

SIRC Guide to Flirting

What social science can tell you about flirting and how to do it

Kate Fox

Social Issues Research Centre

Why do we flirt?

Flirting is much more than just a bit of fun: it is a universal and essential aspect of human interaction. Anthropological research shows that flirting is to be found, in some form, in all cultures and societies around the world.

Flirting is a basic instinct, part of human nature. This is not surprising: if we did not initiate contact and express interest in members of the opposite sex, we would not progress to reproduction, and the human species would become extinct.

According to some evolutionary psychologists, flirting may even be the foundation of civilisation as we know it. They argue that the large human brain – our superior intelligence, complex language, everything that distinguishes us from animals – is the equivalent of the peacock's tail: a courtship device evolved to attract and retain sexual partners. Our achievements in everything from art to rocket science may be merely a side-effect of the essential ability to charm.

If flirting is instinctive, why do we need this Guide?

Like every other human activity, flirting is governed by a complex set of unwritten laws of etiquette. These rules dictate where, when, with whom and in what manner we flirt. We generally obey these unofficial laws instinctively, without being conscious of doing so.

We only become aware of the rules when someone commits a breach of this etiquette – by flirting with the wrong person, perhaps, or at an inappropriate time or place. Chatting up a widow at her husband's funeral, for example, would at the very least incur disapproval, if not serious distress or anger.

This is a very obvious example, but the more complex and subtle aspects of flirting etiquette can be confusing – and most of us have made a few embarrassing mistakes. Research shows that men find it particularly difficult to interpret the more subtle cues in women's body-language, and tend to mistake friendliness for sexual interest.

Another problem is that in some rather Puritanical cultures, such as Britain and North America, flirting has acquired a bad name. Some of us have become so worried about causing offence or sending the wrong signals that we are in danger of losing our natural talent for playful, harmless flirtation.

So, to save the human race from extinction, and preserve the foundations of civilisation, Martini commissioned Kate Fox at the Social Issues Research Centre to review and analyse all the scientific research material on interaction between the sexes, and produce a definitive guide to the art and etiquette of enjoyable flirting.

Psychologists and social scientists have spent many years studying every detail of social intercourse between men and women. Until now, their fascinating findings have been buried in obscure academic journals and heavy tomes full of jargon and footnotes. This Guide is the first to reveal this important information to a popular audience, providing expert advice on where to flirt, who to flirt with and how to do it.

Where to flirt

Parties

Flirting is most socially acceptable at parties, celebrations and social occasions/functions. At some such events (e.g. Christmas/New Year parties) a degree of flirtatious behaviour is not only socially sanctioned, but almost *expected*.

This is because most parties, celebrations, carnivals and festivals are governed by a special code of behaviour which anthropologists call 'cultural remission' – a temporary, structured relaxation of normal social controls and restrictions.

This might just sound like a fancy way of saying 'letting your hair down', but it isn't. 'Cultural remission' does not mean abandoning all your inhibitions, letting rip and behaving exactly as you please. There are rules of behaviour at even the wildest carnival – although they may involve a complete reversal of normal, everyday social etiquette. Flirtatious behaviour which is normally frowned upon may be actively required, and prissy refusal to participate may incur disapproval.

Drinking-places

Flirting is also socially acceptable in some public settings, usually where alcohol is served – such as bars, pubs, night-clubs, discos, wine bars, restaurants, etc. One survey showed that 27% of British couples first met their current partner in a pub, and alcohol was voted the most effective aid to flirting by respondents in the Martini Flirting Survey.

Flirting in drinking-places is, however, subject to more conditions and restrictions than at parties. In pubs, for example, the area around the bar counter is universally understood to be the 'public zone', where initiating conversation with a stranger is acceptable, whereas sitting at a table usually indicates a greater desire for privacy. Tables furthest from the bar counter are the most 'private' zones.

As a rule-of-thumb, the more food-oriented establishments or 'zones' tend to discourage flirting between strangers, while those dedicated to drinking or dancing offer more socially sanctioned flirting opportunities. Restaurants and food-oriented or 'private' zones within drinking-places are more conducive to flirting between established partners.

Learning-places

Schools, colleges, universities and other educational establishments are hot-beds of flirting. This is largely because they are full of young single people making their first attempts at mate selection.

Learning-places are also particularly conducive to flirting because the shared lifestyle and concerns of students, and the informal atmosphere, make it easy for them to initiate conversation with each other. Simply by being students, flirting partners automatically have a great deal in common, and do not need to struggle to find topics of mutual interest.

Flirting is officially somewhat more restricted in learning-places than in drinking-places, as education is supposed to take priority over purely social concerns, but in many cases the difference is not very noticeable. Taking a course or evening class may in fact provide more opportunities for relaxed, enjoyable flirting than frequenting bars and night-clubs.

Workplace

At work, flirting is usually acceptable only in certain areas, with certain people and at specific times or occasions. There are no universal laws: each workplace or working environment has its own unwritten etiquette governing flirtatious behaviour.

In some companies, the coffee machine or cafeteria may be the unofficial 'designated flirting zones', other companies may frown on any flirting during office hours, or between managers and staff, while some may have a long-standing tradition of jokingly flirtatious morning greetings.

Careful observation of colleagues is the best way to discover the unspoken flirting etiquette of your own workplace – but make sure that you are guided by the behaviour of the most highly regarded individuals in the company, not the office 'clown', 'groper' or 'bimbo'.

Participant sports/hobbies

Almost any participant sport or hobby can involve flirting. The level of flirtatious behaviour, however, often tends to be inversely related to the standards achieved by participants and their enthusiasm for the activity.

You will generally find a lot of flirting among incompetent tennis players, unfit swimmers, cack-handed potters, etc., but somewhat less among more proficient, serious, competitive participants in the same activities. There are of course exceptions to this rule, but before joining a team or club, it is worth trying to find out if the members have burning ambitions to play in the national championships or win prestigious awards for their handiwork. If you are mainly looking for flirting opportunities, avoid these high-flying groups, and seek out clubs full of happy, sociable under-achievers.

Spectator events

Although they have the advantage of providing conversation topics of mutual interest, most sporting events and other spectator pastimes such as theatre or cinema are *not* particularly conducive to flirting, as social interaction is not the primary purpose of the occasion, and social contact may be limited to a short interval or require 'missing the action'.

The most striking exception to this rule is *horseracing*, where all the 'action' takes place in just a few minutes, the half-hour interval between races is dedicated to sociability, and friendly interaction between strangers is actively encouraged by racecourse etiquette. In fact, our own recent research on the behaviour of racegoers indicates that the 'social micro-climate' of the racecourse makes it one of the best flirting environments in Britain.

Who to flirt with

'Flirting for fun'

At one level, you can flirt with more or less anyone. An exchange of admiring glances or a bit of light-hearted flirtatious banter can brighten the day, raise self-esteem and strengthen social bonds. Flirtation at this level is harmless fun, and only the stuffiest killjoys could possibly have any objections.

Clearly, it makes sense to exercise a degree of caution with people who are married or attached. Most people in long-term relationships can cope with a bit of admiration, and may even benefit from knowing that others find them or their partners attractive, but couples differ in their tolerance of flirtatious behaviour, and it is important to be alert to signs of discomfort or distress.

Research has also shown that men have a tendency to mistake friendly behaviour for sexual flirting. This is not because they are stupid or deluded, but because they tend to see the world in more sexual terms than women. There is also evidence to suggest that women are naturally more socially skilled than men, better at interpreting people's behaviour and responding appropriately. Indeed, scientists have recently claimed that women have a special 'diplomacy gene' which men lack.

This means that women need to be particularly careful to avoid sending ambiguous signals in interactions with married men, and men need to be aware that married/attached males may misinterpret friendly behaviour towards their wives/girlfriends. Otherwise, light-hearted flirtation is both harmless and enjoyable.

'Flirting with intent'

But flirting is also an essential element of the mate-selection process, and when you are 'flirting with intent', rather than just 'flirting for fun', you need to be a bit more selective about your choice of target.

In mate-selection flirting, there are two basic rules about who to flirt with that will increase your chances of success and reduce the likelihood of embarrassing rejections.

1. Do initiate flirtation with people of roughly the same level of attractiveness as yourself.

This will give you the best chance of *compatibility*. Most successful marriages and long-term relationships are between partners of more or less equal good looks. There is some leeway, of course, and other qualities are also important, but statistically, relationships where one partner is much more attractive than the other tend to be less successful. Studies have shown that the more evenly matched partners are in their attractiveness, the more likely they are to stay together.

But evaluating your own attractiveness may be difficult. Research has shown that many women have a poor body-image, and often underestimate their attractiveness. Some recent studies indi-

cate, for example, that up to 80% of adult women believe that they are too fat, and try to achieve a figure that is around two sizes smaller than the body-size men find most desirable. If you are female, the odds are that you are more attractive than you think, so try flirting with some better-looking men.

Men generally tend to be less critical of their own physical appearance than women. This is partly because standards of beauty for males are much less rigid than for females, and a wider variety of shapes and features are considered attractive. But it must be said that some men are also inclined to overestimate their attractiveness. If you are a more honest male, and do not consider yourself good-looking, remember that most men lack expertise in the subtleties of social interaction, so polishing up your flirting skills could give you the edge over a more attractive rival.

2. *Don't* flirt with people who are unlikely to return your interest.

Even if you are not looking for a long-term mate, you will enjoy flirting more with someone who is interested in you. So it makes sense to approach people who are likely to see you as at least a *possible* partner, rather than those likely to dismiss you as unsuitable.

Evolution has favoured males who select young, attractive mates and females who select partners with power, wealth and status. Men therefore naturally tend to seek women who are younger than them and place greater emphasis on physical beauty, while women are more likely to favour older males with higher status and earning potential. Women also tend to prefer men who are taller than them. Analysis of thousands of personal ads – where people are more explicit about their requirements, and more obviously conscious of the requirements of others – shows that these are the qualities most frequently demanded and offered by mate-seekers.

Short, low-status males and older, less attractive females may therefore be a bit more restricted in their choice of potential partners, although there are many exceptions to this rule, and confidence and charm can outweigh apparent disadvantages.

In the How to Flirt section, you will find tips on how to tell immediately, even from across a crowded room, whether someone is likely to return your interest or not.

How to flirt

The first key to successful flirting is not an ability to show off and impress, but the knack of conveying that you like someone. If your 'target' knows that you find him or her interesting and attractive, he or she will be more inclined to like you.

Although this simple fact has been demonstrated in countless studies and experiments, you don't really need scientists to prove it. You already know that when you are told someone fancies you, or hear that someone has praised or admired you, your interest in that person automatically increases - even if it is someone you have never met!

Conveying that you like someone, and judging whether or not the attraction is mutual, clearly involves a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

When asked about flirting, most people – particularly men – focus on the verbal element: the 'chatting-up', the problems of knowing what to say, finding the right words, etc. In fact, the non-verbal element – body-language, tone of voice, etc. – is much more important, particularly in the initial stages of a flirtation.

When you first meet new people, their initial impression of you will be based 55% on your appearance and body-language, 38% on your style of speaking and only 7% on what you actually say.

Also, their non-verbal signals will tell you much more about their feelings towards you than the words they use. We show attitudes such as liking and disliking not by what we say but by the way we say it and the posture, gestures and expressions that accompany our speech.

The customary polite greeting "pleased to meet you", for example, can convey anything from 'I find you really attractive' to 'I am not the slightest bit interested in you', depending on the tone of voice, facial expression, position and posture of the speaker.

Non-verbal flirting

When a man and a woman meet for the first time, both are in a difficult, ambiguous and potentially risky situation. Neither person knows what the other's intentions and feelings are. Because stating intentions and feelings verbally involves a high risk of embarrassment or possible rejection, non-verbal behaviour becomes the main channel of communication. Unlike the spoken word, body language can signal invitation, acceptance or refusal without being too obvious, without causing offence or making binding commitments.

Warning: some of the non-verbal flirting techniques outlined in this section are very powerful signals, and should be used with caution. Women should be particularly careful when using signals of interest and attraction. Men already tend to mistake friendliness for flirting; if your signals of interest are too direct and obvious, they will mistake them for sexual availability.

Eye contact

Your eyes are probably your most important flirting tool. We tend to think of our eyes mainly as a means of receiving information, but they are also extremely high-powered *transmitters* of vital social signals. How you look at another person, meet his or her gaze and look away can make all the difference between a successful, enjoyable flirtation and an embarrassing or hurtful encounter.

Eye contact – looking directly into the eyes of another person – is such a powerful, emotionally loaded act of communication that we normally restrict it to very brief glances. Prolonged eye contact between two people indicates intense emotion, and is either an act of love or an act of hostility. It is so disturbing that in normal social encounters, we avoid eye contacts of more than one second. Among a crowd of strangers in a public setting, eye contacts will generally last only a fraction of second, and most people will avoid making any eye contact at all.

This is very good news for anyone wishing to initiate a flirtation with an attractive stranger. Even from across a crowded room at a party, you can signal your interest in someone merely by making eye contact and attempting to hold your target's gaze for more than one second (not too much more, though, or you will seem threatening). If your target maintains eye contact with you for more than one second, the chances are that he/she might return your interest. If after this initial contact, your target looks away briefly and then looks back to meet your gaze a second time, you can safely assume that he/she is interested. If these eye contacts trigger a smile, you can approach your target with some confidence.

If, on the other hand, your target avoids making eye contact with you, or looks away after a fraction of a second and does not look back again, you should probably assume that your interest is not returned. There is still the possibility that your target is just a very shy person – and some females may be understandably wary of signalling any interest in male strangers. The only way to find out is by close observation of your target's behaviour towards others. Does she consistently avoid direct eye-contact with men? Does he seem nervous, anxious or aloof in his interactions with other women? If so, your target's reluctance to meet your gaze may be nothing personal, and it might be worth approaching, but only with considerable caution.

Once you have approached your target, you will need to make eye contact again in order to strike up a conversation. As soon as your eyes meet, you may begin to speak. Once a conversation begins, it is normal for eye contact to be broken as the speaker looks away. In conversations, the person who is speaking looks away more than the person who is listening, and turn-taking is governed by a characteristic pattern of looking, eye contact and looking away.

So, to signal that you have finished speaking and invite a response, you then look back at your target again. To show interest while your target is speaking, you need to look at his/her face about three-quarters of the time, in glances lasting between one and seven seconds. The person speaking will normally look at you for less than half this time, and direct eye contact will be intermittent, rarely lasting more than one second. When your target has finished speaking, and expects a response, he or she will look at you and make brief eye contact again to indicate that it is your turn.

The basic rules for pleasant conversation are: glance at the other person's face more when you are listening, glance away more when you are speaking and make brief eye contact to initiate turn-taking. The key words here are 'glance' and 'brief': avoid prolonged staring either at the

other person or away.

The most common mistake people make when flirting is to overdo the eye contact in a premature attempt to increase intimacy. This only makes the other person feel uncomfortable, and may send misleading signals. Some men also blow their chances by carrying on a conversation with a woman's breasts, rather than looking at her face.

Interpersonal distance

The distance you keep from the other person when flirting is important, because it will affect his or her impression of you, and the quality of your interaction. Perhaps even more importantly, paying attention to the other person's use of distance will tell you a great deal about his/her reactions and feelings towards you.

When you first approach an attractive stranger, having established at least an indication of mutual interest through eye contact, try to make eye contact again at about 4ft away, before moving any closer. At 4 ft (about two small steps away), you are on the borderline between what are known as the 'social zone' (4 to 12 ft) and the 'personal zone' (18in to 4ft).

If you receive a positive response at 4ft, move in to 'arm's length' (about 2ft 6in). If you try to approach much closer than this, particularly if you try to cross the 18in 'personal zone/intimate zone' border, your target may feel uncomfortable. The 'intimate zone' (less than 18in) is reserved for lovers, family and very close friends. If you are close enough to whisper and be heard, you are probably too close for comfort.

These distance rules apply particularly in face-to-face encounters. We will tolerate reduced interpersonal distances when we are side by side with someone. This is because when you are alongside someone, it is easier to use other aspects of body language, such as turning away or avoiding eye contact, to 'limit' your level of involvement with the other person.

You can therefore approach a bit closer than 'arm's length' if you are alongside your target – at the bar counter of a pub, for example – rather than face-to-face. But be careful to avoid 'intrusive' body-language such as prolonged eye contact or touching.

If you have misjudged the appropriate distance, in either a face-to-face or side-by-side encounter, the other person's discomfort may show in his/her body language. Your target may attempt to turn away or avert his/her gaze to avoid eye contact. You may also see 'barrier signals' such as folding the arms or crossing knees, or rubbing the neck with the elbow pointed towards you. If you see any of these signs, back off!

Finally, remember that different people have different reactions to distance. If your target is from a Mediterranean or Latin American country (known as the 'contact cultures'), he or she may be comfortable with closer distances than a British or Northern European person. North Americans fall somewhere between these two extremes. Different personality-types may also react differently to your approach: extroverts and those who generally feel at ease in company will be comfortable with closer distances than introverts and shy or nervous types. Even the same person may vary in tolerance from day to day, according to mood: when we are feeling depressed or irritable, we find close distances more uncomfortable.

Posture

Most of us are quite good at controlling our faces – maintaining an expression of polite interest, for example, when we are really bored to tears, or even nodding when we really disagree! But we tend to be less conscious of what the rest of our body is doing. We may be smiling and nodding, but unconsciously revealing our disagreement by a tense posture with tightly folded arms. This is known as ‘non-verbal leakage’: while we’re busy controlling our words and faces, our real feelings ‘leak out’ in our posture.

When flirting, you should therefore watch out for signs of this ‘non-verbal leakage’ in your partner’s posture – and try to send the right signals with your own posture.

Your partner’s ‘non-verbal leakage’ can give you advance warning that your chat-up isn’t working. If only his/her head is turned towards you, with the rest of the body oriented in another direction, this is a sign that you do not have your partner’s full attention. Even just the feet starting to turn and ‘point’ away from you can be a sign that his/her attention is directed elsewhere, or that he/she is thinking about moving away. Leaning backwards and supporting the head on one hand are signs of boredom. ‘Closed’ postures with arms folded and legs tightly crossed indicate disagreement or dislike.

More positive signs to watch out for would be a partner’s body oriented towards you, particularly if he/she is also leaning forward, and an ‘open’ posture. These are signs of attentiveness and interest or liking. Experiments have also shown that females are more likely to tilt their heads to one side when they are interested in the person they are talking to. Men should beware, however, of automatically assuming that these signs indicate *sexual* interest. Women should be aware of men’s tendency to make such assumptions, and avoid signalling interest too obviously.

Another positive sign is what psychologists call ‘postural congruence’ or ‘postural echo’: when your partner unconsciously adopts a posture similar to yours. Mirror-image postural echoes – where one person’s left side ‘matches’ the other person’s right side – are the strongest indication of harmony and rapport between the pair. If the position of your partner’s body and limbs appear to ‘echo’ or ‘mimic’ your own, particularly if his/her posture is a mirror image of yours, the chances are that he/she feels an affinity with you.

When flirting, you can also *use* postural echo to *create* a feeling of togetherness and harmony. Experiments have shown that although people are not consciously aware of someone deliberately ‘echoing’ their postures, they will evaluate a person who does this more favourably. If you ‘echo’ your partner’s postures, he/she will not only feel more at ease in your company, but will perceive you as more like-minded.

This technique obviously has its limits. We would not suggest, for example, that a woman in a mini-skirt should ‘echo’ the open-legged sitting posture of her male companion. But if he is leaning forward with his left forearm resting on the table, she could create a sense of common identity by ‘mirroring’ this aspect of his posture – leaning forward with her right forearm on the table.

In addition to these ‘generic’ signals of interest, there are specifically male and female posture signals which are often seen in flirtatious encounters. These tend to be postures which enhance

the masculine or dominant appearance of the male, and the femininity of the female. Males may adopt postures which make them appear taller, larger and more impressive, such as placing hands in pockets with elbows out to enlarge the chest, or leaning one hand at above shoulder height on a wall to appear taller and more imposing. Females either adopt postures which make them look smaller, such as drawing the knees towards the body when seated, or postures which draw attention to physical attributes attractive to males, such as arching the back to display the breasts, or crossing and re-crossing the legs to draw attention to them.

Gestures

As well as overall body posture, the gestures we use can signal interest, attraction and invitation – or discomfort, dislike and rejection.

When flirting, it is important to be aware of these non-verbal cues, both in ‘reading’ your partner’s body-language and in controlling the messages you are sending with your own gestures.

In conversation, gestures are mainly used to enliven, clarify and ‘punctuate’ our speech, or to show responsiveness to what the other person is saying. In a flirtatious encounter, the amount of gesticulation, the directions of the gestures and the co-ordination of gestures can indicate the degree of interest and involvement your partner feels towards you.

Different cultures vary widely in the amount of gesticulation that accompanies their speech (Italians say that you can silence an Italian by tying his hands behind his back), and even within a single culture, some people naturally express themselves more through gestures than others. Generally, however, someone who is interested in you will be more lively and animated in conversation, using more gestures when speaking in order to keep your attention, and more responsive gestures to show interest when you are speaking.

Similarly, you can signal interest in your partner, and keep his/her attention focused on you, by enhancing your speech with appropriate gestures: shifting your hands or head slightly at the end of sentences, using downward hand movements to emphasise a point, ‘projecting’ what you are saying towards your partner by open-palm hand movements and so on. When your partner is speaking, you can show responsiveness by nodding in agreement, throwing up your hands in surprise, bringing them together in a ‘silent clap’ of appreciation, etc.

Researchers have found that nodding can be used to ‘regulate’ conversations. If you make single, brief nods while your partner is speaking, these act as simple signs of attentiveness, which will maintain the flow of communication from the speaker. Double nods will change the rate at which the other person speaks, usually speeding up the flow, while triple nods or single, slow nods often interrupt the flow altogether, confusing speakers so much that they stop in their tracks. So, if you want to express interest and keep your partner chatting with you, stick to brief single nods.

You can also watch for gestures which indicate anxiety and nervousness, such as hand-clasping movements and palm-rubbing. As a general rule, anxious gestures are directed towards the anxious person’s own body (known as ‘proximal’ movements), while ‘distal’ movements, directed away from the body, are a sign of confidence. As well as watching for these signals in your partner, you can control the impression you are making by using more confident, ‘distal’ gestures.

As with posture, the greatest involvement and harmony is achieved when gestures are synchronised – when the movements of one person are echoed or reflected by the other. You may have noticed that this tends to happen naturally between people who like each other and get on well together. Watch pairs of lovers in a bar or pub, and you will see that they often tend to lift their drinks and take a sip at the same time, and that many of their other body movements and gestures will be similarly synchronised. Psychologists call this ‘interactional synchrony’ or ‘gestural dance’, and some of their research findings indicate that the timing of matched gestures may be accurate down to fractions of a second.

Although this synchronisation normally happens without conscious effort, you can use it as a highly effective flirting technique. If you feel the conversation is not flowing easily, or you and partner seem awkward and uncomfortable with each other, try to be more sensitive to the patterns of his/her gestures and body movements, and to reflect these in your own body language.

If your partner spontaneously begins to synchronise his/her body language with yours, this is a sign that he/she feels comfortable with you. Men should not assume that it necessarily indicates sexual interest, however. Women can avoid creating this impression by reducing synchronisation, adopting a more ‘closed’ posture and avoiding the use of gestures which are specifically associated with flirtatious behaviour. In experiments, female hair-flipping and head-tossing were among the (non-contact) gestures most often regarded as sexually flirtatious, along with repeated leg-crossing and movements designed to draw attention to the breasts.

Facial expression

An ability to ‘read’ and interpret the facial expressions of your partner will improve your chances of successful flirting, as will awareness of what you are signalling with your own expressions.

Some expressions can be effective even from a distance, as in the ‘across a crowded room’ encounter with a stranger. The ‘eyebrow-flash’, for example, which involves raising the eyebrows very briefly – for about one-sixth of a second – is used almost universally as a long-distance greeting signal. When you see someone you know, but are not near enough to speak, the eyebrow-flash shows that you have noticed and recognised them.

We all use this non-verbal “Hello!” in situations where we cannot use the verbal equivalent, either because of distance or social convention. Watch a video of Andrew and Fergie’s wedding, for example, and you will see that Fergie performs frequent eyebrow-flashes as she walks down the aisle. Social etiquette does not allow a bride to call out cheery greetings to her friends and relations during the ceremony, but the highly sociable Fergie is clearly unable to refrain from signalling the same greetings with her eyebrows.

If you are desperate to attract the attention of an attractive stranger across a crowded party, you could try an eyebrow-flash. This should make your target think that you must be a friend or acquaintance, even though he or she does not recognise you. When you approach, your target may thus already be wondering who you are. You can, if you are skilful, use this confusion to initiate a lively discussion about where you might have met before. Such conversations inevitably centre on possible shared interests or friends or habits, and invariably involve mutual disclosure of at least some personal information. As you will learn from the ‘Verbal flirting’ sections of this Guide, these are essential ingredients of successful flirting. So, assuming your target finds you attractive, an eyebrow-flash with appropriate follow-up could leapfrog you into instant

intimacy.

Two warnings are necessary here: 1) If your target does *not* find you attractive, the eyebrow-flash strategy may backfire, as the confusion over whether or not you already know each other will be experienced as unpleasant and annoying, rather than amusing. 2) Do not use the eyebrow-flash in Japan, where it has definite sexual connotations and is therefore never used as a greeting signal.

If your target is attracted to you, this may be more evident in facial expressions than in words. Studies have found that women are generally better than men at reading these expressions, but that both sexes have equal difficulty in seeing through people's expressions when they are controlling their faces to hide their real feelings.

The problem is that although faces do express genuine feelings, any facial expression that occurs naturally can also be produced artificially for a social purpose. Smiles and frowns, to take the most obvious examples, can be spontaneous expressions of happiness or anger, but they can also be manufactured as deliberate signals, such as frowning to indicate doubt or displeasure, smiling to signal approval or agreement, etc. Feelings can also be hidden under a 'social' smile, a 'stiff upper lip' or a blank, 'inscrutable' expression.

Despite this potential for 'deceit', we rely more on facial expressions than on any other aspect of body language. In conversation, we watch our companions' faces rather than their hands or feet, and rely on their facial signals to tell us what effect we are having, and how to interpret what they say. Although people are better at controlling their facial expressions than other aspects of body language, there is still some 'leakage', and the following clues will help you to detect insincerity.

Let's say your target smiles at you. How do you know whether this smile is spontaneous or manufactured? There are four ways of telling the difference. First, spontaneous smiles produce characteristic wrinkles around the eyes, which will not appear if your target is 'forcing' a smile out of politeness. Second, 'forced' or 'social' smiles tend to be asymmetrical (stronger on the left side of the face in right-handed people and on the right side of the face in left-handed people). The third clue to insincerity is in the timing of the smile: unspontaneous smiles tend to occur at socially inappropriate moments in the conversation (e.g. a few seconds after you have made a funny remark, rather than immediately). Finally, there is a clue in the duration of the smile, as a manufactured smile tends to be held for longer (what is often called a 'fixed' smile) and then to fade in an irregular way.

When observing your target's facial expressions, it is important to remember that although an expressive face – showing amusement, surprise, agreement etc. at the appropriate moments – may indicate that your target returns your interest, people do naturally differ in their degree and style of emotional expression. Women naturally tend to smile more than men, for example, and to show emotions more clearly in their facial expressions.

You are also likely to interpret expressions differently depending on who is making them. Experiments have shown that people may read the same expression as 'fear' when they see it on a female face, but as 'anger' when it appears on male face. There are also cultural and even regional differences in the amount of emotion people express with their faces. Oriental people are more likely than Westerners to hide their emotions under a 'blank' expression or a smile, for example, and American researchers have found that in the US, Northerners smile less than people from the South.

If an attractive stranger smiles at you, it could be that he or she finds you attractive, but he or she could also be an outgoing, sociable person from a culture or region in which smiling is commonplace and not particularly meaningful.

These factors must also be taken into account when considering the effect of your own facial expressions. People tend to be put off by levels of expressiveness that are considerably higher or lower than what they are used to, so it could help to try to ‘match’ the amount of emotion you express with your face to that of your target.

As a general rule, however, your face should be constantly *informative* during a flirtatious conversation. Unexpressiveness – a blank, unchanging face – will be interpreted as lack of interest when you are listening and an absence of facial emphasis when you are speaking will be disturbing and off-putting. You need to show interest and comprehension when listening, and to promote interest and comprehension when speaking, through facial signals such as eyebrows raised to display surprise, as a question mark or for emphasis; the corners of the mouth turning up in amusement; nodding to indicate agreement; frowning in puzzlement; smiling to show approval, or to indicate that what you are saying should not be taken too seriously, and so on.

Fortunately, most of these facial signals are habitual, and do not have to be consciously manufactured, but some awareness of your facial expressions can help you to monitor their effect and make minor adjustments to put your target more at ease, for example, or hold his or her attention, or increase the level of intimacy.

Finally, remember that your target is unlikely to be scrutinising you for tiny signs of insincerity, so a ‘social’ smile will be infinitely more attractive than no smile at all.

Touch

Touching is a powerful, subtle and complex form of communication. In social situations, the language of touch can be used to convey a surprising variety of messages. Different touches can be used to express agreement, affection, affiliation or attraction; to offer support; to emphasise a point; to call for attention or participation; to guide and direct; to greet; to congratulate; to establish or reinforce power-relations and to negotiate levels of intimacy.

Even the most fleeting touch can have a dramatic influence on our perceptions and relationships. Experiments have shown that even a light, brief touch on the arm during a brief social encounter between strangers has both immediate and lasting positive effects. Polite requests for help or directions, for example, produced much more positive results when accompanied by a light touch on the arm.

When flirting, it is therefore important to remember that the language of touch, if used correctly, can help to advance the relationship, but that inappropriate use of this powerful tool could ruin your chances forever.

Although there are considerable differences between cultures in the levels of touching that are socially acceptable, and different personalities welcome different levels of touching, we can provide a few basic rules-of-thumb for first encounters with strangers of the opposite sex.

The first rule, for both sexes, is: touch, but be careful. Women are much less comfortable about

being touched by an opposite-sex stranger than men, so men should take care to avoid any touches which may seem threatening or over-familiar. Men are inclined to interpret women's friendly gestures as sexual invitations, so women should be equally careful to avoid giving misleading signals with over-familiar touches.

This does not mean 'don't touch', as appropriate touching will have positive benefits, but touching should initially be restricted to universally acceptable areas and levels. As a general rule, the arm is the safest place to touch an opposite-sex stranger. (Back pats are equally non-sexual, but are often perceived as patronising or overbearing.) A brief, light touch on the arm, to draw attention, express support or emphasise a point, is likely to be acceptable and to enhance your companion's positive feelings towards you.

If even this most innocuous of touches produces a negative reaction – such as pulling the arm away, increasing distance, frowning, turning away or other expressions of displeasure or anxiety – you might as well give up now. Unless your companion is exceptionally shy and reserved, negative reactions to a simple arm-touch probably indicate dislike or distrust.

If your companion finds you likeable or attractive, a brief arm-touch should prompt some reciprocal increase in intimacy. This may not be as obvious as a return of your arm-touch, but watch for other positive body-language signals, such as increased eye-contact, moving closer to you, more open posture or postural echo, more smiling, etc. Your arm-touch may even prompt an increase in verbal intimacy, so listen for any disclosure of personal information, or more personal questions.

If you see or hear signs of a positive reaction to your arm-touch, you can, after a reasonable interval, try another arm-touch, this time slightly less fleeting. If this results in a further escalation of verbal or non-verbal intimacy from your companion, you might consider moving to the next stage: a hand-touch.

Remember that a hand-touch, unless it is the conventional handshake of greeting or parting, is much more personal than an arm-touch. By touching your companion's hand, you are opening negotiations towards a higher degree of intimacy, so keep it light and brief: a question, not an order.

A negative reaction to your hand-touch, such as the non-verbal signals of displeasure or anxiety mentioned above, does not necessarily mean that your companion dislikes you, but it is a clear indication that your attempt to advance to the next level of intimacy is either premature or unwelcome. A very positive reaction, involving a significant increase in verbal or non-verbal intimacy, can be taken as permission to try another hand-touch at an appropriate moment.

Highly positive reactions to a second hand-touch – such as a definite and unambiguous attempt to move closer to you, reciprocal arm- and hand-touching, along with significantly more personal questions, more disclosure of personal information and more expression of emotion – can be taken as permission to proceed, with caution, to a higher level of intimacy. The next stages might involve a hand-squeeze or hand-hold, repeated twice before moving on to an arm over the shoulders, or perhaps a brief knee-touch. (Males should note, however, that positive reactions to any of these touches can *not* be taken as permission to grope.)

You will have noticed that we advise performing each touch two times before progressing to the next level. This is because repeating the same touch, perhaps with a slightly longer duration,

allows you to check that reactions are still positive, that you were not mistaken in your judgment that the touch was acceptable. The repetition also tells your companion that the first touch was not accidental or unconscious, that you are consciously negotiating for an increase in intimacy. Repeating the same touch before moving to the next level is a non-verbal way of saying “Are you sure?”.

Vocal signals

You may be surprised to see this heading in the ‘Non-verbal flirting’ section, but ‘verbal’ means ‘words’ and vocal signals such as tone of voice, pitch, volume, speed of speech, etc. are like body-language in that they are not about what you say, the words you use, but about how you say it.

We noted at the beginning of this ‘non-verbal’ section that people’s first impressions of you are based 55% on your appearance and body language, 38% on your style of speaking and only 7% on what you actually say. In other words, body-language may be your most important ‘flirting tool’, but vocal signals come a very close second. The more you think about that 38%, the more concerned you will be to ensure that your vocal signals make the best possible impression. An ability to ‘read’ the vocal signals of the person you are flirting with will also help you to find out how he or she really feels about you.

Attraction and interest, for example, are communicated much more by the tone of voice than by what is actually said. Depending on the tone, volume, speed and pitch, even a simple phrase such as “Good evening” can convey anything from “Wow, you’re gorgeous” to “I find you totally uninteresting and I’m looking for an excuse to get away from you as quickly as possible”.

If your target gives you a deep-toned, low pitched, slow, drawn-out “Good evening”, with a slight rising intonation at the end, as though asking a question, this is probably an indication of attraction or at least interest. If you get a short, high-pitched, clipped “Good evening”, or a monotone, expressionless version, your target is probably not interested in you.

Once you are in conversation, remember that the intonation of even a single word can communicate an immense variety of emotions and meanings. As an experiment, try practising variations in your intonation of the one-word response “Yeah”, and you will find that you can communicate anything from enthusiastic agreement to grudging acceptance to varying degrees of scepticism to total disbelief.

If you speak in a monotone, with little variation in pitch, pace or tone of voice, you will be perceived as boring and dull, even if what you are saying is truly fascinating or exceptionally amusing. Loud volume, a booming tone and too much variation in pitch will make you seem overbearing. Speak too quietly or too slowly and you will seem submissive or even depressed. Aim for moderation in volume and tone, with enough variation in pitch and pace to hold your companion’s interest.

Also remember that a rising or falling intonation, especially when accompanied by a drop in volume, is a ‘turn-yielding cue’, whereby speakers signal that they have finished what they are saying and are ready to listen to the other person. When you hear these vocal signals, your companion is probably indicating that it is your turn to speak. When your companion hears these signals, he or she may well assume that you are ‘yielding’ the floor. If you frequently end sen-

tences on a rising or falling intonation, with a drop in volume, and then carry on without allowing your companion to speak, he or she will become frustrated. Taking your turn when your companion has not given any vocal 'turn-yielding cues', even if he or she has finished a sentence, will be perceived as interruption, and is equally irritating.

Verbal flirting

Although your target's initial impressions of you will depend more on your appearance, body language and voice than on what you actually say, successful flirting also requires good conversation skills.

The 'art' of verbal flirting is really just a matter of knowing the rules of conversation, the unwritten laws of etiquette governing talking and listening. The best and most enjoyable conversations may seem entirely spontaneous, but the people involved are still obeying rules. The difference is that they are following the rules automatically, without consciously trying, just as skilled, experienced drivers do not have to think about changing gears. But understanding how the rules of conversation work – like learning how and when to change gears – will help you to converse more fluently, and flirt more successfully.

Studies have shown that women tend to be more skilled at informal social conversation than men, both because they are naturally more socially sensitive, and because they have better verbal/communication skills. (Men make up for this with superior visual-spatial abilities, but these are not much help in verbal flirting.) Men can, of course, easily *learn* to be as skilled in the art of conversation as women – it is only a matter of following a few simple rules – but some do not take the trouble to learn, or may be unaware of their deficiencies in this area. Those males who do take the trouble to improve their conversation skills (perhaps by reading this Guide) have a definite advantage in the flirting stakes.

Opening lines

When the subject of flirting comes up, most people seem to be obsessed with the issue of 'opening lines' or 'chat-up lines'. Men talk about lines that work and lines that have failed; women laugh about men's use of hackneyed or awkward opening lines, and all of us, whether we admit it or not, would like to find the perfect, original, creative way to strike up a conversation with someone we find attractive.

The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is that your opening line is really not very important, and all this striving for originality and wit is a wasted effort. The fact is that conversational 'openers' are rarely original, witty or elegant, and no-one expects them to be so. *The best 'openers' are, quite simply, those which can easily be recognised as 'openers' – as attempts to start a conversation.*

The traditional British comment on the weather ("Nice day, isn't it?" or "Doesn't feel much like summer, eh?", etc.) will do just fine, as everyone knows that it is a conversation-starter. The fact that these comments are phrased as questions, or with a rising 'interrogative' intonation, does not mean that the speaker is unsure about the quality of the weather and requires confirmation: it means that the speaker is inviting a response in order to start a conversation.

In Britain, it is universally understood that such weather-comments have nothing to do with the weather, and they are universally accepted as conversation-starters. Saying "Lovely day, isn't it?" (or a rainy-day equivalent) is the British way of saying "I'd like to talk to you; will you talk to me?"

A friendly response, including positive body language, means "Yes, I'll talk to you"; a monosyl-

labic response (accompanied by body-language signalling lack of interest) means “No, I don’t want to talk to you”, and no verbal response at all, with body language signalling annoyance or dislike, means “Shut up and go away”.

If you are indoors – say at a party or in a bar – and nowhere near a window, some equally innocuous general comment on your surroundings (“Bit crowded, isn’t it?”, “Not very lively here tonight, eh?”) or on the food, drink, music, etc., will serve much the same purpose as the conventional weather-comment. The words are really quite unimportant, and there is no point in striving to be witty or amusing: just make a vague, impersonal comment, either phrased as a question or with a rising intonation as though you were asking a question.

This formula – the impersonal interrogative comment – has evolved as the standard method of initiating conversation with strangers because it is extremely effective. The non-personal nature of the comment makes it unthreatening and non-intrusive; the interrogative (questioning) tone or ‘isn’t it?’ ending *invites* a response, but is not as demanding as a direct or open question.

There is a big difference between an interrogative comment such as “Terrible weather, eh?” and a direct, open question such as “What do you think of this weather?”. The direct question demands and requires a reply, the interrogative comment allows the other person to respond minimally, or not respond at all, if he or she does not wish to talk to you.

In some social contexts – such as those involving sports, hobbies, learning, business or other specific activities – the assumption of shared interests makes initiating conversation much easier, as your opening line can refer to some aspect of the activity in question. In some such contexts, there may even be a ritual procedure to follow for initiating conversation with a stranger. At the races, for example, anyone can ask anyone “What’s your tip for the next?” or “What do you fancy in the 3.30?”, a ritual opening which effectively eliminates all the usual awkwardness of approaching a stranger.

Unless the context you are in provides such a convenient ritual, use the IIC (Impersonal Interrogative Comment) formula. This formula can be adapted to almost any situation or occasion. Just make a general, impersonal comment on some aspect of the event, activity, circumstances or surroundings, with a rising intonation or ‘isn’t it?’ type of ending. Your target will recognise this as a conversation-starter, and his or her response will tell you immediately whether or not it is welcomed.

There are of course degrees of positive and negative response to an IIC. The elements you need to listen for are *length*, *personalising* and *questioning*. As a general rule, the longer the response, the better. If your target responds to your comment with a reply of the same length or longer, this is a good sign. A personalised response, i.e. one including the word ‘I’ (as in, for example, “Yes, I love this weather”) is even more positive. A personalised response ending in a question or interrogative (rising) intonation (as in “I thought it was supposed to clear up by this afternoon?”) is even better, and a personalised response involving a personalised question, i.e. a response including the words ‘I’ and ‘you’, is the most positive of all.

So, if you say “Nice day, isn’t it?” and your target replies “Yes, I was getting so tired of all that rain, weren’t you?”, you are definitely in with a chance. Note that there is nothing original, witty or clever about the above exchange. You may even be inclined to dismiss it as polite, boring and insignificant. In fact, a great deal of vital social information has been exchanged. The opener has been recognised as a friendly invitation to a conversation, the invitation has been accepted, the

target has revealed something about him/herself, expressed interest in you, and even suggested that you might have something in common!

The biggest mistake most people make with opening lines is to try to start a *flirtation*, rather than simply trying to start a *conversation*. If you think about your opening line as initiating a conversation, rather than starting a flirtation, use the IIC formula and pay close attention to the verbal and non-verbal response, you cannot go wrong. Even if your target does not find you attractive and declines your invitation to talk, you will avoid causing offence and you will avoid the humiliation of a direct rejection.

Turn-taking

Once you have initiated a conversation with your chosen target, your success in making a favourable impression will depend as much on your social skills as on what you say.

We have probably all met at least one person who is highly articulate, witty and amusing, but who loses friends and alienates people by hogging the conversation, not allowing others to get a word in. You may also have come across the equally irritating strong, silent type who makes you do all the 'work' in the conversation – who never asks a question, never expresses interest and makes no effort to keep the conversation flowing.

What you have to say may be fascinating, and you may express it with great eloquence, but if you have not grasped the basic social skills involved in conversational turn-taking, you will be perceived as arrogant and unpleasant, and neither your target nor anyone else will enjoy your company.

The basic rule on how much to talk is very simple: *try to make your contribution to the conversation roughly equal to that of your partner*. The essence of a good conversation, and a successful flirtation, is reciprocity: give-and-take, sharing, exchange, with both parties contributing equally as talkers and as listeners.

Achieving this reciprocity requires an understanding of the etiquette of turn-taking, knowing when to take your turn, as well as when and how to 'yield the floor' to your partner. So, how do you know when it is your turn to speak? Pauses are not necessarily an infallible guide – one study found that the length of the average pause *during speech* was 0.807 seconds, while the average pause *between speakers* was shorter, only 0.764 seconds. In other words, people clearly used signals other than pauses to indicate that they had finished speaking.

In previous sections of the Guide, we have described in detail the various non-verbal signals people use to show that they have finished what they are saying, and that it is your turn to speak. These include eye-contact signals (remember that people look away more when they are speaking, so when they look back at you, this often indicates that it is your turn) and vocal signals such as rising or falling intonation, with a drop in volume. This may be accompanied by verbal 'turn-yielding' signals, such as the completion of a clause or 'tailing off' into meaningless expressions such as "you know".

As a general rule, the more of these turn-yielding cues occur simultaneously, the more likely it is that your partner has finished and expects you to speak. Watching and listening for these clues will help you to avoid interrupting, and also to avoid awkward gaps and lengthy pauses in the

conversation.

Talking

This Guide clearly cannot tell you exactly what to say, what words to use, in a flirtatious conversation, but it is possible to provide some general guidelines on what you talk about, and how you express yourself, particularly in terms of mistakes and pitfalls to avoid.

Negativity, for example, is real turn-off. If you talk too much about the bad side of things, and constantly complain about the world or your own problems, your partner will soon get bored and fed up. Other characteristics that research has identified as particularly boring or off-putting include self-preoccupation (talking too much about yourself and showing too little interest in others), banality (only talking about superficial things, repeating hackneyed jokes and stories), tediousness (talking too slowly, pausing too long, taking too long to make a point), passivity (failing to take full part in the conversation or express opinions), lack of enthusiasm (talking in a monotone, not making eye-contact, expressing too little emotion), over-seriousness (using a serious tone of voice and expression, even when your partner is trying to be light-hearted or humorous) and over-excitement (easily sidetracked, engaging in too much meaningless chatter, too much slang).

Compliments, on the other hand, are almost universally welcomed, and do not have to be witty or original. In an analysis of 600 verbatim compliments, linguists found that they tend to follow a tried-and-tested formula, with the word “nice” occurring in nearly 25% of the compliments studied, and the word “you” in almost 75%. In other words, you should not be afraid of paying simple, unflowery compliments such as “That’s a nice jacket” or “That colour really suits you”, as they can be very effective.

Clearly, excessive use of compliments will make you seem ingratiating, and your partner may become bored with too much suffocating niceness, but of all the ways you can bore someone, studies have shown that this is the least offensive.

Males should, however, avoid paying women embarrassing or potentially offensive compliments. This is not a matter of ‘political correctness’, but of basic social skills. Some men need to learn that it is entirely possible to convey to a female friend or acquaintance that you find her physically attractive, without being crass or intrusive.

A simple, admiring comment such as “You look lovely (or pretty, or stunning)” is enough. Anything more explicit will only cause embarrassment or offence. The body-language must be right as well: address the compliment to her face, not to her chest, and without leering or what the Americans call ‘elevator eyes’ (eyes travelling up and down the body).

Timing is equally important: there are times, places and situations where *any* comment on a woman’s appearance, however innocent, would be inappropriate and potentially offensive. It is not possible to list all these situations here, but as a rule-of-thumb, only comment on a woman’s appearance a) if you know her well enough (this kind of compliment should not be used as an opening line, but only at a much later stage in flirtatious conversation) and b) at times, places and situations where appearance is relevant – i.e. where it would be acceptable to comment on a man’s appearance. If the situation is not one in which you would compliment a male acquaintance on his flattering new jacket or haircut, do not comment on a female’s appearance either.

(Males please note: 80% of women think that they are too fat. In one American survey, women were asked what were the three words they would most like to hear from a male partner. The most common answer was not, as expected, “I love you”, but “You’ve lost weight”. While you should not make *any* comment on a woman’s figure unless you know her well, this compliment might please a girlfriend or close female friend.)

Listening

Good listeners have distinct advantages in the flirting stakes, but being a good listener is not just about shutting up and letting the other person talk (although this certainly helps). Good listening is essentially about giving good ‘feedback’, which involves giving both verbal and non-verbal signals to show that you are a) paying attention, and b) interested.

Effective non-verbal feedback signals include nodding, smiling, responsive facial expressions and leaning forwards, accompanied by general positive body language such as ‘open’ posture and posture/gesture echo. Good verbal feedback signals include the use of expressions such as “mm-hmm”, “yeah”, “mmm”, “ah” to show interest or agreement and to encourage the other person to continue.

Research has shown that these basic feedback signals are highly effective in winning friends and influencing people. They can even result in concrete, tangible rewards: studies have found, for example, that candidates who give this sort of feedback during job interviews are more likely to be successful than those who do not. Even just a few nods can significantly improve your chances, both in interviews and in flirtatious conversation.

Another effective good-listener technique is ‘paraphrasing’. To show that you are paying attention and interested, and to encourage your partner to tell you more, it can help if you occasionally sum up what your partner has said, as in “...so you were stranded at the station with no money! How did you get home?” This paraphrasing will be particularly helpful if your partner seems a bit shy, insecure or anxious, as it will make him or her feel more confident.

You may have noticed that the question at the end of the ‘paraphrasing’ example was an ‘open’ question, rather than a ‘closed’ question requiring only a yes or no response. If you want to encourage your partner to talk, try to ask more open questions, such as “What kind of food do you like?” than closed questions such as “Do you like Chinese food?”

If you are not sure about the difference, remember that open questions begin with one of the following words: Who, What, When, Where, How, Why. Journalists and personnel managers are taught to ask questions beginning with these words in interviews, to encourage job candidates and sources to give detailed replies, but they are equally effective in informal social conversation – particularly in flirting!

Reciprocal disclosure

One of the most important aspects of verbal flirting is what psychologists call ‘reciprocal disclosure’ – the exchange of personal information. In fact, unless partners disclose at least some personal details, the conversation can hardly be called a flirtation.

When you first meet, these details do not have to be particularly intimate: disclosure of almost *any* personal information, even something as innocent as the fact that one likes warm weather or Italian food, is a move towards intimacy.

If your partner discloses some such detail, you should reciprocate as soon as possible by revealing some similar information about yourself, perhaps ‘raising the ante’ a little by making your disclosure slightly more personal. If your partner likes you, he or she will probably try to ‘match’ your disclosure with one of similar value. Reciprocal disclosure of this kind is a much more subtle and less threatening route to intimacy than asking direct personal questions.

The key to successful flirtation is to escalate the level of intimacy *gradually*, always maintaining a *balance* between your disclosures and those of your partner. Avoid getting too far ahead by revealing too much, or lagging behind by revealing too little.

Women should be aware that men tend to interpret disclosure of personal information as a sign of sexual availability, and be particularly careful about how much they reveal.

Humour

Humour is a powerful flirting tool. It is almost impossible to flirt successfully or enjoyably without it, and yet it can easily backfire if abused or misused.

On the positive side, studies have shown that people who use humour in social encounters are perceived as more likeable, and that both trust and attraction increase when a light-hearted approach is used. Judicious use of humour can reduce anxiety and establish a relaxed mood which helps a relationship to develop more rapidly. A slightly risqué joke can help to escalate the level of intimacy in a flirtatious conversation.

On the negative side, inappropriate use of humour can kill a promising flirtation stone dead in a matter of seconds. Making a risqué joke or comment too early, for example, before a reasonable degree of intimacy has been established, is the verbal equivalent of a bum-pinch. Men are generally more likely to make this kind of fatal mistake than women. Women, however, need to be even more cautious in their use of sexual humour, as men will be inclined to interpret this as a sign of sexual availability.

While it is clearly important to avoid causing offence or giving misleading signals, humour is an essential element of flirtation. Flirting is by definition a light-hearted, playful form of interaction. A flirtatious encounter may eventually lead to a ‘serious’, long-term relationship, but too much seriousness in the early stages is off-putting. Even in the longer term, a capacity for light-hearted playfulness is important. It is no accident that so many single people seeking partners through the personal ads include ‘gsoh’ (good sense of humour) in their requirements.

Humour can clearly help to reduce tension and awkwardness in the early stages of a flirtatious encounter. In the section on opening lines, we advised the use of phrases which are universally recognised as ‘conversation-starters’, such as comments on the weather. A touch of humour can make these openers even more effective. There is no need for elaborate attempts at wit: a simple twist such as “Lovely day, isn’t it?” during a torrential downpour will raise a smile if your target

finds you attractive. (If your target does not find you attractive, more elaborate efforts will be no more effective.)

Once some degree of mutual attraction has been established, the use of humour in flirtatious conversations tends to come naturally, as both parties are motivated to keep their target amused and interested. Our natural instinct is to try to make the other person smile. We need constant reassurance that we are liked and appreciated by the object of our attraction, and smiles and laughter provide that reassurance.

One particular form of humour, playful teasing, is particularly common in flirtatious encounters. This is because playful teasing allows partners to increase the 'personal' content of the exchange, while keeping the tone light-hearted and non-serious, thus escalating the level of disclosure and intimacy in a non-threatening manner. Men respond particularly well to this form of humour, as it closely resembles the 'mock-arguments' and good-humoured exchanges of insults which are their normal means of expressing friendship among themselves.

The most common mistakes in flirtatious use of humour involve opposite extremes. Men are more likely to over-use humour or monopolise the joke-telling, and fail to notice that their companion is bored or frustrated. Women sometimes have a tendency to under-use humour – to adopt a serious tone when their companion would be more comfortable with light-hearted banter. There are many exceptions, of course: we've all met heavy-going men and raucous women, but most studies show that women are generally more cautious in their use of humour, while men are more inclined to avoid heart-to-heart seriousness.

If you feel you may sometimes be guilty of either excessive or inadequate use of humour, watch your companion carefully for signs of boredom or embarrassment – such as feet or body turning away from you, forced smiles, reduced eye-contact, reduced verbal attention-signals, fidgeting, defensive arm-crossing, etc. If you are overdoing the humour, these would be your cues to tone it down a bit. If you are being too serious, lighten up!

Parting

Your approach to leave-taking after a flirtatious conversation is of critical importance, as it will determine your future relationship with your companion.

Many flirtatious encounters are of naturally short duration – where it is understood that there are no serious intentions, merely an ego-boosting acknowledgement of mutual attraction. These light-hearted 'brief encounters' are part of normal social interaction, and only the pathetic or desperate would imagine that every passing exchange of flirtatious banter is a prelude to matrimony.

Flirting would not, however, be such a universal feature of human interaction if it did not occasionally serve some more long-term purpose – such as sex, reproduction, the survival of the species, etc. While there is no harm in practising our flirting skills just for the fun of it, there will be some occasions when we wish to pursue the relationship, and a cheery, unconcerned "Bye, then" or "Nice meeting you" will not do. This is when parting words and gestures take on greater significance.

Every salesperson knows that there is little point in establishing a great rapport with potential customers, attracting their interest, gaining their trust and so on, if you fail to ‘close’ – ‘closing’ being sales-speak for actually making the sale, securing the contract, getting the customer to hand over money or sign on the dotted line. Sales staff are specifically trained in ‘closing techniques’ to help them achieve this all-important goal.

In the same way, if you are genuinely attracted to your flirting partner, and want to see him or her again, none of the flirting skills in this Guide will be much use unless you can ‘close’ effectively. In this case, your goal in ‘closing’ is to secure not a contract or a sale, but the chance to meet again.

At the risk of rejection, this is the moment when you must be explicit about your wishes. Subtle hints and positive body-language will help you to get to this point, and careful observation of your partner’s reactions will tell you whether your ‘closing’ is likely to be successful, but these techniques cannot, by themselves, get you a phone number or a date! You have to ask. And the most effective strategy is simple honesty. You don’t have to declare undying love, just ask: “Would you like to meet for a drink sometime next week?” (or some equivalent, the exact words are unimportant, but it must be a clear request). If making a date on the spot would be awkward or inappropriate, say something like: “Perhaps we could meet again sometime - could I have your phone number?”

Some American ‘dating manuals’ recommend that you precede this request with a statement such as “I’ve really enjoyed talking with you and I’d like to see you again”. You are welcome to do this if you wish, but it would seem to be already implicit in the request for a date or phone number, and therefore somewhat superfluous.

Dating manuals and articles in glossy women’s magazines also constantly insist that it is perfectly acceptable nowadays for women to take the initiative in asking men out. In fact, they never fail to exclaim, men love it when women take the initiative. This is quite true, and if you read the more scientific research on the subject, you will find out *why*. The studies and experiments show that men perceive women who take the initiative in asking a man out as more sexually available. To put it more bluntly, if a woman asks them out, they think they have a better chance of ‘scoring’. Naturally, they are delighted.

If you are female, and wish to avoid giving this impression, there is a simple solution. Instead of asking for his phone number, offer your own. Say something like: “Maybe we could have a drink sometime? – here’s my number”. This makes it perfectly clear that you are interested, but still requires the man to take the initiative in asking for a date.

You are of course free to dismiss this suggestion as hopelessly old-fashioned, sexist, pandering to double-standards, etc. It is not the place of this Guide to make moral judgements about flirting, merely to provide information on the latest scientific findings. Flirting has been part of human behaviour for thousands of years, and whether we approve or not, the latest findings show that not much has changed. Males have always tended towards an over-optimistic interpretation of female signals, and females have always adjusted their signals to encourage only selected males.

Despite the disapproval of 17th-century Puritans, Victorian moralists and their modern equivalents in both the ‘moral majority’ and ‘political correctness’ camps, these basic flirting instincts persist, and the human species survives.