

Better Conversations Week Lesson Plan: Family Feast Starters

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Objective

Students will be able to:

1. Identify the difference between "closed" and "open-ended" questions.
2. Develop a list of thoughtful, open-ended conversation starters appropriate for multi-generational family gatherings.
3. Practice using the "follow-up" technique to sustain a conversation.

Duration

45-60 minutes

Materials

- Whiteboard or projector
 - Handout/worksheet (see activity sections)
 - Markers or pens
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Phase 1: The Anatomy of a Good Question (15 minutes)

1. Introduction (5 min)

- **Hook:** Ask students to brainstorm common small talk questions they hear: "How are you?" "Did you finish your homework?" "What are you thankful for?"
- **Discussion:** Point out that these often lead to one-word answers and awkward silences. Explain that a **good conversation starter** is like a key that unlocks a longer, more interesting story.

2. Open vs. Closed Questions (10 min)

- **Definition:** Define and give examples of:
 - **Closed Questions:** Get a single piece of information (Yes/No, a number, a name).
Example: "Did you drive far to get here?"
 - **Open-Ended Questions:** Invite a long, detailed, and reflective answer. They often start with "How," "Why," or "Tell me about..." *Example: "What was the most memorable part of your drive here?"*
- **Activity: The Transformation:** Provide students with a list of closed Thanksgiving-related questions and challenge them to rewrite them as open-ended questions.

Closed Question (One-Word Answer)

Did you like the turkey?

Open-Ended Transformation (Story-Worthy)

How does this dish compare to your favorite Thanksgiving meal

Closed Question (One-Word Answer)

Do you have to work tomorrow?

Is it cold where you live?

Open-Ended Transformation (Story-Worthy)

from childhood?

Tell me about the most interesting project you're currently working on.

What do you enjoy doing most when the weather turns cold?

Phase 2: Generating Great Starters (20 minutes)

3. Categories for Conversation (5 min)

Explain that the best questions avoid controversial topics (politics, money, heavy personal history) and focus on universal, safe, and positive themes. Introduce three key categories:

1. **Hopes & Dreams:** Future-focused, aspirational.
2. **Memories & Stories:** Past-focused, reflective.
3. **Appreciation & Favorites:** Present-focused, personal preference.

4. Brainstorming Activity (15 min)

- Have students work individually or in small groups to generate at least **three conversation starters** for each category.
- *Teacher Tip:* Encourage students to think about different age groups (grandparents, cousins, aunts/uncles).

Category

Conversation Starters

Hopes & Dreams

- * "What is one new skill or hobby you're hoping to learn in the next year?"*
- * "If you could take any trip in the world next year, where would you go?"*

Memories & Stories

- * "**Tell me about** the first pet you ever had."*
- * "**What** is a food or meal that you remember making with your parents or grandparents?"*

Appreciation & Favorites

- * "**Who** is one person in your life who has taught you a valuable life lesson?"*
 - * "**What** is the strangest or funniest gift you've ever received?"*
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Phase 3: Conversation Sustainers (10 minutes)

5. The Three-Part Rule (The "Follow-Up")

Explain that an open-ended question starts the conversation, but **follow-up statements/questions** keep it going.

- **Rule:** For every question you ask, listen for a detail you can use to ask a second, related question.
- **Example Dialogue:**

- **Student:** "What is one new skill you're hoping to learn next year?" (Starter)
- **Aunt:** "I want to learn how to bake sourdough bread."
- **Student:** "Wow, that's really specific! **What made you decide on sourdough instead of something else?**" (Follow-up)
- **Aunt:** "Well, it seems like a big challenge, and I love a good challenge!"
- **Student:** "I get that! **What's the biggest challenge you think you'll face?**" (Second Follow-up)

6. Role-Playing Practice (5 min)

- Pair students up. Have them use one of their generated conversation starters and practice having a 60-second conversation where they **must** use at least two follow-up questions.
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★ Wrap-Up and Homework (5 minutes)

- **Summary:** Review the key concepts: **Open-Ended, Categories, and Follow-Up.**
 - **Actionable Homework:** Students must select their **Top 5 Conversation Starters** (their favorites) and write them neatly on a small card (the "Conversation Cue Card"). Their homework is to successfully use at least three of these starters with a family member over the Thanksgiving break and be prepared to report on the resulting story when they return.
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Three Conversation Starter Prompts

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Prompt 1: The Unexpected Skill

This prompt focuses on revealing surprising talents or accomplishments, which often leads to fascinating stories.

Starter Prompt

"What is one unexpected thing you learned how to do or build that might surprise me?"

Focus

Skills, Hobbies, Achievements

Follow-Up Questions

1. "That's amazing! How did you initially get interested in learning about [mention the specific skill/topic they named]?"

2. "Was there ever a time when you used that skill in a completely unexpected or funny way?"

Why it works

Connects the skill to the *origin story*, revealing motivation and background.

Shifts the focus from the process to a specific, engaging *anecdote*.

Prompt 2: The Nostalgic Memory

This prompt invites reflection on their past, which is particularly great for older relatives and can generate multi-generational interest.

Starter Prompt

"Tell me about a time when you saw or experienced something that felt like it was truly 'ahead of its time'?"

Focus

History, Technology, Culture, Change

Follow-Up Questions

1. "How did people around you react to it back then? Did everyone think it was as important as you did?"

2. "If you could bring that one idea or experience forward in time, how do you think it would change things today?"

Why it works

Gauges the cultural context and collective *reaction* to the event.

Encourages playful, *hypothetical thinking* and deeper analysis.

Prompt 3: The Best Advice

This prompt is universally relevant and provides an opportunity for the speaker to share personal wisdom and life lessons.

Starter Prompt

"What is one piece of advice you've received that you dismissed at first, but later realized was completely true?"

Focus

Wisdom, Personal Growth, Regret/Insight

Follow-Up Questions

1. "What was the exact moment or situation that made you realize that advice was actually correct?"

2. "If you could send a piece of advice back to your younger self right now, what would it be?"

Why it works

Pinpoints the critical *turning point* or moment of revelation.

Elicits a different, *personally tailored lesson* that may be less conventional.