

## Adopters Welcome: Sample language to model engaging conversations

To help staff and volunteer counselors feel comfortable having meaningful conversations, incorporate examples and regular practice into your training. The following is a cheat sheet with sample language to help with role-play exercises. The sections below follow the same order as the sample adopter questionnaire that can be downloaded at [humanepro.org/adopters-welcome](https://humanepro.org/adopters-welcome).

Don't tie yourself to unnecessary paperwork. If adoption counselors can demonstrate that they have mastered a conversational approach, allow them to skip the questionnaire.

The details of the adoption process, from introductions to congratulations, will be different for each organization. Use these examples to enhance your method and ensure your approach remains adaptable and inclusive.

### Start with a “thank you”

Remember the lengths that someone has gone to in order to arrive at your shelter or adoption event, and thank them for considering adoption. Whether you're helping people get to know the animals in your adoption program or reviewing their questionnaire, starting with gratitude can ease potential intimidation or confusion about the process. Be approachable, welcoming and open to questions.

- *In-person introduction:* “Hi, I’m Rosie. Thanks so much for visiting us today! Do you have a pet in mind today or would you like some help learning about the pets in our care?”
- *After receiving a questionnaire:* “Hi, I’m Rosie. I see you’ve already started with our questionnaire—thank you! Let’s go over it together. Feel free to ask questions as we go along!”

### Support gift adoptions

Most research shows that pets given as gifts are just as likely to remain in a loving home as those who aren't. If your organization embraces pets as gifts, use the questionnaire to gather details and offer additional follow-up support.

- “I see you’re adopting for your parent/partner/child/friend—how thoughtful! What can you tell me about the lucky recipient? I can help you find a great match and share tips for introducing the pet to their household. Is this a surprise, or are they involved in the decision?”

### Engage adopters who rent

Our sample questionnaire doesn't include a question about renting or owning a home. Instead, it provides a brief FYI about possible restrictions for renters who may not be aware of them and has space to add any housing-related resources your organization offers. Encourage renters to be familiar with any pet policies, provide helpful advice and trust them to work through any bumps.

- “If you rent, let me know if you have any questions about possible pet restrictions such as size limits or pet deposits. We may have programs to help you.”

### Learn about household members

You have access to information about each animal, even if it's limited, including historical information from owners or finders. Be transparent with this information and cover all pertinent interactions the pet has had with adults, children, strangers and other pets, if known. Combine this information with the insights you gather from potential adopters to identify suggestions that can help the match succeed.

- “We’ve noticed that Sophie is a very active dog. Even the good Samaritan who found her said she was friendly but very strong! You mentioned you have a family member who may have difficulty walking a large dog. Do you want to look for a dog who is more low-key, or would you like to discuss ways we can help Sophie learn to walk on a loose leash?”

### Learn about current or former household pets

Start the conversation about any pets already in their home, building on their answers. Pay attention to what information the adopter offers because it creates a picture of what they may be expecting with this new pet. Don't be afraid to offer suggestions that can help them with a smooth transition.

- “You mentioned that your last dog stayed outside, and it sounds like you have the same plans for Squeaky. We know from Squeaky’s former owners that he is used to living inside and might not do well outside, away from you. Would you be interested in some tips on keeping Squeaky inside with you? We can also provide a free crate until he’s acclimated to your home.”
- “I’m so sorry your last cat ran away! Would you like information on how to exercise your new cat without letting them outside?”

### Share information about the new pet’s physical health

Review any known medical history collected from the previous owner or finder, as well as medical information from the pet’s time in your organization’s care. Answer questions (or connect the adopter with someone who can) and aim to help them find accessible veterinary care if they don’t already have it.

- “I’m not a veterinarian, but I will go over Bella’s medical notes with you and send you home with a copy of everything. According to her records, vaccines aren’t due until September of next year, but it’s a good idea to think ahead about who her veterinarian will be. Do you have a veterinarian you’re used to, or would you like a list of local options?”
- “Sully is a wonderful cat. She has a chronic illness that will cost approximately \$60 a month. We know managing a chronic condition can be challenging, and as part of Sully’s adoption, we’ll provide six months of medication to get you started until you can get her in for an appointment with a veterinarian.

### Share information about the new pet's behavioral health

Review any known behavior history collected from the previous owner or finder, as well as information from the pet's time in your agency's care. If your organization works with any certified pet dog trainers or cat behavior professionals, or offer these services directly, this is a good time to discuss what's available.

- "Rocco has shown some playful but mischievous behavior with household items in the past. If you're considering adopting him, we can provide you with some resources on how to manage these habits."
- "Tofu has had a few dog friends but can be picky about which dogs she likes. Would you like assistance introducing her to your dog or tips on how to do so at home?"

### Covering additional topics

Some adopters may have questions or concerns that aren't typically covered in a standard adoption conversation. It's important to address these with empathy and provide honest, helpful information.

#### *Declawing cats:*

- "You mentioned that you have questions about declawing. We've found that many folks aren't aware that the surgery is actually an amputation that can have some negative effects such as long-term pain and behavioral concerns. We recommend alternatives that I'd be happy to go over with you!"

#### *Heartworm prevention:*

- "Heartworm disease is a big concern for dogs in our area, so we always like to ask pet owners if they're aware of this disease and how to prevent it. Do you have any questions about heartworm disease I can answer?"

#### *Introducing this pet to other pets:*

- "Sounds like you are like me, with a whole crew of pets at home! Tell me more about them, and I can offer suggestions for introducing the 'new kid.' I'll also send you home with some tip sheets to help you stay on track over the next few days or weeks. Sometimes introductions take time, but they're always worth it!"

### Saying "no"

As hard as you try to help make matches successful, there will be times when adoption isn't in the best interest of the person or the pet. If your conversation has been based on honesty, openness and mutual respect, you will be in a better place to say "no," or "not right now."

- "I know you want to help a pet right now, and I appreciate that you are considering adoption. But I've been listening to you closely, and I want to share my concerns. Can we talk about some steps you can take before adopting and how we might be able to support you?"
- "I know you've fallen in love with Cassie, but based on her behavior in her last home, I'm concerned she may not be the best match for your current dog. We have a few other

dogs I could introduce you to, or we can schedule time for you to come back another day.”

### Explaining the return or trial adoption process

We know it can take days, weeks or even months for a pet to fully acclimate to a new home and for families to determine if their household is the best fit for the pet. If your organization embraces trial adoptions or foster-to-adopt programs, be sure to discuss how it works; this can significantly ease an adopter’s concerns about what might happen if things don’t work out.

- “We hope Sassy is the perfect pet for you and your family, but if that’s not the case, we want you to feel comfortable reaching out for support. Our return policy is designed to make sure every pet has the best chance of finding the right home and for every adopter to find the pet for them. Let’s go over the process together so you’re aware of your options.”
- “We hope Linus is the perfect pet for you and your family, but we know it can take time for everyone to acclimate to your new life together. We offer a 30-day trial adoption program to give you space to get to know Linus, and if for any reason he’s not the best fit for your family, we’ll help you find another match. Even better, Linus will have had a break from the shelter, and we’ll learn so much more about him that we can share with a future adopter.”

### Follow-up and support

Offer adopters the reassurance that your shelter is there for them post-adoption. Provide information about any follow-up programs, including support on pet behavior, medical needs or community resources. The relationship built through your outstanding customer service and engaging conversations will encourage them to call before a problem is out of hand.

### Promoting additional shelter services

Adopters are a captive audience. If your organization offers extra services such as ID tags, microchipping, pet food pantries, or low-cost spays and neuters, adoption counselors should be well-versed in promoting these services and answering common questions about them. And don’t be afraid to mention your volunteer program or donation options. Remember, adopters are pet lovers in your community who may be able to take advantage of your programs, spread the word about them, or even support your efforts with time and money.

### Incorporate digital tools while ensuring accessibility

As more organizations embrace online tools, it’s essential to consider the varying levels of comfort adopters may have with technology. Provide options for those who may not have access to technology and offer guidance to make the process user-friendly.

- *Adopters with internet access:* “I noticed you completed our online questionnaire—thank you! That’s a great start. Let’s go over it together to make sure we find the best match for you.”
- *Adopters without internet access or who walked in the door:* “Here’s our short questionnaire to get you started, or we can go through the questions together. I’m happy to help however works best for you.”

- *Hybrid approach:* “We offer virtual meet-and-greets if that’s more convenient, but you’re always welcome to visit in person, too. Let me know what works best for your schedule and comfort level.”

### Create a welcoming environment for all adopters

Tailor your approach to individual needs and avoid making assumptions about people’s knowledge or experience with pets.

- “We’re here to support you, whether this is your first pet or your tenth. Can I answer any questions about caring for a new pet or what to expect during the adoption process?”
- “We want to make sure our process is welcoming to everyone. If there’s anything we can do to make this easier for you, please let us know!”
- “Pets make great companions for everyone. Let’s talk about how we can help find a match that suits your lifestyle and preferences.”

### Wrap up with a “thank you”

Always close the conversation with appreciation, reinforcing that adopters are valued members of your shelter’s community and you appreciate the time and effort someone has taken to adopt!