# Preparing topics makes conversations better

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## Background

Humans spend a lot of time talking to other humans. Conversations are ubiquitous, consequential (first dates, interviews), and challenging. One thing that is especially hard is topic selection: choosing what to say on the fly. We propose a simple strategy to improve conversations: preparing possible topics beforehand.

## Pilot Study: People Don't Prepare Topics Naturally

### How do you prepare for conversations?



- Think about person — 44%
- Plan what to wear — 27%
- Research person online — 23%
- Write down topics — 18%

More people plan what to wear (27%) than write down topics (18%, p <.001)

### Why don't you prepare?



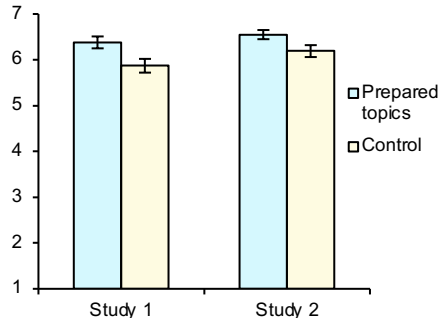Distracting 13%  Already friends; unnecessary 53%  Don't want to feel forced 34%

## Study 1A-B (causal): Preparing topics makes conversations with close others more enjoyable

**Participants:** recruited in close pairs (friends, roommates, romantic partners)
**2 conditions:** topic preparation v. control
**DV:** conversational enjoyment



- Prepared topics
- Control

Study 1: N= 74, t(68) = 1.8, $p = .050$
Study 2: N= 110, t(106) = 2.0, p < 0.01

Why? People felt more **confident** and less **anxious** when they prepared topics.

The intervention is counterintuitive (unlikely to learn it without trying it): In retrospect, participants in treatment condition (88%) believed topic prep *increased* enjoyment, while those in control condition (80%) believed preparing would have *decreased* enjoyment, $X^2(1, N = 110) = 29.60$, $p < .001$.

## Study 2 (correlational): Relying on prepared topics predicts conversation enjoyment among MBAs

**Participants:** 44 MBA students, 148 round-robin conversations
**IV:** all students prepped topics, we used natural variance in their *raising* them
**DV:** conversational enjoyment



Students who relied more on their prepared topics enjoyed the conversations significantly more ($b = .07$, $p = .017$)

## Future Directions & Boundary Conditions

Does topic prep change natural language features of the conversation?
Can it similarly help strangers?
Do you have to write the topics down?
Does the effect replicate in the workplace?