as they close or shut down the flow of conversation. They may cause the book (or conversation) to be closed entirely as the others involved may no longer be engaged. Closed-ended questions

often start with “Did”, “Do” and possibly “Who”, “Where” or “When”. Sometimes, closed-ended questions can simply be answered with yes/no responses or one word. By comparison, open-ended questions are those that usually start with words such as “How”, “Why” and “What.” They have no set or predetermined answer and require a response longer than a word or two. Some examples of good open-ended questions might be:

- “What keeps you busy outside of your work?”
- “What do you enjoy doing in the summer/fall/winter/spring (whatever season it currently is or about to be)?”
- “How did you hear about our organization?”
- “What has brought you by today?”

## Tips

### From TIME Magazine:



**Don’t get personal too quickly (e.g. kids, marriage, work) unless the other person shares the information first.**



**When someone asks you a question, respond with a full sentence rather than a word or two so that they can build on the conversation.**

*<https://time.com/6280607/small-talk-tips-benefits/>*





It is important to ask open-ended questions that can be used for different age groups, in different contexts and are “safe” (the recipient can answer as lightly or deeply as they feel comfortable). Asking open-ended questions provides the opportunity for a conversation to uncover problems to be solved or information to deepen the plot.

## Chapter Development

The middle chapters of a book focus on developing characters and themes, building on what has already been contributed. In a conversation, follow-up questions in response to what someone has already shared help to add dimension, context or key information to guide where the story will go next. Once you have asked someone an open-ended question, hopefully, they replied with an answer (more than a word or two) to that question. Their answer can then be used to help the conversation move forward. At this point, your next questions are developed based on their continued sharing. For example, you could say things like, “That sounds interesting! I’d love to hear more about that”, or “Can you explain what that looks like?”, or maybe, “I’m not sure I completely understand. Would you be willing to tell me more as to what you mean by....?”

## A Blank Page (or Writer’s Block)

When co-writing a story, more than one author is expected to be contributing. However, at times, one of the authors may only be contributing a small amount or even nothing at all. This might be due to many factors; when this happens writers can look at exploring how to engage the other writer back into the story by using a few strategies such as:

- switching genres
- shortening the story
- adding in a twist with a new idea
- or giving them permission to pause and pick up the pen again at another point in time

**If you are sharing a comment about yourself due to the other person not sharing as much, be sure to keep your sharing brief to provide the opportunity for them to join in the conversation again when they’re ready.**

In conversations, there are times when, for whatever reason, the other person is not choosing to engage in the conversation. Perhaps they are not responding at all to questions asked, or maybe they are providing very short answers even though you have asked open-ended questions. In these situations, you can attempt to keep the conversation going by using a few strategies. First, after pausing to provide them enough time to answer (and this is hard... so count to about seven in your head before talking again), share some things about yourself. You can do this by answering the open-ended question you have asked of them, or by sharing something else you think might reopen engagement. Ideas for what you might share could include: what you enjoy about your job or role, some of the things that your organization offers, something you think might be of interest to them in the community, or something you enjoy spending time on outside of work. After your brief time of sharing, invite them back into the story by asking a new open-ended question, as it might encourage them just enough to pick up their pen and jump back into the conversation again.

## The Conclusion

Conclusions signal the end of a particular story, tying up loose ends or leaving the reader on the edge of their seat anticipating a sequel. Conclusions are essential in providing closure, or to indicate what next step(s) should be taken. If after asking a few open-ended questions the other person still appears to not be interested in actively engaging in the conversation, it is okay to end the conversation or reschedule it for another time. Exiting gracefully from a conversation is like a well-scripted ending to a book. Some things you might choose to say

are, “Well, it’s been great to meet with you today. Thank you for your time”, or “Thank you for coming in, I look forward to when we can continue our conversation.” While saying descriptive words like these, it is important that your body language or actions match your words. Perhaps you start standing up and walking with them to the door or begin to close your notebook or gather up your supplies. However you choose to conclude, be sure that it is both kind and clear, keeping the possibilities open for the next chapter.

Engaging in conversations beginning at the first introduction, asking great open-ended questions to guide the plot, developing the narrative through informed follow-up questions—while being ready with ways to respond if you run into a block—and ending with a strong conclusion, builds conversationalists who, like authors, co-write strategic conversations (or stories) that keep those involved wanting more. How will you and the learners you interact with co-write the next best seller? ♦

## Author's Picks

### Tanis' Top Picks for Conversations



#### A GREAT MUG

My fave: Night Owl Creations



#### LUSH SUCCULENTS

They really grow on you!



#### A DELICIOUS SNACK!

My fave: Flourless Chocolate Cake



#### COMFY CHAIRS

They really rock!

### Conversation Resources

TableTopics Card Game  
<https://tabletopics.com/>

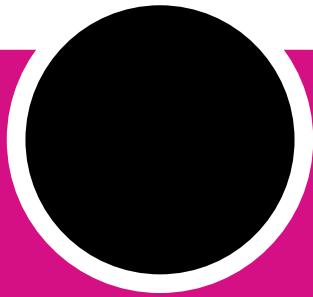
An Introvert's Guide To Small Talk: Eight Painless Tips  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinapark/2015/03/30/an-introverts-guide-to-small-talk-eight-painless-tips/?sh=6787e2a9574a>

7 Ways to Get Better at Small Talk—And Why You Should  
<https://time.com/6280607/small-talk-tips-benefits/>

9 Magic Phrases That Can Save Awkward Conversations  
<https://www.rd.com/list/conversation-skills/>

Good Conversation Starters  
<https://www.rd.com/list/conversation-starters/>

Breaking the Ice in Getting to Know Others Blog  
<https://calp.ca/blog/breaking-the-ice-in-getting-to-know-others.htm>



# 6 Tips to Start a Great Conversation

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## 1

### Choose a Great Space

Be intentional about where you have a conversation:

- Is it comfortable?
- Is it safe?
- Is it distraction free?
- Is it private?

Comfy seating, relaxing decor (like plants and pictures) help create a calm setting to chat.



## 2

### Time it Right

It is important to have time available for conversations. Schedule enough time (and maybe a bit extra) for asking good questions and creating space for listening well.

If you don't have enough time, be honest about that and schedule another time that works better.



## Be a Great Host

Just like how you would treat a guest visiting your home, show hospitality by offering a drink of coffee, tea or water and a snack.

Feeling welcomed goes a long way in building relationships.



## Ask Great Questions

Great questions lead to great answers, and open-ended questions invite deeper responses.

Start with casual asks and then transition to more personal ones like:

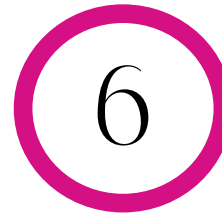
- What's something that would be helpful to know about you?
- When you get the chance, what do you love to do?



## Show you Care

Open body language and regular eye contact communicate care—even more than the words say!

Is your body angled towards the speaker? Are you nodding, smiling and expressing that you're listening? Are you regularly making eye contact to show that you are focused on what they are saying?



## End with Room for More

First conversations are just the beginning... so keep them at an introductory level of time and focus.

You want the other person to leave wanting more, so that they come back to continue the conversation and relationship building.