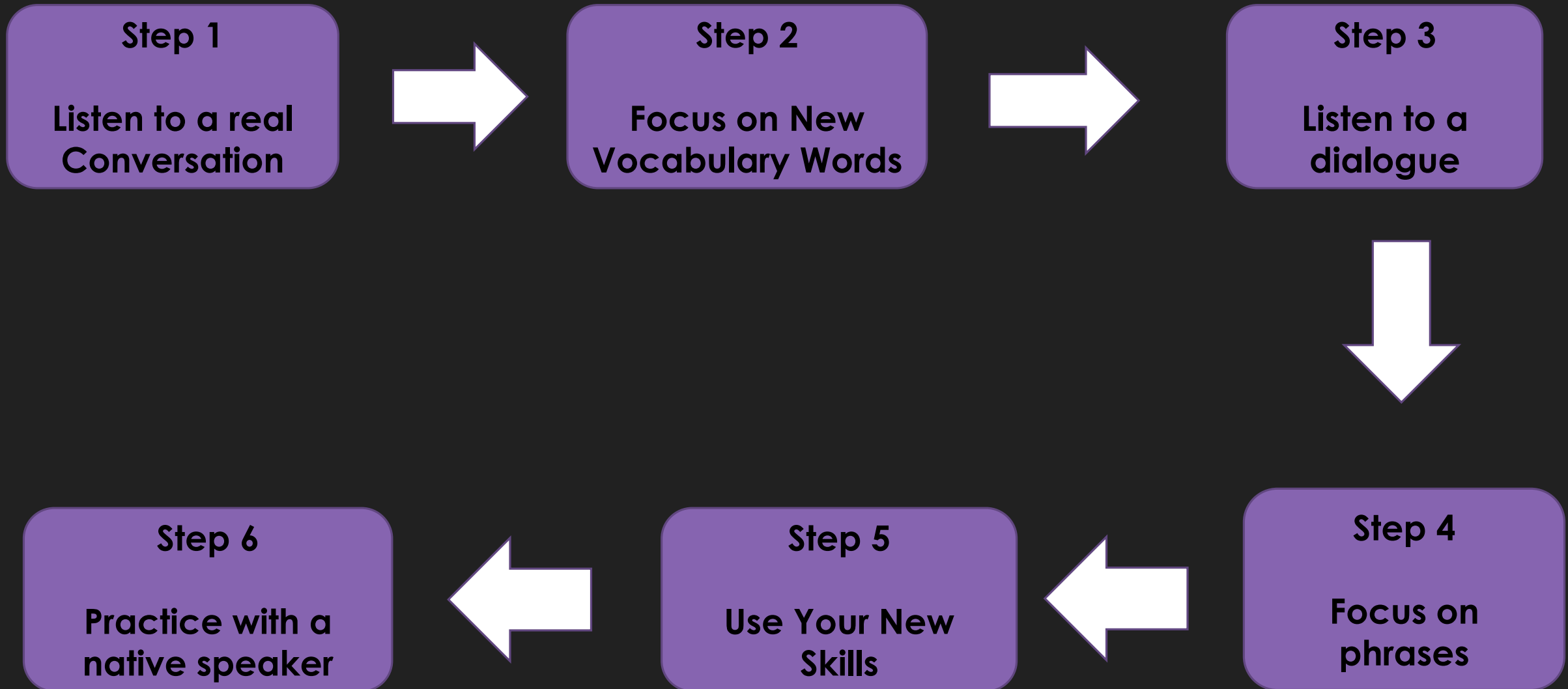




8 Ways to Make Small Talk in English

A Vocabulary Lesson

Our Method



Step 1: How to “Break the Ice”



Please listen to Audio Step 1- How to Break the Ice

Do you ever wonder what topics are appropriate to “break the ice” when you first meet someone at a party or at work? Listen to this conversation to get some ideas.

Please view Transcript Step 1- How to Break the Ice

Bonus! 8 Phrases to Break the Ice

- “So do you have any kids?” (don’t say “how many kids do you have?”, a woman might get offended if you assume she has kids)
- Shared situation- “How are you enjoying the party?”
- Shared acquaintance- “How do you know (name of party host)?”
- “Where do you live?” (this question is common in Boston or New York, you are asking about their neighborhood/district)
- “What do you do?” (job) or “What do you like to do with your time?” (hobby)
- “How are you doing on that new project?” “What do you think about these changes around the workplace?” or “What are you working on now?” (if you work for the same company)
- Upcoming weekend or holiday plans- “What are your plans for the weekend?” “Any exciting plans this weekend?”
- “Can you believe the weather these days?”

Step 2: Focus on New Vocabulary Words

**Personal
bubble**

So-and-so

**At arm's
length**

Acquaintance

**Common
ground**

At arm's
length

Idiom



The distance of one arm, stretched out completely

*“You should stand at arm's length when you make
small talk in the US.”*

Personal bubble

Idiom



The space around a person (1-2 feet) that you should not enter unless they give their consent.

“People in the US have large personal bubbles and you should consider that when you communicate.”

Acquaintance

Noun



Someone who is not a friend, but is also not a stranger,
somewhere in between

*“I have a lot of acquaintances at work but not many
real friends.”*

So-and-so

Noun

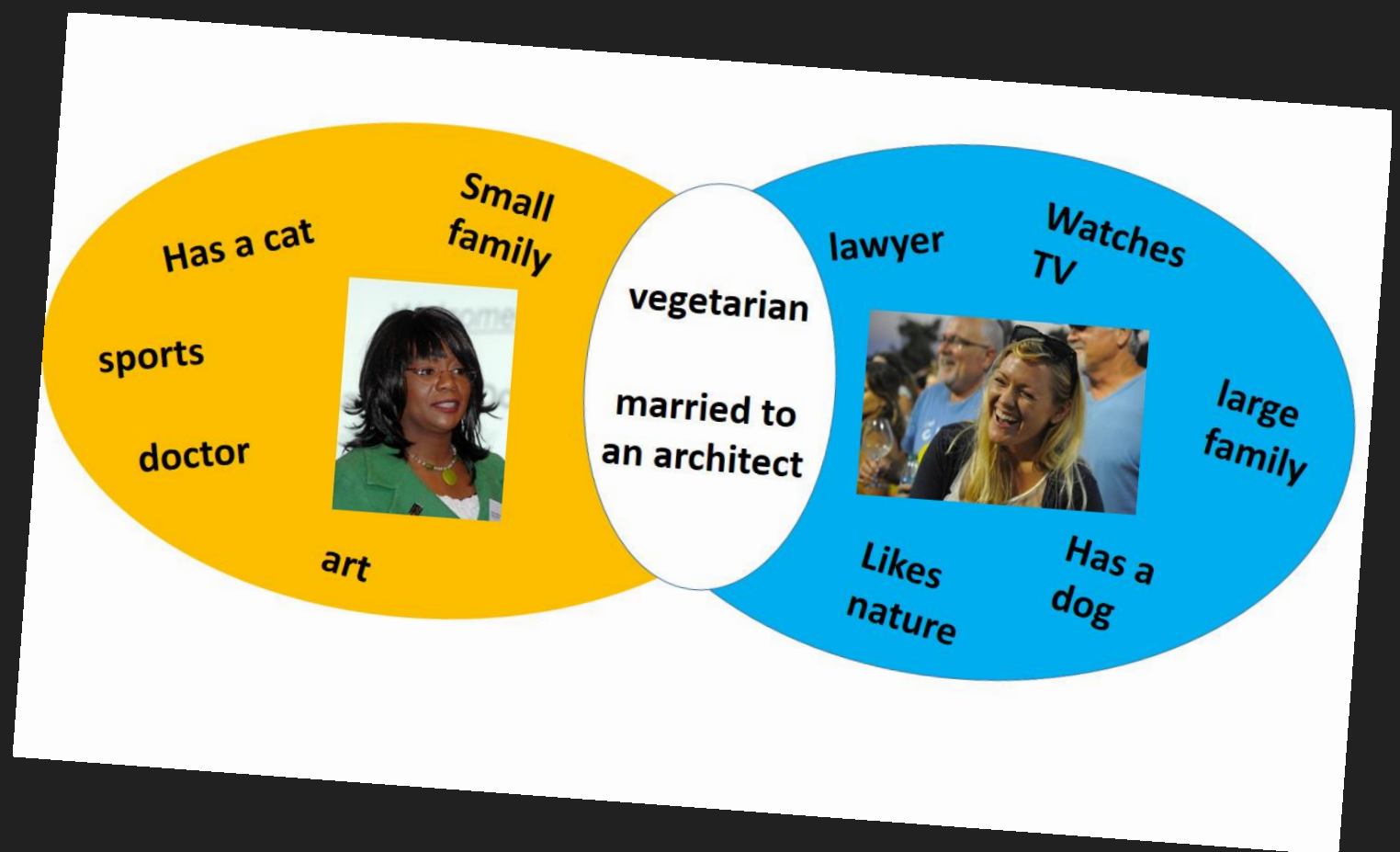


Used as the name of a person who is unknown or not important

“Did you see so-and-so at the party?”

Common ground

Noun



A topic of mutual interest or agreement

"It took a few minutes of conversation, but eventually we found some common ground."

Bonus! Cultural Tip on Body Language

As we mentioned in Audio 1, Americans do not like to stand close to people when they speak unless they are in a close/intimate relationship with the person.

Please watch this funny
video clip to learn more:

[Seinfeld: The Close Talker](#)



Step 3: How Was the Party?

Listen to one sister give advice to another sister about her socializing style.

Listen to Audio Steps 3 and 4-How Was the Party?



Step 4: Focus on the Vocabulary Phrases

Learn the new vocabulary in context!

Please open Transcript Steps 3 and 4 – Do You Get Along with your Colleagues?

Key Vocabulary Phrases

- I can never find common ground with people
- You have to let them have their personal bubble
- Try to have at least an arm's length between you and the other person
- ...especially when you meet up with some acquaintances, you have to stop doing that.
- Maybe that's why that guy, so-and-so, walked away from you.

Bonus! Say It Another Way!

Learn how to say the phrases in a different way!

Click on the file "Say It Another Way"

Step 5: Use Your New Skills

**At arm's
length**

**Personal
bubble**

Acquaintance

So-and-so

**Common
ground**

A: Hey how far should I stand from people at a party in the US?

B: You should leave about ___1___ (a few feet of space) between you and the other person.

A: What is your strategy for finding ___2___ (things of mutual interest) with someone?

B: I just ask them about themselves and then I try to find a topic that I can relate to.

A: Do you have a lot of friends?

B: Not really. I do have a lot of ___3___ (people that I know, but they are not friends) though.

Answers to Step 5 Quiz

- 1) An arm's length
- 2) Common ground
- 3) acquaintances

Prepare Your Vocabulary Cards

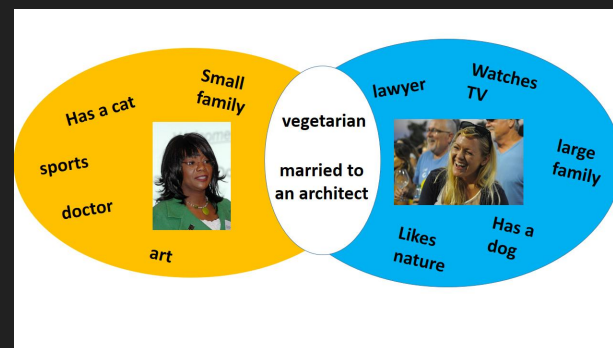
So-and-so



**Personal
bubble**



**Common
ground**



**At arm's
length**



Acquaintance



Step 6: Practice with a Native

- In your home country, what are the norms for personal space? Do people like to have a **personal bubble** that is at least an **arm's length** of space like they do in the US? What other norms do you have regarding body language while making small talk (eye contact, use of hand gestures, questions that you can/cannot ask) in your home country?

Bonus Conversation 1: Please use the phrases from Say It Another Way (A= friend, B= friend)

A: *(student)* So did you meet anyone new at the party last night?

B: Yeah I met an interesting guy, but he didn't have very good manners. He came right into my _____ (personal bubble) and made me feel uncomfortable.

A: Oh wow, so this guy, _____ (so-and-so), why was he interesting?

B: I found out that he's an artist and he is from some other country, I don't remember where.

A: Wow, that's cool. Now someone should just let him know that you need to leave at least _____ (an arm's length) of space when you are speaking with someone in the US.

Answers to Bonus Conversation 1

Bonus Conversation 1: Please use the phrases from Say It Another Way(A= friend, B= friend)

A: *(student) So did you meet anyone new at the party last night?*

B: Yeah I met an interesting guy, but he didn't have very good manners. He came right into my personal space and made me feel uncomfortable.

A: *Oh wow, so this guy, what's his name?, why was he interesting?*

B: I found out that he's an artist and he is from some other country, I don't remember where.

A: *Wow, that's cool. Now someone should just let him know that you need to leave at least a few feet of space when you are speaking with someone in the US.*

Step 6: Practice with a Native

- Do you find it easy to make small talk with an **acquaintance**? Why or why not? Give some examples of the last time you chatted with someone new. What topics did you find that were **common ground** for both of you?

Bonus Conversation 2: Please use the phrases from Say It Another Way (A= friend, B= friend)

A: *(student)* Oh my gosh I don't want to go to the company party tonight.

B: Why not?

A: All of my colleagues are _____ (acquaintances), not real friends.

B: What's the problem with that?

A: I have no idea how to find _____ (common ground with them).

B: Just ask them about work. Find out how their latest projects are going.

A: Oh good idea. At least that's one thing we all have in common.

Answers to Bonus Conversation 2

Bonus Conversation 2: Please use the phrases from Say It Another Way(A= friend, B= friend)

A: *(student) Oh my gosh I don't want to go to the company party tonight.*

B: Why not?

A: *All of my colleagues are people I don't know very well, not real friends.*

B: What's the problem with that?

A: *I have no idea how to find a topic that we're both interested in.*

B: Just ask them about work. Find out how their latest projects are going.

A: *Oh good idea. At least that's one thing we all have in common.*

Practice with a Native

- In your culture, is it ok to look straight into someone's eye? Are there any limitations in terms of who you can make direct eye contact with whom? Why? (hierarchical, gender norms, etc.)
- What are the most common topics of small talk in your country? How are they different from common topics mentioned in this module?
- In module 19, we said that Americans avoid the following four topics during small talk with people we don't know well: money, politics, religion, and sex. Is the same true in your culture? Why or why not? Have you ever made the mistake of bringing up one of these topics? If so, what happened? What did you learn?
- Do you enjoy engaging in small talk or do you prefer deep conversation? Do you know anyone who's really good at small talk? Is that person an extrovert or an introvert? (module 12)

Practice with a Native

- Please respond to this quote. Do you agree or disagree:
 - “Although we may envy those people who have the gift of effortlessly engaging strangers in conversation about the weather, politics, or news of the day, research suggests that it is the deep conversations that are associated with satisfaction and happiness.” -By Ronald E. Riggio, PhD. on June 8, 2012 In *Cutting Edge Leadership*.

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