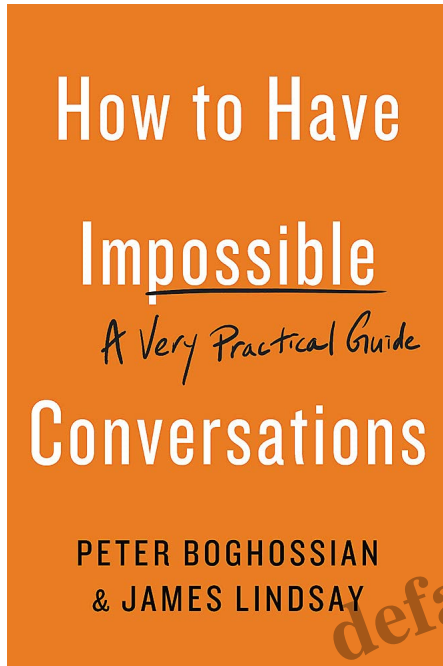


# How To Have Impossible Conversations By Boghossian (SUMMARY, Review, Criticisms)

## Description



How To Have Impossible Conversations

## What Is This Book About?

Persuasion is practically impossible when discussing certain subjects. This book teaches techniques for such situations. It is chalk full of effective questions that will force people to reconsider their positions.

## Who Should Buy This Book?

You should buy this book if you are looking for techniques to improve your persuasive skills in conversational settings. Specifically, if you want to be better at asking persuasive questions, this is the book for you.

This isn't a sales book, though you might be able to improve your question asking skills in sales situations by reading this book.

## Review

The book does a great job of illustrating its point that persuasion in difficult situations can be accomplished with the techniques. It is well laid out and organized in a way that makes it easy to

reference. We found ourselves returning to many of the middle chapters frequently. The techniques themselves are practical and work well. However, the best parts of the book are the questions. See the summary section below for specific examples. We found some of the non question techniques obvious, like don't assume things about their argument, don't be a jerk, and make sure you understand what their terms mean.

## Criticism

There are two distinct criticisms that have been raised against this book. **First**, some argue that the book was written in bad faith. The authors claim to be interested in instilling doubt in any irrational belief, but they only seem to instill doubt in ideas they already disagree with. There are tons of examples of how to undermine religion and attack liberals. They even specifically criticize evangelism while their book, methods, and suggestions ironically aren't too different in practice. If they really wanted to instill doubt they would do it in any situation against any type of affirmative belief. That would happen if they were focused on logic and reason before all else.

We think they should have just said this is a book that teaches a more effective method for changing people's minds when you disagree. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a book like this. They should have dropped the part where they suggest approaching the conversation willing to change your opinion, and the rest of the book would have worked out well.

**Second** is the criticism that the book is generally making obvious points. This has some weight if you have read persuasion books in the past. Many techniques like building rapport and listening to your conversation partner are quite obvious. But the book put many of those techniques in a section labeled beginner or intermediate. The questions themselves aren't obvious. Questions can be powerful, and a slight change in how one is worded can make all the difference. We have backgrounds in philosophy, persuasion, psychology, and law, and we still found many question formulations unique and beneficial. This criticism doesn't hold much water for us.

**Finally** is the criticism about some of the epistemological assumptions made in the book. Their [epistemological explanations and assumptions](#) for some of the opponent beliefs aren't well thought out for a person with a PHD in Philosophy. For example, not all Christians are [fideists](#). There are examples where oversimplified assumptions slightly harm the book but we don't think it was meant to be a full attack manual against religious people. These were simply illustrative examples.

## Summary

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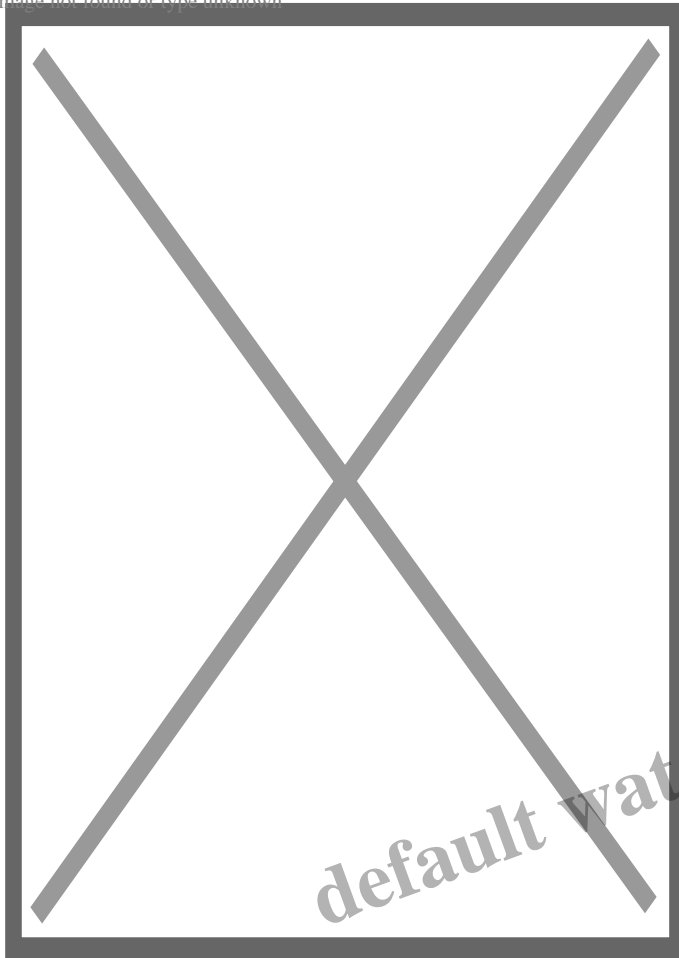


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## Chapter 1: When Conversations Seem Impossible

The purpose of the first chapter is to illustrate what an impossible conversation situation might be. He discusses failures and how what he was doing, debating, doesn't actually change people's minds. This chapter summarizes some of the things the book will discuss. He cautions people to learn, read, and practice the material in sequential order.

## Chapter 2 – The Seven Fundamentals of Good Conversations

This section is about the foundations of a productive conversation.

**#1 Goals** – Ask yourself why you are having this conversation. Maybe you are trying to learn from someone. Maybe you want to intervene in their beliefs and actions. Perhaps you want to reach mutual understanding. You will have better more productive conversations if you are first honest with yourself about what you want.

**#2 Partnerships** – Changing minds happens best in psychologically safe environments. Change your focus to being a conversation partner. Stop focusing on winning and focus on understanding. Practically this means explicitly stating that the goal of the conversation is to understand their view

point.

**#3 Rapport** – Build rapport to create a safe environment. Do this immediately upon starting the conversation. Use their name. Find common ground. Don't parallel talk (reference yourself and your experiences when they mention something). Don't rush the conversation. Avoid call outs and "you should's."

**#4 Listen** – **Listening is one of the most important tools for understanding a person and also for building rapport.** Try asking someone to clarify points by saying "I'm not sure I understand, can you explain that?" Repeat back what they are saying in your own words to ensure understanding. Give the person your full attention.

**#5 Shoot The Messenger** – Stop trying to deliver facts to change people's opinions. It doesn't work. Instead, shoot the messenger and focus on understanding.

**#6 Intentions** – People don't knowingly desire bad things. Assume they think that they have a moral and rational reason for thinking what they think.

**#7 Walk Away** – Be willing to walk away if the conversation isn't working. "People need time to wrestle with doubt, incorporate new information, mull over challenges, and different perspectives, and rethink their positions. And so do you. Changing one's mind happens slowly and in a way that suits one's individual psychology and habits."

## **Chapter 3 – Beginner Level: Nine Ways to Start Changing Minds**

This chapter discusses how to intervene in someone's thought process and beliefs once you have created a safe environment.

**#1 Modeling** – This is about demonstrating the kinds of behaviors you want people to follow. They talk about the Unread Library Effect which is when people are ignorant of how ignorant they are. This makes them more confident in their beliefs. Defeat this by introducing doubt. Help them realize they are relying on borrowed knowledge. Get them explaining processes of how things work in detail and get them explaining what would happen if their way of doing things was implemented. Model this behavior by highlighting the limits of your own knowledge by saying "I don't know" how X would play out or work. Ask for explanations and specifics. "What are the best arguments against those laws?" "What might go wrong if that law is passed?"

**#2 Words** – Clearly define words up front so they don't shift or cause confusion later on. Get examples of their definitions to make it more concrete.

**#3 Ask Questions** – Socratic questioning is very useful. Ask questions that are open ended to continue conversations. How or what questions do this. Closed questions seek a yes or no answer.

**#4 Acknowledge Extremists** – Pointing out how extremists on your side go too far models to other people that you are willing to be vulnerable and open about things that aren't correct or perfect. This willingness is necessary for a person to change their mind. Attacking extremists also puts you on the same side as the person you are talking to.

**#5 Navigating Social Media** – Avoid combative situations on social media. Remember things never really delete.

**#6 Don't Blame, Do Discuss Contributions** – Instead of focusing on blame, focus on the things they have done right. By focusing on both side's contributions it opens the way for people to be more rational. Ask "what factors contributed to X?"

**#7 Focus On Epistemology** – Instead of focusing on what people believe, focus instead on how they came to believe those things. Focus on the steps or patterns they follow when changing or creating a belief. The focus on process over the beliefs themselves makes people less likely to be defensive. "That is an interesting perspective, what leads you to conclude that?" "Can you give me an example of some other issue where you use that same reasoning process?"

**#8 Learn** – Making a person feel understood and heard opens them up. Ask them things like "how do you know that?"

**#9 What NOT To Do (Reverse Applications)** – Don't be a jerk. Don't display anger. Don't laugh at them. Don't attack their position. Don't view people as ignorant.

## Chapter 4 – Intermediate Level: Seven Ways to Improve Your Interventions

Here are more skills that will help you change minds. They are more advanced than last chapter and should be practiced after you have practiced the first few chapters.

**#1 Let Friends Be Wrong** – Let people be wrong. Don't damage a relationship just because you believe they are wrong. You don't know for sure. Say things like "I hear you."

**#2 Build Golden Bridges** – People have a hard time changing their minds because of social pressure. Build them an easy bridge they can walk over if they are wrong. Say things like "I can see where you were coming from though." "I used to believe x, y, and z. It turns out those beliefs were wrong. When I learned a, b, c I changed my mind."

**#3 Language** – Use collaborative language like "give me something else I can present to them," or "us," or "we." Make it as if we are in this together. Switch from I disagree to I am skeptical.

**#4 Stuck? Reframe** – Find common identities if you are stuck. For example, appeal to their humanity or how you are both American. "I hear you, I wonder if we can get around this our disagreement by looking at it another way."

**#5 Change Your Mind** – Don't interrupt long pauses, they mean the person is reflecting.

**#6 Introduce Scales** – Certainty scales are useful for gauging how successful a conversation was and for understanding more about why someone thinks what they think. Ask, "on a scale of 1 – 10 how confident are you that X is true?" "Out of curiosity, why didn't you say (higher/lower number)?" "I am a 3 on that scale, I'm not sure how I'd get to where you are. Can you walk me through it?"

**#7 Outsourcing** – In addition to the unread library effect, another way to [deal with people who have stronger opinions](#)

than is justified is to use outsourcing. Outsourcing is when you use external information to reach a conclusion. Before you outsource to your phone or a study, determine the qualifications they would accept to change their mind. “What sources do you trust and why?” “What is the best counter argument for why one should question conclusions from that evidence?” “What evidence could we find that would settle this?”

## Chapter 5 – Five Advanced Skills for Contentious Conversations

Rethinking your conversational habits can lead to better conversations that are less likely to get emotional.

**#1 Keep Rapport’s Rules** – List any points of agreement before discussing places where you disagree. Use pro social modeling which is demonstrating behavior you want them to copy.

**#2 Avoid Facts** – Don’t focus on facts because people simply find facts that support what they already believe. If you challenge those facts, you “redouble a believer’s commitment to her beliefs.” Introducing facts give people a reason to defend their position. Focus instead on how they know. Ask “what if that experiment couldn’t be replicated, would you change your mind?” “I could be wrong about this but it is my understanding that X.” “What evidence would change your mind.”

**#3 Seek Disconfirmation** – Ask for limits to what they think, or situations that happen that would cause a person to be willing to abandon their beliefs. “Under what conditions could belief X be wrong?” “Your goal is to help your partner revise her beliefs, the easiest and fastest way to do this is by asking disconfirming questions.” If a belief is held that isn’t disconfirmable then it is likely held because of their identity. “What would it mean if you abandoned that view?” “Would someone be a bad person if they did/didn’t hold that belief?” If they have high disconfirmation conditions, ask why those criteria are so high. “How did you go about setting your bar for doubt so high?” Try altercasting the person as rational and “reframe the conversation around what rational people should believe.”

**#4 Yes, And** – Get rid of but and instead add “yes, and” and then what you were going to say. But marks disagreement.

**#5 Dealing With Anger** – “Think of anger as being a strong cognitive bias that pushes you to confirm your anger is justified.” Focus on why your partner is acting the way they are acting and why that is making you angry. Try apologizing with aggressive people. It can be extremely disarming. Identify your anger triggers ahead of time.

## Chapter 6 – Six Expert Skills to Engage the Close-Minded

This chapter is about breaking through when someone is rigid or close minded.

**#1 Synthesis** – This is keeping rapport while trying to disconfirm beliefs. “Engage in synthesis is to assume the opposite side of the argument from your own inclination and argue for it to the best of your ability.” There are 5 steps which are essentially performing the method of belief questioning on yourself. Present an idea, listen to counter arguments, look for ways to disconfirm your belief, refine your original position, repeat.

**#2 Help Vent Steam** – When people are venting use the following strategies. “Tell me more.” “How

has this situation made you feel?" "I want to hear more." Re express what they said and ask to hear more.

**#3 Altercasting** – Altercasting is a persuasion technique where you use an identity the person desires to have to persuade them. For example, you might say that smart people have evidence based beliefs. Altercast conversational virtues like civility, fairness, rationality, and open mindedness.

**#4 Hostage Negotiations** – Mirror what they say by repeating the last few words of what they said with a pause at the end. This will keep them talking. "Create a climate of success by dealing with and resolving small issues first, then break down the big problems into a number of smaller problems that are each easier to handle."

**#5 Probe The Limits** – Look for the limits of a person's argument. Look for inconsistency. "Are there any circumstances that would lead you to act inconsistently with that belief?"

**#6 Counter Intervention Strategies** – Ask for help doubting your doubts. "I have doubts about X, but I'm not sure they are justified. Do you think my uncertainty is justified?" "I firmly believe X, and I wish I didn't think that." "On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that my beliefs should be the ones to change? How do you know that your beliefs shouldn't be the ones to change?"

## Chapter 7 – Master Level: Two Keys to Conversing with Ideologies

Ideologues are people who are unwilling or unable to revise their beliefs. "Moral and identity issues operate invisibly at the level of emotion rather than reason... Challenging these beliefs triggers the same brain responses as putting someone in physical danger." There are two main strategies for dealing with such people.

**#1 How To Converse With An Ideologue** – First acknowledge their positive intentions and affirm that they are a good and moral individual. Change the subject to deep values. Help them see the way they derive their moral beliefs. Allow the connection between emotions and belief to sever by itself. "These beliefs seem important to you, what are you basing them on?" "Why do you feel this belief is more justified than competing beliefs?" "Does the intense feeling that a belief is true make it more likely to be true?" Simply focus on talking about how they came to the moral conclusions. You [know you are probably dealing](#) with an Ideologue when they say they are 10 out of 10 confident about something.

**#2 Moral Reframing** – People have tendencies for certain moral values. There are 6 moral foundations people lean towards. Care versus harm, fairness versus cheating, loyalty versus betrayal, authority versus subversion, sanctity versus degradation, liberty versus oppression. Values are like tastes. Conservatives tend to value things that lead them to security, sanctity, and liberty. Liberals value things like harm and care. Understanding why someone holds a view comes from immersing yourself in a sea of different moral outlooks. **When talking to a conservative, talk about leadership, freedom, family, responsibility, and so on. When speaking to liberals, talk about the poor, victims, harm, and the disadvantages.**

## Chapter 8 – Conclusion

This chapter simply summarizes points made in the others.

## Most Useful Questions List

- What would people who disagree with your position say? Why would they say that?
- What would you rate your certainty on a scale of 1 – 10? Why not higher, lower?
- What would have to happen for you to revise your opinion?
- Why are there so many different opinions on that subject? How do you distinguish between which is right/wrong?
- If you were born into a different situation do you think you'd think something else?
- Have you ever changed your beliefs?
- I'm not sure I understand, can you explain that?
- What are the best arguments against those laws? What might go wrong when those laws are put into place?
- That is an interesting perspective. What leads you to conclude that?
- Would every reasonable person draw that conclusion? How come there are so many divergent opinions? How does one figure out whose belief is true and whose is false?
- How'd you arrive at that conclusion?
- How can we solve this problem?
- Out of curiosity, why didn't you say (higher/lower number)?
- I am a 3 on that scale, I'm not sure how I'd get to where you are. Can you walk me through it?
- What sources of evidence do you trust and why? What type of evidence would conclusively settle this?
- What are the three best experts that disagree with that?
- How did you go about setting your bar for doubt so high? Why do you think your standard for disconfirmation for this is so much higher than for other things?
- What value does that belief bring you?
- Is it a virtue to not revise certain beliefs?
- Have any of your beliefs changed in the last 10 years? Which ones and why?
- How do you know this belief won't be one of those beliefs you'll later see as false?
- Why do you feel this belief is more justified than competing beliefs? Does that intense feeling that a belief is true make it more likely to be true.
- These beliefs seem important to you, what are you basing them on?

## Quotes

- "If you do not listen, you cannot understand." (p19)
- "People need time to wrestle with doubt, incorporate new information, mull over challenges and different perspectives, and rethink their positions. And so do you. Changing one's mind happens slowly and in a way that suits one's individual psychology and habits." (p30)
- "Further, if you challenge someone's beliefs, then you're more far more likely to evoke a defensive posture than if you question their reasoning that led them to their beliefs... People are less threatened by having their epistemology probed than having their beliefs challenged." (p61)
- "It would be foolish to damage a relationship because we merely think, but do not know, that the other person is harboring an incorrect view about reality." (p74)



- “Building golden bridges takes pressure off someone and makes it easier to admit ignorance or revise a belief.” (p77)
- “Attempts to re-express your target’s position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, ‘Thanks, I wish I’d thought of putting it that way.’” (p96)
- “Facts are the main culprit in eliciting the backfire effect.” (p100)
- “Your goal is to help your partner revise her beliefs, the easiest and fastest way to do this is by asking disconfirming questions.” (p106)
- “Think of anger as being a strong cognitive bias that pushes you to confirm your anger is justified.” (p124)
- “Try to create a climate of success by dealing with and resolving small issues first and then break down the big problems into a number of smaller problems that are each easier to handle.” (p147)
- “Morality and identity issues operate invisibly at the level of emotion rather than reason... Challenging these beliefs triggers the same brain responses as putting someone in physical danger.” (p158)
- “If you’re talking to a conservative, invoke ‘leadership,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘family,’ ‘responsibility,’ and so on. If you’re talking to a liberal, appeal to ‘the disadvantaged,’ ‘the poor,’ ‘victims,’ ‘harm,’ and the like. (p176)

## Where Can I Buy This Book?

Check out Amazon for the book [price](#).

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January 7, 2022

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