

**Title:** Small Talk, Big Deal... Because sometimes “Nice weather, huh?” is just foreplay for a breakdown.

**Synopsis:**

In this episode of *\*Alchemy\**, Tim and LeeAnna bravely tackle the most ignored, underestimated, and eye-roll-inducing part of human conversation: small talk. You know the drill—“How’s it going?” “Good.” “Good?” “Just good.” But beneath the empty words and muffin recommendations lies a jungle of emotional complexity, primal survival instincts, and potentially one or two serial killers.

With help from the science of brain synchrony and a few tragic dramatic readings, your podcasters reveal that small talk isn’t meaningless. It’s how characters—and actual humans—test the waters, create connection, hide secrets, or lay the groundwork for something much, much bigger. Whether it’s tension, desire, dread, or plain old confusion, small talk can be a goldmine for writers brave enough to see the signal in the fluff.

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**Discussion Questions**

*Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:*

- What’s the purpose of small talk in real life—and how does that translate to fiction?
- Why might a writer *\*avoid\** using small talk in a scene—and when is that a mistake?
- Do you think readers pick up on the hidden meaning in small talk, or does it only work when the author makes it clear?
- Are there moments in your own life where you realize small talk was actually doing more than you thought at the time?
- In what ways is small talk a safety behavior—and how does that idea relate to the podcast’s “Dark Forest” theory”?

**Writer’s Prompts**

*Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:*

- **Prompt 1:** Tension in Politeness. Two strangers. A coffee shop. Or a train. Or a funeral. They exchange small talk—nothing flashy. But one (or both) is hiding something big. A secret. A motive. A memory. Let the tension simmer under the surface. Let the reader feel it before they understand it?

- **Prompt 2:** Small Talk That Means Everything. Write a scene that starts with “How are you?” and ends in emotional chaos. It can be romantic. It can be tragic. It can be murder-y. But it has to begin with innocent, breezy conversation... and then quietly spiral into something the characters can't walk away from.
- **Prompt 3:** The Muffin Means Murder. Use a setting where small talk is required (e.g. ordering at a bakery, waiting in a queue, chatting at a PTA meeting). One character makes an offhand comment. The other picks up on something *very* wrong. Bonus points if the reader gets the creeping dread before the character does.
- **Prompt 4:** Camouflaged Confrontation. Your character wants to confront someone—about a betrayal, a lie, a missed opportunity—but instead of launching in, they circle. They use casual language. They ask about the weather. The tension should build until we're begging them to finally say what they mean. (Or not.)
- **Prompt 5:** Repetitive Reflex. Write a short scene where one character responds to every question with the same word—“fine,” “good,” “sure.” Let the repetition *reveal* something. Boredom? Passive aggression? Deep trauma? This is emotional subtext with training wheels.
- **Prompt 5:** One Line Too Far. Write a scene where everything is going well—nice banter, breezy tone—until one character says just *one thing* too revealing. It could be a slip. A line rehearsed too carefully. A compliment that lands strangely. Let the moment twist the entire interaction in retrospect.

### Class Activities

These activities will help expand on the themes of the episode:

- **Group Discussion:** “What Did They *\*Really\** Say?” Bring in clips or short passages of small talk from books or films. As a group, decode what's actually going on beneath the surface. Is it flirtation? Hostility? Panic?
- **Design Exercise:** Emotional Radar. In pairs, one student writes a scene of pure small talk. The other reads it aloud *twice*—once as comedy, once as horror. Discuss how tone, pacing, and subtext can completely reshape the meaning of dialogue.
- **Debate:** Small Talk—Art or Filler? One side argues that small talk is essential in fiction; the other says cut it all. Use examples, science, and dramatic readings to prove your point. Bonus points for the most smug closing statement.
- **Collaborative Alien Story-Building:** In groups of 3–4, design a scene where an alien attempts small talk with a human in a completely inappropriate setting (e.g. a surgery waiting room, a haunted house, jury duty). Decide together what each character *thinks* is happening... and what really is..

### Closing note from the Podcasters, Tim & LeeAnna

*Sometimes we skip over the small stuff. We dismiss the light chatter, the half-hearted greetings, the*

*weather talk. But underneath those casual words are fear, hope, humor, and heartbreak. Every “Nice to meet you” could be the start of a love story. Or a very polite betrayal. Or an accidental podcast partnership.*

*At **Alchemy**, we believe that behind even the most ordinary moments is something extraordinary—if you’re paying attention. Small talk isn’t small. It’s just the first step into something messy, beautiful, chaotic, and very, very human.*