

PATRICK KING

THE ART OF

BE CLEVER, BE QUICK, BE INTERESTING

WITTY

CAPTIVATING CONVERSATION

BANTER

The Art of Witty Banter: Techniques to Be Clever, Be Quick, Be Interesting – Have Captivating Conversation

By Patrick King, Social Interaction Specialist at
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Introduction

When I was growing up, my favorite television show wasn't one of the conventional cartoons like *G.I. Joe* or *X-Men*.

People tend to assume I had a very sad childhood when I say this, but it's not that I was deprived of cartoons by draconian parents.

Cartoons were typically aired early on weekend mornings, which meant that you had to go to bed early the night before to get up in time for the shows. I always overslept, so I never saw the cartoons.

Why was I oversleeping?

I overslept because I always stayed up late to watch David Letterman, the host of *The Late Show with David Letterman* for over 30 years.

I didn't know it at the time, but of all the late night television hosts, David Letterman was one of the most legendary. I just watched because I thought

his Top Ten Lists were funny in an adult way that I couldn't quite understand. He would talk about economics, and though I didn't quite grasp the specifics, I knew the general feeling he was trying to convey and would laugh when my older brother laughed.

It wasn't until I grew older that I started to really notice the subtle tactics he used to energize boring guests and turn dull segments in funny ones.

In particular, it was his ability to banter wittily with his band leader, guests, and even himself in a self-deferential way that was the engine of the show. Letterman was like *Teflon* – he was so smooth and slick, he could always go with the flow, nothing ever seemed to faze him, and he was never without a witty quip or two.

It seemed as if he could joke about anything and his jokes never seemed forced or out of place.

It didn't work as well for me when I tried emulating Letterman the next day at school, but it did get me thinking about what constituted a person who was conversationally so slick and smooth they were Teflon.

How can you not just always have something to say, but have something witty and clever to say? Witty banter is many things at once – disarming, charming, intelligent, and quick. It almost sounds impossible when you think about the feelings it imparts to others.

But it's a skill just like pitching a baseball or underwater basket weaving. Once you know the patterns and root actions, you can practice and improve them.

And once you practice enough, they become instinct and habit that come easily to you because they are second nature.

This book is going to be one of your best tools for becoming adept at the kind of witty banter you've always wanted to master.

You'll learn what makes a statement clever, how to deliver it quickly, and how it all comes together to make you someone of note and worth talking to.

Chapter 1. HPM, SBR, meet EDR

For those of you who have a passing familiarity with any of my books, one of my favorite topics to cover is HPM, and more recently, SBR.

What are these strange acronyms?

Put simply, they are six distinct types of responses you can use for practically any topic that arises in a conversation. HPM and SBR are quite helpful because if you are stumped or you can see an awkward silence creeping around the corner, you can essentially use HPM and SBR as ice breaking cue cards to find topics to talk about, and ways to respond to people.

It also makes sense to refer to them as a “plug and playable” because all you need to do is plug in one of these responses and bingo – it just works.

The right responses can go a long way to jump-start and add new life to your conversations. It doesn't matter how good a conversationalist you are because awkward silences are always lurking around the corner. Using HPM

and SBR, you can always find a way to work around these impending conversation killers.

Here's a quick review for those of you that are new to HPM and SBR and wondering when I'm going to stop talking in annoying acronyms and codes.

HPM

HPM stands for History, Philosophy, and Metaphor.

This means in response to a question or statement directed at you, you reply with your own statement that evokes History, Philosophy, or a Metaphor.

HPM tends to draw on your memories, experiences, and opinions, which is a bit different from the other acronyms you'll be learning about in this chapter. It's more internal and personal, while others are more external and in the moment.

History means you reply with your personal experience regarding a topic. For example, if someone tells you a story about skiing, this is a prompt for you to reply with:

- That reminds me of the last time I skied...
- That's just like the first time I skied as a child...
- What a coincidence, my mother's friend went skiing last week and had a blast...

Philosophy, on the other hand, involves your personal stance, take, or opinion on a specific topic. For example, if someone tells you that same rousing story about skiing, this is a prompt for you to reply with:

- I've always loved skiing because...

- I've hated skiing ever since...
- Skiing is so fun! My favorite hobby.
- I don't know how I feel about skiing. On one hand...

Metaphor, on the other hand, involves what the conversation topic reminds you of. If you're hearing the same story about skiing for the third time in the same day, you might not want to talk about it again. Thus, this is a prompt for you to subtly change the topic to something that's related or ... not so related. This works as long as you can preface it with some sort of transition.

- That reminds me of ...
- That's just the opposite of snowboarding, isn't it?
- That makes me think of...
- Isn't that similar to...

Keep in mind that HPM is more focused on you, what you think, and what your experiences are. It really has nothing to do with the other person, it has to do with what the topic at hand evokes from you – a memory, an opinion or feeling, or a jumping off point from which to change the subject.

Seems pretty easy and intuitive, right? The point is that everyone has these things – everyone has personal stories and experiences, everyone has opinions and stances on subjects, and everyone can envision how one topic is related to or reminiscent of another topic. It's just that we are lazy conversationalists that don't realize the broad scope of what's available for us to talk about.

Here's a quick review on SBR, which you'll find is similar but probably easier to use quickly on your feet than HPM. It's external, which means everything that you need to continue any conversational topic is right there in front of you. You'll see what I mean.

SBR

SBR stands for Specific, Broad, and Related. To any statement or question directed to you, you can reply with one of these types of statements.

Specific involves asking targeted questions regarding the topic you're talking about. This kind of response allows you to drag the conversation forward or take it deeper by pulling out fine details. Suppose you want to get into the nitty-gritty of what's being talked about. Let's take the skiing story example we used earlier:

- What kind of slopes did you go down?
- How was the snow?
- How many times have you skied recently?

Broad means you ask broad questions about the topic. These create context and are great springboards to sub-topics. This enables the conversation to proceed smoothly from the main topic to a sub-topic and all the way to a completely new topic. Get the background and the general lay of the land here.

- Where was this?
- Who did you go with?
- When was this?
- How did you drive there?

Finally, Related refers to asking about something that is either directly or broadly related to the subject of your conversation. The great thing about "related" is that it allows you to explore issues tangential to the topic of your conversation.

- I love when it's snowing outside.

- I love taking weekend trips.
- Isn't it great, getting physically active as much as possible?

The unifying characteristic of the SBR conversation strategy is that it focuses primarily on the topics you're talking about. That is, you're taking the exact topic that's in front of you, digging deeper into it, and essentially letting the other person guide you through questions.

So that was a fairly direct and straightforward set of rules, right? Now you have six responses you can pop into just about any situation, almost as if you're reading off of cue cards and can just say "Oh, hmm... philosophy... well, the way I feel about that is...."

After a bit of brainstorming and paying attention to the fact that everyone's brain works a little bit differently, and different cues will prompt different things for people, I developed three more frameworks that are usable in just about any situation – EDR.

Using these nine frameworks together adds a whole lot of engagement, personalization, depth, and intrigue to a conversation that might otherwise have begun and ended at "Hey, how was your weekend?"

EDR

EDR is the last part of the nine frameworks that you can use to answer just about anything. It straddles HPM and SBR – you can use what's in front of you, but it's even better if you draw internally and speak about your own thoughts and opinions.

EDR stands for Emotion, Detail, and Restatements.

E (emotion) means when you respond to a statement made in conversation you state someone else's emotion or emotional state.

You mention what you believe their emotional response is. For example, "It seems like you're really excited about that." If it's not 100% apparent and clear to you what the other person's emotional state is, you can make a statement summing up an assumption to see whether you're right or not. You don't have to be correct, the point is that whether you are or not, they will correct you and automatically explain their actual feelings.

"I went skiing last weekend!"

"You sound really excited about that."

If you were wrong... "Actually, I'm not. Here's why..."

If you were right... "Totally, it's very thrilling to be on the slopes."

Think of this like being a very open minded counselor who just wants to talk about other people's feelings. When you state someone's emotions, you appear to be very in tune with them and engaged in their well-being.

To emphasize, what makes this approach particularly effective is that you talk about other people's emotions, not yours.

As I've mentioned in my previous books, people like to be the center of attention. The more attention you give them, the more they're likely to talk. With E, you allow them to take the limelight and express their emotions. People appreciate this because most people like to feel they matter, and they aren't often given a chance to feel that way.

D (detail) means when you respond to a topic, you do so by asking for details and how they relate to the person with whom you're speaking. This is similar

to the S in SBR.

You get the details and you also get an overview of how it impacts them. For example, the key journalistic "5 Ws" work perfectly here. The 5 Ws, just in case you don't know, are who, what, where, when, and why. The 5 Ws work perfectly because they allow you to tie in different details to the person with whom you're speaking. Think of yourself as a detective sifting through different clues to solve a mystery.

For example, "When did you start doing that?" "How did that make you feel?" and so on.

R (restatements) means when you respond to a topic, you do so by restating or summarizing what the other person said and then throw it back at them.

This is very effective because it lets the person you're speaking with know loud and clear that you're paying attention to them. You're paying so much attention that you can't get their words out of your mouth!

As I mentioned above, people like to feel they matter. What better way to show that appreciation than simply letting them know, in clear terms, that you were listening to what they had to say and you want confirmation of your understanding of what they've said.

When you restate what they say, you are essentially validating them twice. First, the simple act of summarizing what they said already validates them. It lets them know that you were listening to them. On top of that, you ask for their permission or confirmation to see if you've understood them correctly. This creates a tremendous sense of comfort and validation for the other person.

"I went skiing in the mountains last weekend."

“So you went skiing in the *mountains* last weekend?”

“So you went *skiing* in the mountains last weekend?”

“So you went skiing in the mountains *last weekend*?”

This prompts them to elaborate on their statement without your having to say much. All you did was say the exact same thing back to them, with a slight emphasis on a different word to indicate that you are curious and want clarification on an aspect of what they’ve said. Each of these three versions is a distinctly different assertion or question, but you are using their exact words.

Think of this like a psychologist prompting a patient for deeper and more personal discoveries and insights.

By using EDR in addition to HMP and SBR, you now have nine ways to respond to people about anything.

Which of the nine feel easy and natural to you and which feel difficult?

Pay careful attention, because as previously noted, some of these are more about your own thoughts and internal workings, and others are about the situation in front of you and the other person. So if you skew too much in one direction, it can mean you’re either a conversational narcissist or someone who provides no value or substance.

Chain them together and with these nine techniques you will pretty much never run out of things to talk about.

Chapter 2. Never Speak in Absolutes

Notice the irony in the chapter title?

I used the word “never” to warn against using the word “never.”

One of the most common ways to kill any kind of conversation, regardless of how interesting the topic might be, is when one of the people talking reduces their questions to absolutes.

I know this because I was once set upon with absolute questions by a cousin at a family. He was eight at the time, so it was excusable, but I’ll never forget how it felt when someone kept talking to me in absolutes.

He asked me what my favorite ice cream flavor in the entire world was. I thought for a while and said rocky road. He started howling that I had horrible taste and demanding to know how I could forget Neapolitan. It was a tortuous conversation full of long pauses and subsequent judgment of my tastes and opinions.

Years later, he would discover that he was lactose intolerant, so the joke is on him.

Of course, there are more common absolute questions that you'll come across in your daily life. The point is that they are incredibly difficult to answer off the cuff, and open you to unnecessary internal debate and judgment from others.

They usually appear very innocent.

For example, "What's your number one favorite movie of all time?" That's a pretty innocuous question on its face, but it is an absolute question. It puts people on the spot and usually leads them to answer with, "Oh, I'm not sure, let me think about that," then never finish their thought.

"What's your favorite band?"

"I don't know, let me think about that."

Or, "Hmm...I'm not sure. What's yours?"

The problem here is that you're asking for an absolute answer. When you do that, you give the other person no wiggle room and, worse, you've given them the difficult task of coming up with a definitive answer to your question. *What is my favorite movie?*

Your question will fail, the conversation will stall, and you may never get back on track.

Most people like to tell the truth, and if they are tasked with something that requires them to really dig deep and come up with an honest answer to an absolute question, it just takes too much work. About 1% of people will have

these things on the tip of their tongues for whatever reason, but the rest won't know how to respond.

The bottom line: using absolute statements, answers, and questions makes conversation difficult for people and leads to premature death. (Of the conversation, not the people involved.)

One primary rule of thumb for conversation is to make it easy for the other person, which of course makes it easy for you. If you can get people engaged and interested with topics they can easily converse about, then you've just created a great situation for yourself.

Moreover, it's obvious that no one wants to carry the burden of a conversation. No one wants to fill in all the blanks, prevent all the silences, and direct the entire conversation. If your line of questioning ends up putting the burden on the other person as if it were a job interview, that other person is either going to disengage quickly, or bounce everything back to you with a "What about you?" response. Then you're going to have to deal with the mess you've created.

When you ask somebody "What's your absolute favorite (fill in the blank)?" you're putting them on the spot. You're really asking them to dig down and think, and worse, to commit to something they may not have strong feelings about. This might be fine once or twice, but imagine how they will feel after a while if every question you ask is along similar lines.

They will start to feel as if they're at a job interview or in an interrogation instead of a pleasant social interaction. They will feel as if they're being put in a position of carrying the burden of the conversation – a responsibility they don't particularly want. It's very tiring.

So what's the solution here? Let's see how we can modify those absolute questions into questions that are far easier to answer and won't stymie people or stall the exchange.

Here's a common absolute question: What's your favorite movie?

Put boundaries around the question and make it non-absolute and people will be able to answer the question far more easily.

Transform this question into:

What are your top few movies?

Or

What are some good movies you've seen recently?

Or

Any comedy movies you consider pretty decent and can recommend?

By doing this, you're not tying somebody into an absolute commitment or an absolute statement. There are several qualifiers here based on number or time, and when people don't feel pressured to come up with an absolute answer, they can relax and answer just about anything.

Each qualifier and boundary makes the question easier (and more fun) for them to answer.

If you were to say, "I think *Forrest Gump* is the greatest movie of all time," you might spark an argument or judgment about your taste. But if instead you said, "I saw *Forrest Gump* recently and it was pretty good," it's unlikely

anyone will argue with you unless they truly hate Tom Hanks and feel-good movies.

They're not debating your taste or seeing an opportunity for judgment.

If they do disagree, it doesn't matter to you because they haven't told you that your taste is terrible. They just disagree on something that is a "decent" movie to you, which neither party will find offensive. In this way, it also opens up dialogue and allows people to say what they want, such as they disagree with you and why! That's how conversations take off.

A good conversationalist's talent is making sure the other person is comfortable. One crucial way to ensure the other person's comfort is to be conscientious about making it easier for the other side to answer.

Remember, you're not really looking for a right or wrong answer. You're just looking to move the conversation along.

Who knows what the best movie is? I mean *the* best is totally subjective because what may be the best for you might turn out to be a flat out horrible bore to someone else. Keep your eyes on your overall objective for the conversation, which is to create a mutual environment of comfort and enjoyment.

The last part of this chapter is to make sure that *you* have an answer to the questions you're asking.

If you are going to ask an absolute question, then you'd better have a good answer to it.

A lot of people who ask difficult questions are often caught flat footed when the difficult question is bounced back to them. And actually, you should have