

Press '1' to begin

The art of conversation.

Nye Joell Hardy

Andrew? Andrew? Are you there?

I know this is an online class, but the reason you have an audio interface is so that you can talk. Andrew? Can you hear me? Hello?

If you're frightened, I want you to know you're not alone. 'Social Interaction 101' is designed for people just like you. It's not an uncommon difficulty these days, not since everyone started telecommuting. Even people who come from the largest families lose their verbal skills if they spend just a few years communicating only by e-mail, blog and tweet. And you haven't been outside your house since — let me look at your profile — oh, my. Well, never mind, Andrew. Can you just say "Hi?" Andrew? No?

Okay. I'll just talk and you can listen. No ... don't type your response. Just listen. Over the duration of the course we will cover History of Social Interaction; Breathing and Talking at the Same Time; Paying Attention to What People Say; Common Greetings; Uncomfortable Silences; What is Rudeness?; Communicative Emotions to Avoid — Silliness, Salaciousness and Sarcasm; The Ten Commandments of Manners; Weather and Sports; and Eye Contact.

Eye Contact used to be in the advanced course, but it really is an important component of social interaction, so we decided it belonged in 101. Facial Expressions are still in the advanced session, of course, and Being A Shoulder to Cry On, but I'm getting off topic here. Still with me?

You could burp or cough, if you want, even though it's not good manners. We'll cover all that in a later class, but I think you just need to get used to making sounds in front of others, Andrew. How about if you just clap your hands? ... No?

Don't worry then. Some people need to go through the first few classes before they're comfortable with me reacting to the sounds they make. But think about this, Andrew: wouldn't you like to be able to put 'Conversationalist' on your résumé? Let's see what you do for a living — Human Resources Director — well. I think conversing could be a powerful tool in your management arsenal, don't you? Andrew?

Never mind. Would you mind if I start our first topic?



Would you?

All right. The very first humans were probably non-verbal, but they needed a code to understand their relationships to one another — who was boss and who had to do all the nasty chores. For this code, they created words, as they were illiterate and didn't have computers. Different tribes of people quickly developed different codes: Chinese, Latin, Farsi, Rap ... and all the other languages, you know, that were in the world. But, they had no technology. Then, someone invented Semaphore and Morse Code and DOS, and people quickly realized that talking wasn't as efficient at communicating data.

This is true, Andrew, we all know it. And I know you might find this hard to believe, but as primitive as it is, verbal communication is still the best form for social interaction. When I think about those early human beings, I like to imagine how they communicated with one another. And do you know what I think was the earliest form of conversation?

The knock-knock joke.

A knock-knock joke is easy. It doesn't require any emotional commitment. It's non-threatening. This is how it works. I say "Knock-knock", and you say, "Who's there?" When I say a word, you repeat the word and say "Who?"

Would you like to try one? Andrew?

I'll start by saying "Knock-knock", just as if I were knocking on your front door, just like those delivery people who come to your house all the time. As an

aside, delivery people are a remarkable holdover from pre-E-volution days: their social interactions have been studied at length, especially as they seem to recognize people they haven't seen for months, and sometimes even years. But I digress. Ready? Knock-knock.

Well, if you had said "Who", I would have said "Cow." Then you would have said "Cow who?" and I would have said, "No! Cow moo!", and I would have laughed.

That's just a fabulous knock-knock joke.

The ironic thing, of course, is that our cultural loss of social interaction was pretty much predicted. I'm going to read you a quote from a book. It was written way back in 1974. It's called *The Private Future* by Martin Pawley. I'll also send you the quote for your homework: it may be a little difficult for you to understand, here in its spoken form. Here goes:

"Alone in a centrally heated, air-conditioned capsule, drugged, fed with music and erotic imagery, the parts of his consciousness separated into components that reach everywhere and nowhere, the private citizen of the future will have become one with the end of effort and the triumph of sensation divorced from action."

Pretty deep, huh?

First of all, Andrew, I told you not to type responses. You can only speak in this class. Second: yes. I do think this quote is talking about you, Andrew. I think this quote is talking about all of us.

Never mind. Our class time is drawing to an end, Andrew. Like I said, you don't have to talk in these first classes if it's too stressful. But as I can see from your class application, you said you desperately wanted to learn about social interaction. That could be motivational for you, too, I think. Don't you think that would make it so much easier to do what you want to do? Let's see what you wanted to do; I know you wrote it down here. Ah, yes.

Don't you think, Andrew, that the ability to make conversation would make it so much easier to go out on a real date?

Andrew? Are you there? ■

Nye Joell Hardy is the food safety manager for an international produce company. She has rarely spoken to and has never met the people who buy her stories.

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