

Communication 4312 -- On Having A Conversation

How to talk with absolutely anyone about anything...

If you are going to write, you will have to talk with lots and lots of people. They will be the source of information you write about. You will discover that getting information from people depends on your ability to converse with them.

The most important consideration in having a good conversation is to put the emphasis on the person with whom you are talking. Not everyone is a good conversationalist. In fact, few are. That's good in a sense, because the person you are talking with won't know what you are doing when you talk with them.

How do you become good at talking with people? By asking them questions. Leading questions. Now, while it may seem that a question like, "Where are you from?" is a leading question, it is not. You could ask a bunch of "Where are you from?" questions, but you wouldn't get anywhere. That question leaves no place for the conversation to go.

What you have to do is anticipate certain aspects about this person and get to those as quickly as possible. For example, you know the person is in school. Don't ask what they are taking. Ask instead how the semester is going, if they have a favorite course yet and do they know their teachers yet.

In having a conversation, you must resist the temptation to respond to a person in kind. Suppose you ask how the semester is going. If you respond by saying that your semester is going well and you are learning Italian or Spanish or whatever, you have sidetracked the conversation.

Remember this: you are responsible for keeping the conversation going. That almost always means keeping the emphasis on the other person. Therefore, avoid turning the attention back to you. That just won't work.

Be prepared with follow-up questions: The people you are talking with went to Europe last summer: What city did they like the best? What was their most interesting experience? Don't start telling about your trip to Europe.

Get the other person talking about themselves so that the conversation will become natural and not forced. If you succeed, you will acquire the kind of information you need to make a story a story.

■ David McHam