Casual conversations are effective ways to engage with museum visitors. Prepared Gallery Guides can facilitate conversations by asking questions that invite visitors to **Go Slow, Look Closer, and Dig Deeper**.

Some conversations will begin and end at the **first** stage. That’s just fine. Other conversations may go through **all four** stages:

**Stage One:** *Greet visitors so that they feel encouraged to Go Slow*

You are standing in the gallery, vest on, nametag affixed. A group of visitors enters the room. Be aware that your body language and expression can encourage or discourage visitors from interacting with you. Now what? How do you start the interaction?

- Acknowledge the visitors and look friendly.
  - Make eye contact and smile.
  - Let the visitors signal what they want to do. Some visitors may approach you directly; more likely they will look around first.
- Ask a simple question that relates to the person’s own experience.
  - “Have you been here before?”
  - “Where are you visiting from?”
- Make an observation about an exhibit specimen yourself.
  - “It’s hard to believe that these flowers are glass!”
  - “Isn’t that amethyst geode huge? It weighs 1,600 pounds!”

**Stage Two:** *Ask productive low-risk questions that invite visitors to Look Closer*

Some types of questions are unproductive because they assume prior knowledge and put visitors on the spot. When the typical visitors have no way of knowing the answer by looking at an exhibit or specimen and may feel intimidated, the questions should be avoided:

- “Do you know the chemical formula for quartz?”
- “What species of plankton do Right Whales eat?”

Instead, asking productive low-risk questions can engage visitors and encourage them to **Look Closer** by engaging senses, guiding observation, and encouraging them to make connections to the exhibits through using observation skills:

- “What do you notice about the quartz specimens in this case?”
- “Would you like to touch a piece of whale baleen?”

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Stage Two: Ask productive low-risk questions that invite visitors to Look Closer

Keep questions focused on a specimen in the exhibit or hands-on specimen. Find out about the visitor’s experiences and interests. The conversation is not a lecture to show what you know. Your goal is for visitors to feel welcome, interested, curious, and perhaps surprised.

Useful types of low-risk questions:

Questions that refer to the senses:
- **Sight** - “What’s your favorite color? Can you find a mineral of that color in the gallery?”
- **Smell** - “Can you imagine how a real orchid smells? This one is made of glass.”
- **Touch** - “Do you want to see how heavy an iron meteorite is?” (hold out specimen)
- **Taste** - “Did you brush your teeth today? Do you know there are minerals in your toothpaste?”
- **Sound** - “What do you think this mineral will sound like if we scratch it on this glass plate?”

Questions that relate to prior experiences of the visitors including popular culture:
- “Did you hear about the Chelyabinsk meteorite that fell in the Urals? Do you want to touch a real meteorite?”
- “Have you see the movie *Ice Age 3*? Do you want to see a real fossil giant ground sloth?”

Questions that focus attention on an object:
- “Take a look at this 150 million-year-old horseshoe crab fossil. What do you notice about it?”
- “What do you notice about that mushroom in the exhibit?”

Questions that focus on measuring and/or counting:
- “Can you count how many sides this mineral crystal has?” (look at
- “Can you put your arms around that tree trunk?”

Questions that encourage visitors to compare or contrast:
- “Which do you think is softer: the beaver fur or the coyote fur?”
- “How is the baleen of this (Bowhead) whale different from that of the (Fin) other whale?”

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Stage Three:  Build the conversation with complex questions, thus encouraging visitors to Dig Deeper
Problem-posing and action questions can guide longer conversations that involve processing and synthesizing. By applying previous knowledge to a new situation, visitors can apply their knowledge.

Hypothesizing
- “I just read a report that ducks are able to land in a well-formed group because they follow magnetic direction. I wonder if geese do the same?”
- “What do you think would happen if we took a UV flashlight outside in the daytime? Would this mineral fluoresce?”

Guiding action
- “Can you find another bird that has a similarly shaped beak?”
- “Can you find a mineral in the case that is the same size as this mineral?”
- “I wonder what would happen if you hit these two rocks together?”

Speculating
- “Do you notice that the mineral specimen of silver is black? Why do you think that is?”
- “Why do you think the birds didn’t go extinct when the other dinosaurs did?”

Applying knowledge
- “Since we know that most meteorites are magnetic, what do you think would happen if we put a magnet next to this iron meteorite?”
- “Scientists believe that most dinosaurs had feathers. What do you think the feathers might have looked like?”

You are not an expert, nor should you pretend to be. Your goal is to encourage visitors to think about the exhibits after they have finished their visit and to dig deeper into questions they find interesting. Support the visitors’ questions and their acquisition of knowledge.

Acquiring knowledge
- “I don’t know about that. I’m not an expert. How do you think we can find out?”
- “I’m not sure. Let’s look it up in this reference book I have right here.”
- “That’s a great question! You can go home and look it up on the web or at school.”
- “Science is about asking questions. There might be researchers here at Harvard who are studying this question.”

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Stage Four: Suggest that visitors **Dig Deeper** and explore on their own

As one of our veteran volunteers has wisely said, “It is better to leave the visitors with questions than with answers.” Don’t expect to share more than just the tip of your knowledge iceberg with most visitors. As facilitator of the conversation, your duty is also to signal its end politely.

Suggest other things for visitors to do or see:

- “If you want to see more animals with antlers, go right through that door to the Great Mammal Hall and you will find several big cases with moose, elk, deer, caribou. Make sure you notice the little Chinese Water Deer with the fangs!”
- “On your way home today you can notice the different kinds of leaves on the ground.”
- “If you have time you can also go to our sister museum, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. We are connected on the third floor.”

If visitors are monopolizing your time, politely suggest they move on.

- “I see there is another family who would like to look at these fossils. Would you mind giving them a turn?”
- “It’s time for my break, so I need to put away my cart. It was nice talking with you..”
- “Thanks for stopping by. I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit.”

Congratulations! You have facilitated a successful conversation and ensured a good visitor experience. Job well done! Perhaps you have also learned something from the visitors?