

MPRnews

**talking
sense**

Have hard political
conversations, better.

MPRNEWS.ORG/TALKINGSENSE



INTRODUCTION

Do conversations at family gatherings get tense or combative?
Have you stopped talking to a neighbor or cousin because of political differences?

We're here to help! This election year, MPR News is partnering with the organization [Braver Angels](#) to help Minnesotans have hard political conversations, better. The goal? To identify common ground and narrow rifts that have emerged in today's highly polarized world.

Do you want to have a more productive, less-heated conversation with someone you disagree with? This e-book was created to help you think through strategies that will help you engage in difficult discussions—and how to gracefully exit conversations when necessary.

ABOUT TALKING SENSE

MPR News and Braver Angels have teamed up this election season to bring you Talking Sense, an online and in-person platform to help you have difficult conversations, despite political differences. An interactive version of this guide is available at talkingsense.mprnews.org.

Our Methodology

Talking Sense is rooted in techniques commonly found in family and marriage therapy. They involve accepting others as they are while being flexible and effective in how we communicate with them.

Our Mission

MPR News and Braver Angels share a common mission: to foster meaningful connection and conversation among Minnesotans who differ politically. We believe a diversity of perspectives enriches our communities and that civic engagement strengthens our country.

MPR News

Minnesota Public Radio has been providing trustworthy, fact-based news to Minnesotans for more than 50 years via MPR News. With reporters around the state, we report stories that reflect the communities we live and work in. Talking Sense builds on our long history of providing thorough political coverage with a twist — one aimed at helping people preserve relationships during a contentious election year.

Braver Angels

Braver Angels is a national nonprofit founded in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election with a mission to bridge the partisan divide and depolarize America. Its leadership is half “red” and half “blue.” Braver Angels has done thousands of workshops across the country, most of them developed in Minnesota. Some workshops bring people together in conversation while others teach skills for communicating across the political divide. A Braver Angels initiative in Minnesota for 2024 is “Reduce the Rancor, Minnesota,” which brings together many organizational partners, including MPR News, in an effort to head off polarization during this election year.

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COMMUNICATION STYLES

Who am I talking to?

Your next hard conversation will go better if you prepare. It helps to know who you're talking to and how they will react. Here are four archetypes that Braver Angels uses in its Families and Politics workshop.



The Gladiator

The Gladiator wants to convince you they're right. Having a good conversation with a Gladiator is all about timing, so make sure you're in the right frame of mind. Be prepared to listen and ask follow-up questions. It helps to lead with areas of agreement, too. Settle for brief — but constructive — exchanges the first few times you talk, with the hope of longer conversations in the future.

"It's the communication style that basically talks to win," said Juan Carlos Téllez, a professor of Intercultural Studies at the University of Northwestern, St. Paul.



The Defender

The Defender will escalate arguments by misrepresenting your positions. Disarm them by using "I" statements, offer context for your reasoning and use personal stories to make your point. It helps to acknowledge their perspective, too. If the Defender continues to criticize you, move on to another topic.

Psychotherapist Dr. Corey Yeager says to avoid getting defensive with a defender. And, he notes, it's good to have an exit strategy.

He likened the conversation to a pot that's overheating on a stove. Sometimes you need a handle on the pot "so you can move it off the heat."



The Peacekeeper

A Peacekeeper will try to stop political conversations in an effort to make people feel comfortable. You can keep them engaged by calmly reassuring them that it's possible to have a respectful conversation.

And if the timing isn't right, that's ok. Pick things up again at a later date.



The Sniper

The Sniper will make snarky remarks about your politics or worldview, often in front of others. If experience tells you that they are looking for a fight, the basic strategy is to not take the bait.

If you decide to talk with the Sniper, do so privately when there is less risk of defensiveness and side-taking.

Watch videos of each conversation style at mprnews.org/talkingsense

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

How often do you find yourself thinking about “those people” on the other side of the political spectrum? Maybe you think they’re just ignorant, self-serving or foolishly following bad leaders.

We all tend to do this, no matter where we fall on the political spectrum. But before you can constructively talk with people you disagree with, you must examine your own stereotypes about the millions of people who see things differently about politics.

Challenge your stereotypes

Stereotypes are how we oversimplify and dismiss members of groups we are not a part of. If you’re liberal, the next time you find yourself assuming that because your cousin is conservative they are racist and homophobic, you can counter your own thinking. If you are conservative, you might assume your liberal in-law hates America or just wants to grow the government.

We contain multitudes

Consider that the other side is more varied and more complicated in their views than current rhetoric in the media would have you believe.

Step outside your comfort zone:

Read authors and listen to podcasts that represent the best thinking of the other side.

Consider life experiences: Understand that life experiences shape political views — both yours and those you disagree with.

Read news coverage related to Talking Sense at mprnews.org/talkingsense

Make depolarizing distinctions

People aren’t positions: You can believe a viewpoint is wrong without thinking everyone who holds it is stupid.

Policies aren’t values: Policies are a means to implement a value. People can differ sharply on policies and have similar goals for their communities.

Inconsistency is not hypocrisy: Inconsistencies between values and behaviors can come from blind spots and competing values.

Use depolarizing language

Don’t generalize: Avoid using “they all” and “those Democrats” or “those Republicans” in conversations.

Avoid easy language: Don’t jump quickly to terms like “racist” or “socialist,” which shut down conversations.

Criticize the policy, not motivations:

Just because someone supports stricter climate change policies doesn’t mean they want to over-regulate the economy or over-tax society. Similarly, don’t assume that an objection to affirmative action means someone opposes equal opportunity.

Criticize your own side, too: Point out ways your side falls short and can do better.

TALKING SENSE TOPICS

Let's Talk

Not sure where to start? Pick a topic that often comes up in hard conversations. Each topic gives you tips on how to bring up difficult subjects and find common ground with people who disagree with you.

Abortion

Elections

Climate Change

Policing

Guns



TIPS FOR STARTING A CONVERSATION

Where do I begin?

Sometimes, starting a conversation can be the biggest hurdle to having one. Here are four ways to do it.

Start it yourself

Make a neutral comment about an issue, for instance:

“There have been so many changes made to abortion laws recently, it’s hard to keep track.”

Wait for the other person to respond with their view.

Ask a question

Start with a neutral question like, “Have you been following the court’s most recent decision about abortion?”

When they go first

Acknowledge what the person said and respond with some version of “I hear you on....” or “I get that this is important to you.” Genuinely listen to them. When people feel heard, they are less likely to respond negatively.

Find common ground

Start by acknowledging something you both agree on, for instance

“We’re both scared our kids could get pregnant too early.”

Finding common ground softens people for challenging conversations.

Next, you’ll need to know the conversation style of the person you’re talking to: Gladiator, Defender, Peacekeeper, or Sniper.

Find the descriptions of each conversation style on [page 4](#).

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SPEAKING TO A GLADIATOR ABOUT ABORTION

If you hear them say...

“You say you are for life and against abortion, but you oppose government programs to help children have good lives after they are born. How is that not hypocritical of you?”

Try this...

“I get that this sounds hypocritical to you. Are you open to me explaining how I put those together?”

- Acknowledge what the other person has said and see if they are willing to listen. If not, exit the conversation.

Avoid this...

“Talk about hypocrisy. How can you be against capital punishment for murderers but be okay with killing unborn babies?”

- Firing back charges of hypocrisy never works.

If you hear them say...

“How could you possibly think it’s OK to take another life — especially the life of someone who is completely defenseless?”

Try this...

“I can see we are both really passionate about this. Here’s where I’m coming from...”

- Acknowledge the emotions in play and signal that you’re about to offer a different perspective.

Avoid this...

“OK, so I’m a baby-killer now?”

- Firing back defensively leads to escalation.

If you hear them say...

“You can’t say that you respect women if you don’t believe they have autonomy over their bodies.”

Try this...

“I recognize this is complex and can seem like a contradiction. I can explain how I came to my view if you’re open to hearing it.”

- Use personal stories and see if the other person is willing to listen to you. If not, look for a way to exit the conversation.

Avoid this...

“Autonomy doesn’t give a license to kill babies.”

- Don’t return fire with more fire.

SPEAKING TO A DEFENDER ABOUT ABORTION

If you hear them say...

“What you support is abortion on demand even if the baby is about to be delivered.”

Try this...

“This is very hard to talk about. I want to be very clear on my viewpoint about late-term abortions.”

- Stick to clarifying your view in your own terms, not the terms of the Defender.

Avoid this...

“That’s not what I am saying. Stop putting words in my mouth!”

- In a group it works best to be strong but not reactive. Ask a Defender to talk one-on-one later.

If you hear them say...

“What you’re saying is that you want to traumatize women by forcing them to give birth to non-viable fetuses?”

Try this...

“You and I both care about women. Can I explain how my views are more complicated than that?”

- Point out the commonalities you share, and offer more context for your perspective.

Avoid this...

“You’re making me out to be a monster.”

- Don’t be accusatory. Instead, calmly clarify your position.

If you hear them say...

“So you want anyone to be able to get an abortion whenever they want?”

Try this...

“I feel like you think I believe that abortions should be available with zero restrictions. My views are actually more nuanced than that.”

- Acknowledge where they’re coming from and clarify your views.

Avoid this...

“You’re completely distorting my position.”

- Defensiveness breeds defensiveness.

SPEAKING TO A PEACEKEEPER ABOUT ABORTION

If you hear them say...

“Abortion is like religion and politics. Let’s not talk about it”

Try this...

“I agree that abortion is a tough subject. I think we are handling it OK right now. We can talk about it privately if you like.”

- Acknowledge the concern and see if you can offer a way to continue in a constructive way.

Avoid this...

“You are selling us short if you think we can’t discuss this in a constructive way.”

- Don’t insult a Peacekeeper. It will just aggravate their anxiety.

If you hear them say...

“It’s really impolite to bring this up right now.”

Try this...

“I understand. I’m just really curious about where everyone is on this. But we can talk another time.”

- Sometimes it’s okay to yield to the Peacekeeper. Pick up the conversation with other family members individually later.

Avoid this...

“Sounds like you’re just afraid someone might say something offensive.”

- You are proving why the Peacekeeper feels justified in stopping the conversation!

If you hear them say...

“There’s no need to fight about this.”

Try this...

“I don’t mean to stress you out. I really think we can talk about this without fighting.”

- Acknowledge their distress. Reassure them that conversations don’t need to be fights.

Avoid this...

“I don’t know why we always have to walk on eggshells around you.”

- Dismissing the Peacekeeper’s concerns will only make them more anxious.

SPEAKING TO A SNIPER ABOUT ABORTION

If you hear them say...

“You probably think that Trump never paid for an abortion.”

Try this...

“I don’t recall mentioning Trump. Shall we continue the conversation?”

- This “deflect and keep going” approach tends to stop the Sniper. Point out what the Sniper is doing without responding directly.

Avoid this...

“How do you know what I think about Trump or anyone else?”

- You took the bait.

If you hear them say...

“It’s not your place to police people’s bodies.”

Try this...

“The only thing I’m policing is whether Mom is going to under-bake the pie again.”

- Use humor to diffuse the conversation and try to change the subject. Offer to have a more serious conversation one-on-one.

Avoid this...

“It’s not your place to police my views.”

- Don’t fire back. Now you’ve taken the Sniper’s bait.

If you hear them say...

“What does the family’s Super Feminist think about what the Supreme Court did to Roe v. Wade?”

Try this...

“I prefer the title Super Woman to Super Feminist. And we were talking about the upcoming election, so let’s stay with that.”

- Exaggerate and return to the conversation.

Avoid this...

“I’m proud of being a feminist and I hate what the Court did to abortion rights.”

- Don’t respond as if the Sniper is asking a real question. That’s taking the bait.

TIPS FOR STARTING A CONVERSATION

Where do I begin?

Sometimes, starting a conversation can be the biggest hurdle to having one. Here are four ways to do it.

Start it yourself

Make a neutral comment about an issue, for instance: “Early voting has become really popular. I tried it during the last election, and it was a breeze.” Wait for the other person to respond with their view.

Ask a question

Start with a neutral question like, “Are you planning to vote on Election Day or by absentee ballot?”

When they go first

Acknowledge what the person said and respond with some version of “I hear you on....” or “I get that this is important to you.” Genuinely listen to them. When people feel heard, they are less likely to respond negatively.

Find common ground

Start by acknowledging something you both agree on, for instance: “I think we can both agree that we want our elections to be secure and fair.” Finding common ground softens people for challenging conversations.

Next, you’ll need to know the conversation style of the person you’re talking to:

Gladiator, Defender, Peacekeeper, or Sniper.

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SPEAKING TO A GLADIATOR ABOUT ELECTIONS

If you hear them say...

“You’ve been brainwashed by Donald Trump. Election fraud is fake news.”

Try this...

“I get that you think election fraud concerns are bogus. Lots of people, including me, have some of these concerns. Can I explain mine?”

- Acknowledge what the person said and see if they are open to hearing your views.

Avoid this...

“You know what’s fake news? The Democratic line that election systems are perfectly fine.”

- Don’t make blanket characterizations about political parties. Instead, focus on the issue.

If you hear them say...

Biden and the Democrats stole the 2020 election. And you know it.”

Try this...

“I can see you’re passionate about this, here’s why I feel confident that the 2020 election results were accurate.”

- Cite where your information comes from. Gladiators want to convince you they’re right. If they are unwilling to listen, exit the conversation.

Avoid this...

“Republicans are just blindly following Trump’s lies.”

- Criticize an idea or policy. Don’t stereotype everyone in a particular party.

If you hear them say...

“You election deniers are oblivious to the mountain of evidence that shows Donald Trump did not win the 2020 election.”

Try this...

“I don’t put myself in a camp called ‘election denier.’ Are you interested in my personal views about that election?”

- Resist being labeled and see if the other person is open to hearing your views. If not, end the conversation.

Avoid this...

“So you’re an election expert now? When did that happen?”

- Stay away from sarcastic questions and comments with a Gladiator, even if your loved one uses them.

SPEAKING TO A DEFENDER ABOUT ELECTIONS

If you hear them say...

“I’m sick of hearing Democrats like you say there aren’t big problems with our election system.”

Try this...

“Let me be clear: Our election system isn’t perfect. I think we disagree on what needs to be improved.”

- When a Defender distorts your point, clarify it, and find something to agree with.

Avoid this...

“Stop assuming you know what I think.”

- Avoid getting worked up with a Defender.

If you hear them say...

“Buying into Trump’s lies about the 2020 election is undemocratic. I thought you were patriotic.”

Try this...

“I love this country just as much as you do. I feel like I have the right to raise questions about the 2020 election. Can I explain where I’m coming from?”

- Don’t let a Defender put words in your mouth. Stay calm and clarify.

Avoid this...

“I think it’s you who doesn’t love America.”

- Don’t get defensive with a Defender. It will backfire.

If you hear them say...

“So you’re saying there’s never been a single instance of voter fraud?”

Try this...

“Let me be clear: I’m sure it’s happened. But my view is that it’s not enough to sway a presidential election.”

- When someone exaggerates your view, calmly restate it.

Avoid this...

“You’re completely distorting what I’m saying.”

- Don’t make accusations. If a Defender continues to exaggerate your view, exit the conversation.

SPEAKING TO A PEACEKEEPER ABOUT ELECTIONS

If you hear them say...

“It doesn’t matter who won in 2020. Let’s just focus on other things.”

Try this...

“I’m not here to fight. I’m genuinely curious about everyone’s views here.”

- Acknowledge their feelings and offer reassurance.

Avoid this...

“If you can’t handle this conversation, you don’t have to participate.”

- Don’t be mean to a Peacekeeper who is already anxious.

If you hear them say...

“You know the rules: We don’t talk religion and we don’t talk politics.”

Try this...

“I get it. We can talk about this another time.”

- Table the conversation for a different day.

Avoid this...

“Why are you so afraid to talk about this?”

- Your Peacekeeper will worry you’re trying to start a fight.

If you hear them say...

“I don’t understand why you’re always harping on the last election.”

Try this...

“I think we can have a civil conversation about this.”

- Distinguish between nasty arguments and genuine efforts to understand.

Avoid this...

“I think you’re hiding from this because it makes you uncomfortable.”

- Accusations make Peacekeepers even more anxious.

SPEAKING TO A SNIPER ABOUT ELECTIONS

If you hear them say...

“So where were you on Jan. 6th?”

Try this...

“On a warm, tropical vacation. You?”

- Use humor to disarm a Sniper.
Don't defend yourself.

Avoid this...

“You're making some serious insinuations.
I love this country.”

- Don't take a Sniper's bait.

If you hear them say...

“You're just mad because Joe Biden didn't actually win.”

Try this...

“I'm just mad because the Vikings didn't win this weekend.”

- It's best not to engage with a Sniper if they start conversations this way.

Avoid this...

“I'm not mad, because he did win.”

- Don't get defensive with a Sniper.
You just took their bait.

If you hear them say...

“I bet you think there's a bunch of ballots stashed in a trunk somewhere.”

Try this...

“And your point is....?”

- Put the ball back in the Sniper's court. Chances are they don't have a good point to make.

Avoid this...

“You are being ridiculous.”

- Snipers want to get a rise out of you. Stay cool.

TIPS FOR STARTING A CONVERSATION

Where do I begin?

Sometimes, starting a conversation can be the biggest hurdle to having one. Here are four ways to do it.

Start it yourself

Make a neutral comment about an issue, for instance: “The weather this year has been pretty wild, hasn’t it?” Then wait for the other person to respond with their view.

Ask a question

Start with a neutral question like, “Are you as confused by all these new energy efficiency tax rebates as I am?”

When they go first

Acknowledge what the person said and respond with some version of “I hear you on....” or “I get that this is important to you.” Genuinely listen to them. When people feel heard, they are less likely to respond negatively.

Find common ground

Start by acknowledging something you both agree on, for instance: “We both really want our kids to live in a clean environment.” Finding common ground softens people for challenging conversations.

Next, you’ll need to know the conversation style of the person you’re talking to: Gladiator, Defender, Peacekeeper, or Sniper.

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SPEAKING TO A GLADIATOR ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

If you hear them say...

“You climate change deniers think you’re smarter than every climate scientist on the planet!”

Try this...

“Like you, I think it’s important to pay attention to science. Maybe you and I are listening to different scientists.”

- Find something to agree with and then suggest that you have different sources of information.

Avoid this...

“It’s not real science. You’ve been brainwashed by climate fanatics.”

- You can’t out-Gladiator a true Gladiator. Try something different.

If you hear them say...

“You Democrats are just using climate change to tax us into oblivion.”

Try this...

“How about if we just talk about where I stand and you stand on this issue.”

- Don’t get pulled into defending everyone in your party.

Avoid this...

“Republicans don’t care about people. They only care about the economy!”

- Criticize the idea or the policy, not the motives of people who support the idea or policy.

If you hear them say...

“I can’t believe you’re not taking climate change seriously. We’re talking about our kids’ future, here.”

Try this...

“I’m concerned about our kids’ future, too. I’m just not convinced climate change is as big a threat as you believe. Here’s why...”

- Look for areas of agreement and offer context around your view. Cite where your ideas come from.

Avoid this...

“Are you a scientist now? I don’t know why you think you’re the authority.”

- Stay away from sarcastic questions and comments, even if your loved one uses them.

SPEAKING TO A DEFENDER ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

If you hear them say...

“You’re willing to crush the economy and turn us back to the Stone Age?”

Try this...

“Let me be clear. I’m saying that we can find a way to gradually reduce carbon emissions without ruining the economy.”

- When a Defender distorts your point, calmly clarify it.

Avoid this...

“Stop telling me what I am willing or not willing to do!”

- In a group setting, personal confrontation is risky. Better to stay calm and clarify your position.

If you hear them say...

“You seem to think that the earth has an endless supply of fossil fuel.”

Try this...

“No, I realize that fossil fuel will run out someday. But we don’t know when and it’s the best energy source we have right now.”

- Don’t let a Defender put words in your mouth. Stay calm and clarify.

Avoid this...

“Where did you get the idea that I think fossil fuels will last forever?”

- This is not a real question and will likely elicit a counterattack.

If you hear them say...

“You talk as if making everyone drive electric cars will save the planet.”

Try this...

“To be clear, I think electric cars are one part of the solution. Here’s why...”

- When someone exaggerates your view, calmly restate it.

Avoid this...

“You’re distorting what I am saying!”

- This will lead the other person to double down on their criticism of you and your position.

SPEAKING TO A PEACEKEEPER ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

If you hear them say...

“Why do you keep talking about climate change? It only leads to arguments.”

Try this...

“I know it bothers you when we argue. I’m trying to do it in a more constructive way.”

- Acknowledge their feelings and offer reassurance.

Avoid this...

“These things are important to discuss. Leave the house if you can’t stand it.”

- Don’t be mean to a Peacekeeper who is already anxious.

If you hear them say...

“Let’s not ruin dinner by talking about this.”

Try this...

“Sure, we can table this for another time.”

- Pick up the conversation with other family members individually.

Avoid this...

“We can’t hide from this division any longer.”

- This will make the Peacekeeper fear that you intend to start a big family fight.

If you hear them say...

“You’re always starting arguments about climate politics”

Try this...

“That’s not my intention, so I’ll watch my tone. I just want to have a better understanding of where other people are coming from.”

- Distinguish between nasty arguments and genuine efforts to understand.

Avoid this...

“Why are you so afraid of disagreement?”

- Accusations make Peacekeepers even more uncomfortable.

SPEAKING TO A SNIPER ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

If you hear them say...

“So, where did you get your Ph.D. in climate science?”

Try this...

“I have so many degrees I can’t keep track.”

- Use exaggerated humor when poked by a Sniper. Don’t defend yourself.

Avoid this...

“Actually, I just stay informed — unlike some people I know.”

- Don’t take a Sniper’s bait.

If you hear them say...

“Did I just see the ‘Flat Earth Magazine’ on your coffee table?”

Try this...

“Nice try. Can someone pass me the potatoes?”

- It’s often best to deflect the Sniper’s jabs in a group setting.

Avoid this...

“Your sarcasm is better than your sense of humor.”

- You risk sounding too sensitive to being teased.

If you hear them say...

“Are you giving up light bulbs so you can help save the planet?”

Try this...

“I was going back to kerosene and then realized it’s a fossil fuel. Who knew?”

- Wild exaggerations can often stop a Sniper.

Avoid this...

“Are you kidding? You clearly aren’t taking this seriously.”

- Snipers want you to get on your high horse. Don’t do it.

TIPS FOR STARTING A CONVERSATION

Where do I begin?

Sometimes, starting a conversation can be the biggest hurdle to having one. Here are four ways to do it.

Start it yourself

Make a neutral comment about an issue, for instance: “It’s been so hard to keep track of all the changes at the Minneapolis Police Department since George Floyd.” Wait for the other person to respond with their view.

Ask a question

Start with a neutral question like, “Did you see that story about the shooting that involved a police officer?”

When they go first

Acknowledge what the person said and respond with some version of “I hear you on....” or “I get that this is important to you.” Genuinely listen to them. When people feel heard, they are less likely to respond negatively.

Find common ground

Start by acknowledging something you both agree on, for instance: “We both want to live in safe communities.” Finding common ground softens people for challenging conversations.

Next, you’ll need to know the conversation style of the person you’re talking to: Gladiator, Defender, Peacekeeper, or Sniper.

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SPEAKING TO A GLADIATOR ABOUT POLICING

If you hear them say...

“The problem with crime is criminals, and the answer is more police to stop them. It’s crazy to talk about defunding the police.”

Try this...

“I agree that we need police to protect us. I just think the solution is bigger than just adding more officers.”

- Find something to agree on and then add to it rather than opening with a direct contradiction.

Avoid this...

“The police are not the solution — they’re the problem.”

- Connect on an area of agreement first before voicing your view. Avoid responding to dogmatic statements with your own dogmatic statements.

If you hear them say...

“The ‘bad apple’ argument is nonsense. The whole policing system is rotten.”

Try this...

“I agree that we need to consider bigger changes to policing. I have police friends who would agree with that. The challenge is how to make changes that help and don’t undermine policing.”

- Find areas of agreement and use personal experiences to explain where you see things differently.

Avoid this...

“Well, some of your fellow liberals want to take police off the street.”

- Don’t generalize about other people in their political party.

If you hear them say...

“Can you see that the liberal media has duped you into thinking that all police are bad? I have police officers in my family and they are wonderful people.”

Try this...

“I get that you’re really bothered by how the police are being portrayed by the media, and I agree the coverage leaves out a lot of nuance. I also want to be clear that I think there are good cops and bad cops, just like in any profession.”

- Acknowledge their view, find something to agree with, and then clarify your view. Don’t stay in the conversation if the Gladiator continues their personal attacks.

Avoid this...

“Sounds like you’ve been watching Fox News day and night.”

- Don’t respond arrogantly to arrogance. Things will deteriorate from there.

SPEAKING TO A DEFENDER ABOUT POLICING

If you hear them say...

“Do you think people of color are making it up when they say they are harassed by the police?”

Try this...

“I’m saying that police are called into very difficult situations. I agree that a minority screw up, but police in my family do their job well.”

- Clarify your viewpoint in a non-defensive way.

Avoid this...

“I didn’t mention race at all. Why are you putting words in my mouth?”

- Defenders don’t respond well to defensiveness. Clarify where you stand.

If you hear them say...

“So you’re saying you don’t want there to be any police officers at all?”

Try this...

“It sounds like you think I believe changing policing requires getting rid of law enforcement. For me, it’s about better policing, not no policing, and that might mean police stop doing some things that others can do better.”

- Acknowledge where they’re coming from, and clarify your views.

Avoid this...

“I have no idea why you asked that question.”

- Defensiveness breeds defensiveness. Instead, point out the complexity of the topic as you see it.

If you hear them say...

“Why do you think everyone who supports the police is racist?”

Try this...

“Whoa! Let’s slow down. What I am saying is that I feel the current policing system perpetuates inequalities that I’m not comfortable with. People can disagree with me about this without being racist.”

- Offer some context for your viewpoint.

Avoid this...

“I never said that! Stop distorting my views.”

- Things will escalate if you get defensive with a Defender. Stay calm and clarify your thoughts.

SPEAKING TO A PEACEKEEPER ABOUT POLICING

If you hear them say...

“All this talk about crime is making me nervous.”

Try this...

“I’m sorry we’re stressing you out. We can stop pretty soon.”

- Acknowledge their feelings and be willing to meet them halfway.

Avoid this...

“This is not about you. It’s about people who are afraid of the police because of their life experience.”

- Don’t dismiss the Peacekeeper’s concerns and don’t try to enlighten them.

If you hear them say...

“Why are you always picking on your brother’s point of view?”

Try this...

“I’m really curious about where he’s coming from on that. That’s why I’m asking these questions.”

- Distinguish between nasty arguments and genuine efforts to understand.

Avoid this...

“Why are you defending him all the time?”

- Peacekeepers are already worried about awkward fights. Escalating will put them even more on guard.

If you hear them say...

“I was hoping for a calm dinner without any fighting.”

Try this...

“Sure. We can talk about this another time.”

- Pick up the conversation with other family members individually at a later time.

Avoid this...

“Why are you so afraid of these conversations?”

- Peacekeepers will try to cut off hard conversations to protect people. Reassure them without getting defensive.

SPEAKING TO A SNIPER ABOUT POLICING

If you hear them say...

“What does our family police apologist think about that?”

Try this...

“He thinks he’s going to keep eating this great dinner. Can someone pass the turkey?”

- Deflecting with humor can defuse a Sniper.

Avoid this...

“At least I’m not an apologist for criminals.”

- Never return a Sniper’s put downs.

If you hear them say...

“I wonder if our anti-police family member would call the police or a social worker if there was a burglary.”

Try this...

“Actually, I would wrestle the burglar to the ground myself.”

- Exaggerated humor shows you have not been hooked.

Avoid this...

“I’m so sick of your sarcasm.”

- If you want to confront a Sniper, do so in private.

If you hear them say...

“With the way you’re defending police brutality, someone might mistake you for a racist.”

Try this...

“Is there a point you’re trying to make?”

- Snipers usually aren’t looking for meaningful engagement. Instead put the ball back in their court.

Avoid this...

“How dare you call me a racist!”

- If a Sniper baits you, don’t engage.

TIPS FOR STARTING A CONVERSATION

Where do I begin?

Sometimes, starting a conversation can be the biggest hurdle to having one. Here are four ways to do it.

Start it yourself

Make a neutral comment about an issue, for instance: “It feels like the only news I see on TV these days is bad news about guns.” Wait for the other person to respond with their view.

Ask a question

Start with a neutral question like, “Have you been following the guns debate at the Legislature?”

When they go first

Acknowledge what the person said and respond with some version of “I hear you on....” or “I get that this is important to you.” Genuinely listen to them. When people feel heard, they are less likely to respond negatively.

Find common ground

Start by acknowledging something you both agree on, for instance: “I know both of us want our kids to be safe in schools.” Finding common ground helps prepare people for challenging conversations.

Next, you’ll need to know the conversation style of the person you’re talking to:

Gladiator, Defender, Peacekeeper, or Sniper.

Find the descriptions of each conversation style on [page 4](#).

An interactive version of this tool is available at mprnews.org/talkingsense

SPEAKING TO A GLADIATOR ABOUT GUNS

If you hear them say...

“Guns aren’t the problem. It’s mental health that’s the problem.”

Try this...

“I agree that there are a lot of complicated reasons someone might use a gun on themselves or someone else. I also think limiting gun access is part of the solution.”

- Find areas of agreement, and use “I” statements to make your point.

Avoid this...

“You’re putting your love of guns before the safety of kids in schools.”

- Criticize the idea or the policy, not the motives of people who support the idea or policy.

If you hear them say...

“You say you want to address mental health, but then oppose government spending to do just that. Isn’t that hypocritical?”

Try this...

“I get that this sounds hypocritical to you. Can I explain my reasoning?”

- Start by acknowledging that your views are complicated. Ask if they’re willing to hear your side. If not, exit the conversation.

Avoid this...

“I’m hypocritical? You Democrats want to restrict my gun use but turn a blind eye to all the gun violence in our cities.”

- Firing back with charges of hypocrisy never works. Don’t assume all members of a political party view issues the same way.

If you hear them say...

“Typical. You sound like every Democrat I know who just wants to take away our gun rights.”

Try this...

“I think there are a lot of responsible gun owners out there. I just think that we need stronger protections to keep guns away from people who could misuse them.”

- Make clear that your views are nuanced.

Avoid this...

“You sound just like every Republican I know.”

- Avoid political stereotypes.

SPEAKING TO A DEFENDER ABOUT GUNS

If you hear them say...

“Are you saying cops shouldn’t have guns, either?”

Try this...

“I’m not saying we should banish all guns. They can be useful in the right hands.”

- Stay calm and offer some context for your viewpoint.

Avoid this...

“What a stupid question.”

- Don’t take the bait.

If you hear them say...

“So you’re saying you’d rather keep your guns than prevent the next mass shooting?”

Try this...

“Wow, that’s quite an accusation. Let me explain where I’m coming from.”

- Push back, explain your views, and use personal stories to make your point.

Avoid this...

“You’re probably hoping for another shooting so you can blame me.”

- You’re now mud wrestling.

If you hear them say...

“You liberals want to take away every freedom we have.”

Try this...

“That’s not what I’m saying. I want to make gun ownership safer for everyone.”

- If they continue to mischaracterize your position, find a respectful way to exit the conversation.

Avoid this...

“That’s right. No fun for you or any of your right-wing gun buddies.”

- Sarcasm and stereotypes won’t get you far.

SPEAKING TO A PEACEKEEPER ABOUT GUNS

If you hear them say...

“This is not the time to start something.”

Try this...

“I think we can have a respectful conversation about this even though we disagree.”

- Reassure the person who wants to maintain the peace that hard conversations can be done well.

Avoid this...

“What are you so scared of?”

- Instead, calmly reassure your conversation partner that this doesn't have to be a fight.

If you hear them say...

“We never get to see each other. Let's not ruin it.”

Try this...

“Sure, we can table this for another time.”

- Pick up the conversation at a better time.

Avoid this...

“I'm really tired of avoiding this, and you're not helping.”

- Reassure “peacekeepers” without getting defensive.

If you hear them say...

“Why are you so mean to your sister about this?”

Try this...

“I'm really trying to understand where she's coming from, that's all.”

- Distinguish between nasty arguments and genuine efforts to understand.

Avoid this...

“Why are you always taking her side?”

- Don't attribute motives to the other person.

SPEAKING TO A SNIPER ABOUT GUNS

If you hear them say...

"I bet our family gun enthusiast wants teachers to carry guns in school, too."

Try this...

"I think there are a lot of ways we could make schools safer for kids. I'm happy to talk with you more about it later."

- Snipers want to get a rise, often in front of others. Offer to have the discussion at a different time, and not in front of an audience.

Avoid this...

"I guess I'll know who to blame when there's another school shooting."

- Don't use insults to make your point.

If you hear them say...

"Your elite college degree didn't teach you much about the Constitution, did it?"

Try this...

"Is there a point you're trying to make?"

- Snipers often aren't looking for meaningful engagement. Put the ball back in their court.

Avoid this...

"Which Republican gun fanatic did you get your education from?"

- Don't take the bait and counterattack in kind.

If you hear them say...

"Are you going to get 'God, guns and country' tattooed on your arm now?"

Try this...

"You know how I feel about needles. Pass the wine, ok?"

- Use humor to disarm your Sniper. If you want to have a serious conversation, follow it up with an invitation to talk in private.

Avoid this...

"Only if you're getting 'snowflake' tattooed on yours."

- Don't try to out-Sniper a Sniper.

HOW TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Say more

To your surprise, this talk is going well. Here are four ways to keep the conversation going.

Validate

Acknowledge the concerns you are hearing, even if you disagree on the solutions.

Try this...

“I hear you that we need to change the way we talk about this topic.”

Try this...

“I hear what you’re saying about some people going to extremes on this topic — on both sides, really.”

Ask for more

Continue validating what you’re hearing by asking for more information.

Try this...

“Your perspective is new to me. Where could I learn more about what you’re saying?”

Try this...

“What if I listen to a podcast you recommend, and you listen to one I recommend, and talk about what we learned?”

TIPS FOR ENDING A CONVERSATION

That’s a wrap

Ending a conversation is all about timing, before anyone gets too angry. The goal is to keep the door open to future conversations.

- Head things off before the start

“Not everyone here agrees with what you said. Maybe you and I can talk later.”

- If you’re getting a lecture, look for a graceful way to exit

Pivot

Before offering your thoughts, check out whether the other person is willing to listen.

Try this...

“I’m with you on being concerned about this. Can I offer my perspective on how to address it?”

Try this...

“This is a really challenging topic. I’ve been reading up on it, and I’d like to share some things I’ve learned. Is that okay?”

Perspective

After you’ve listened, share your perspective.

Try this...

“This is why I see this issue this way.” Avoid saying things like, “Here’s how it actually is.”

Try this...

“I’ve found these sources really helpful in better understanding this issue, though I know you might not find them useful.”

“We see this differently. Give me some time to think about what you’ve said.”

- It’s ok to keep it brief if things escalate quickly

“Okay, I’ve got it. Let’s move on for now.”

- If the conversation has gone better than expected, end with appreciation and an invitation

“Thanks for talking with me about this. Can we come back to this topic again?”

More About Talking Sense From MPR News

This election year, MPR News and the nonprofit organization Braver Angels have created Talking Sense to help Minnesotans have hard conversations, better.

Talking Sense is a reporting project that explores the roots of polarization in communities, families and homes, and looks at how Minnesotans are navigating these divisive times. It's also a series of live events and online tools that help Minnesotans have challenging political conversations without letting the need to change minds stand in the way of preserving important relationships.

Visit us online at mprnews.org/talkingsense for related news coverage, an interactive tool, and informative videos.

Share Your Story

Has political polarization affected your family or community?
Send us your Talking Sense story at talk@mprnews.org.

Support Talking Sense

We hope this e-book will help you have better conversations with family and friends.

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