



Developing small talk skills for clinical settings – for students

Making ‘small talk’ is an important skill that you need to develop as a health professional. The ability to engage effectively in small talk can help you build rapport and trust which can help you manage your relationship with clients better.

Strategies before placement

- Write down a list of small talk topics (see below resources for starters or check the internet for ideas)
- Choose one that you are comfortable with to practise first
- Think about how small talk is used in different stages of a conversation e.g.
 - starting the conversation
 - adding a topic of small talk
 - keeping the conversation going
 - ending the conversation
- Brainstorm language and phrases you might use in each stage
- Brainstorm phrases and techniques that you can use to clarify or ask someone to rephrase
- Brainstorm phrases and techniques that you can use if a client talks about a topic that you are not familiar with
- **Consider:** How do you show interest in the conversation? How do you show empathy?

Useful resources

[How to start an English language conversation with anyone](#) – blog link from Pearson English provides some conversation starters

[Preparing for small talk: a list of the best and worst topics](#) – website article with conversation topics

[ESL conversation worksheets](#) – website with a range of conversation handouts

Strategies in the workplace and at university

- Make a note of what others talk about in their ‘small talk’ conversations
- Write down wording of common phrases, so you can practise at home. Ask someone if unsure of the exact words.
- When unsure, explain to patients/colleagues that you are in the process of learning ‘Aussie English’
- Use clarifying strategies when you are unsure
- Ask people to rephrase what they said but, be strategic
 - Let the person know that you understood part of what they said, but you missed or didn’t understand another part
e.g. ‘Oh, so you went to the footy game, where did you say it was played?’
- If you aren’t familiar with the topic, acknowledge you don’t know, but show interest and get the client to tell you more
e.g. I’ve never been to a game of footy! Everyone seems to love it here, so what team do you follow?



Strategies to practise outside of placement and classes

- Actively build relationships with other students (and staff) – move outside comfort zone; sustain conversation beyond ‘academic’ e.g. in break times
- Actively practise conversations in front of the mirror or with friends at home – use new phrases you pick up on placement
- Try to find something you like doing in your free time that is not study and includes interaction with locals – choose something you would do ‘back home’
- Read magazines and watch TV shows to get an idea of Australian culture, vocab and accents
- Find a show you like watching (not for study) or something health-related

Watch medical reality TV shows to collect examples of everyday language in Australian health settings

- [Old People’s Home for 4 year Olds](#) – ABC TV documentary in aged care setting
- [RPA](#) – Australian reality TV show based in Royal Prince Albert Hospital
- [Medical Emergency](#) – Australian reality TV show
- [Ambulance Australia](#) – Australian reality TV show
- [Paramedics](#) – Australian reality TV show

Engage in social opportunities

- [Volunteering at Uni](#)
- [UniSA Sport volunteers](#)
- [Clubs & societies](#)
- [Community services volunteering search](#)
- [Seniors & aged care volunteering search](#)

More useful resources

- [Strategies for developing English skills](#) – Study Help handout with useful strategies on speaking Australian English for social purposes
- [Communicating at uni & on placement](#) – Study Help chapter with link to useful handouts e.g. [Developing communication skills for placement](#)
- [Communication and language skills for international medical graduates](#) – website by University of Melbourne
- [Tips for improving communication with older patients](#) – US Government website