NEWS LESSON

The Conversations We No Longer Start



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	**encounters**	☐	A	important or full of value
2	**interruption**	☐	B	something that stops what you are doing for a short time
3	**assumptions**	☐	C	things you believe are true without checking
4	**loneliness**	☐	D	the sad feeling of having no one to talk to
5	**privacy**	☐	E	meetings that happen by chance
6	**entertainment**	☐	F	films, music, games and other things people enjoy
7	**meaningful**	☐	G	a slow fall in number or quality
8	**decline**	☐	H	being alone, away from other people's attention

3 Read

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

Phones and headphones make silence easy. Yet research suggests we expect a chat with a stranger to go far worse than it actually does.

1 You board a train, sit beside another passenger and immediately reach for your phone. They put on headphones. For the next hour, the two of you travel through the same landscape without exchanging a word. There is nothing particularly rude about this; it is simply how many journeys work now. Yet a Guardian article published in February 2026 asked whether our increasingly private routines are costing us something valuable: the ability to strike up ordinary conversations with people we have never met. The article explored that concern; it did not measure a decline across everyone's daily life.

2 The writer described brief encounters that turned out to be unexpectedly meaningful, including a conversation with an older passenger and a friendly exchange with someone working in a café. These moments were not dramatic, but that was precisely the point. A small conversation can make an anonymous public place feel more human. It may also remind us that other people have stories we would never come across through the familiar circles of our own social media accounts.

3 There are several reasons we keep to ourselves. Smartphones offer endless entertainment, while headphones create a convenient barrier against interruption. Many people are also afraid of looking foolish or annoying someone who wants to be left alone. After the pandemic, some became less comfortable with casual social contact. For shy people, small talk can feel like an unnecessary test rather than a pleasant opportunity. And safety matters: no one should feel obliged to speak with someone whose attention is unwanted.

4 Nevertheless, psychological research discussed in the article suggests that we sometimes expect conversations with strangers to go worse than they actually do. A comment about the weather or a question about a delayed bus can break the ice without demanding a personal story. If the other person smiles and carries on, a conversation may develop naturally. If they give short answers and look away, it is perfectly reasonable to let the exchange end.

5 Talking to strangers also has a social value beyond making an individual day more enjoyable. Casual encounters bring people from different ages, professions and backgrounds into contact. Without them, it becomes easier to imagine that everybody outside our immediate circle is somehow unfamiliar or unapproachable. A friendly chat will not solve loneliness or political division, but it can challenge small assumptions we did not realise we held.

6 Perhaps the answer is not to insist that everyone becomes outgoing. Privacy, silence and personal space remain important. Instead, we could learn to read the room and recognise when a relaxed conversation might be welcome. Put away the phone for a moment, thank someone properly or ask a simple question without expecting anything in return. The aim is not to collect new friends on every journey. It is to remember that everyday life can include moments of connection that no app has arranged for us.

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. The writer's encounters included a conversation with an older passenger. T F NG
2. Train companies have started campaigns encouraging passengers to talk. T F NG
3. Everybody should become more outgoing. T F NG
4. People may expect a chat with a stranger to be worse than it turns out to be. T F NG
5. According to the article, a friendly chat will solve political division. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

anonymous	casual	foolish	obliged	outgoing	reserved	unwanted	withdrawn

1. Nobody should feel _____ to answer personal questions from a stranger.
2. He wore jeans and a T-shirt because the dinner was a _____ occasion.
3. The prize was donated by an _____ businessman who did not want his name known.
4. It would be _____ to travel across the city without checking the train times.
5. Our new colleague is cheerful and _____ , so she soon knew everyone in the office.
6. Her _____ advice annoyed him because he had not asked for it.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time the train arrived, the two passengers _____ together for an hour. (TRAVEL)
2. If people put their phones away, strangers _____ to each other more often. (TALK)
3. The Guardian article _____ in February 2026. (PUBLISH)
4. Since she moved to the city, she _____ more confident with strangers. (BECOME)
5. While the train _____ at the platform, a stranger asked me the time. (WAIT)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Many verbs and adjectives need one fixed preposition, and a different preposition can change the meaning. Learn each pair as a chunk.

about for from of on to with

1. Spending a few minutes chatting can contribute _____ a more positive mood.
2. Shy people often apologise _____ interrupting others.
3. People of all ages can benefit _____ a friendly chat.
4. Nobody should insist _____ talking to a person who wants silence.
5. Many people are anxious _____ approaching strangers.

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

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 NG · 3 F · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 obliged · 2 casual · 3 anonymous · 4 foolish · 5 outgoing · 6 unwanted

6 Verb forms

1 had travelled · 2 would talk · 3 was published · 4 has become · 5 was waiting

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 for · 3 from · 4 on · 5 about

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