

NEWS LESSON

An Hour on a Train Without a Word

BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes it easy to start talking to someone you do not know?
2. Would you enjoy a journey more if a stranger spoke to you?
3. Where does a short conversation feel welcome?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**polite**	☐	A	being friendly and good to other people
2	**headphones**	☐	B	in a way that you did not expect
3	**annoying**	☐	C	things you wear over your ears to listen to music
4	**delayed**	☐	D	making you a little angry or tired
5	**pleasant**	☐	E	nice and enjoyable
6	**ordinary**	☐	F	later than planned
7	**kindness**	☐	G	normal, not special
8	**surprisingly**	☐	H	showing good manners to other people

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Two passengers, two phones and no conversation. One simple question could change the journey.

1 Two people sit next to each other on a train. One looks at a phone, and the other puts on headphones. They spend an hour together without saying a word. This is a normal scene in many cities. But what might happen if one of them looked up and started a conversation? They could exchange a few polite words, share a joke or discover that they have something in common.

2 An article in the Guardian in February 2026 asked whether we are forgetting how to talk to strangers. The writer described meeting people in ordinary places and finding that even short conversations could be surprisingly pleasant. It raised a simple question: if we have more ways to contact each other than ever before, why do we sometimes avoid speaking to the person standing right beside us?

3 Technology may be part of the answer. Phones help us pass the time and keep in touch with people we already know. Headphones let us listen to music while travelling. These things are useful, but they can also stop conversations before they begin. It is harder to say hello to someone who is staring at a screen or whose ears are covered.

4 Fear is another reason. Some people worry that a stranger will think they are strange, boring or annoying. Others are naturally shy and find small talk uncomfortable. Of course, not every person wants to chat, and we should respect that. A woman travelling alone at night may feel very different from someone waiting in a sunny café with friends.

5 Still, research discussed in the article suggests that people sometimes underestimate how enjoyable a conversation with a stranger might be. A simple question about a delayed train or a friendly comment about a dog can break the ice. The talk does not need to be deep. Small moments of kindness can brighten an ordinary day and remind us that other people have interesting lives.

6 Nobody needs to talk to every stranger they meet. Sometimes silence is exactly what we want. But perhaps we can leave a little room for friendly contact. Put your phone away for a minute, smile or say something simple when the moment feels right. If the other person responds, you might end up having a lovely conversation. If not, that's fine too. The art of talking to strangers begins with noticing that they are there.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. People sometimes expect a conversation with a stranger to be less enjoyable than it really is. (T) (F) (NG)
2. Phones and headphones can make it harder to start a conversation. (T) (F) (NG)
3. Most people in cities say they would like more conversations with strangers. (T) (F) (NG)
4. The two passengers on the train talk to each other during the journey. (T) (F) (NG)
5. An interesting conversation with a stranger has to be a deep one. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

brighten	chat	exchange	greet	remind	respect	underestimate

1. At the end of the year, the students _____ cards with their classmates.
2. You don't have to agree with her, but you should _____ her opinion.
3. A few fresh flowers can _____ a dull, grey room.
4. Many students _____ how long a big project takes.
5. Please _____ me to buy milk on the way home.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. An article in the Guardian _____ whether we are forgetting how to talk to strangers. **(ASK)**
2. The writer described _____ people in ordinary places. **(MEET)**
3. It is harder to say hello to someone who _____ at a screen. **(STARE)**
4. Research _____ in the article suggests that short conversations can be pleasant. **(DISCUSS)**
5. Nobody _____ to talk to every stranger they meet. **(NEED)**

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some adjectives and verbs always take one fixed preposition. Learn the pair together, such as afraid of.

about	at	from	in	of	on	to

1. Some people are afraid _____ starting a conversation with someone new.
2. Shy people are often worried _____ saying the wrong thing.
3. Are you interested _____ meeting new people on your journey?
4. Whether we talk or not can depend _____ how safe we feel.
5. My brother is very good _____ making small talk with anyone.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. How can someone invite a conversation without making the other person feel trapped?
2. Would a place feel friendlier if more people said hello?
3. Which matters more for a good conversation: having something in common or being curious?

9 Role-play: a quiet journey

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the chatty colleague

You and your colleague take the same train to work every morning. You find the journey boring in silence. Ask your colleague to talk more, and explain why it matters to you.

Student B · the quiet colleague

You like to read or listen to music on the train, and you need a quiet start to the day. Explain what you need, but try to agree a plan that is fair for both of you.

Useful phrases

Do you mind if we chat for a bit?

I'd rather keep the journey quiet, if that's okay.

I find the trip boring when we don't talk.

How about we talk on the way home instead?

That's fair, I didn't realise you felt that way.

Let's try it for a week and see how it goes.

Afterwards, tell the class: what plan did you agree, and was it fair for both people?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 C · 3 D · 4 F · 5 E · 6 G · 7 A · 8 B

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 T · 3 NG · 4 F · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 exchange · 2 respect · 3 brighten · 4 underestimate · 5 remind

6 Verb forms

1 asked · 2 meeting · 3 is staring · 4 discussed · 5 needs

7 Language focus

1 of · 2 about · 3 in · 4 on · 5 at

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