

# HOW TO TEACH INTERMEDIATE & ADVANCED LEARNERS

## LIKE A PRO

43 TOP SECRETS EVERY TEACHER OF INTERMEDIATE & ADVANCED LEARNERS SHOULD KNOW

HOW TO  
ASSIST YOUR LEARNERS  
ON THEIR WAY TO FLUENCY  
HOW TO PRESENT  
COMPLEX TOPICS

DEBATES AND  
DISCUSSIONS

AND MUCH,  
MUCH  
MORE

EVERYTHING  
YOU NEED TO KNOW  
TO TEACH INTERMEDIATE &  
ADVANCED LEARNERS

 STRAIGHTFORWARD STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS, CLEARLY AND SIMPLY EXPLAINED

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# I Don't Know What They Don't Know: 5 Steps for Teaching the Intermediate ESL Student

SO YOU'VE BEEN ASSIGNED AN INTERMEDIATE ESL THIS TERM AFTER A NUMBER OF TERMS TEACHING BEGINNING ESL STUDENTS. THIS SHOULD BE A BREEZE!

The students understand everything you say, can follow directions, and can carry on a conversation. After a week or so, however, you realize it is NOT a breeze. In fact, it's much more challenging than any class you've taught yet! A small contingent of students complains of being bored while other students say they can't understand any of the material. You seem to spend more time on lesson planning than ever before, with only student boredom and confusion to show as a result. Even the student who seems to you the most fluent in English and acculturated to the U.S. confesses he spends hours on his homework and still doesn't understand it. What's going on?

Well, the first problem is to paraphrase a scholar on the topic of assessment, "there are many rooms in the house of 'intermediate.'" Many different students with different levels of English skill can be legitimately called "intermediate": for example, those with strong conversational and life skills in English but almost no academic or literacy skills as well as those with strong reading and writing skills who have trouble carrying on a conversation. This creates a problem for curriculum and instruction: what exactly do you focus on and teach in such a class? While you knew the appropriate material for a beginning student and an advanced student, the needs of the intermediate student are not so apparent. An activity, such as working on the distinction between simple present and present continuous tense, may interest some students but bore others. **How may these problems be addressed?**

## HOW TO TEACH INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS

### 1 DIAGNOSTIC

Give a short diagnostic at the beginning of the term. For example, a small dictation followed by a reading with short answer questions is a versatile tool that can be used again and again. This doesn't take a long time to administer, and it reveals some important information on each student's reading, writing, and listening skills. In addition, the instructor can get some information about the class, collectively: if it is trending toward the low or high end of intermediate, for example, or if the class as a whole seems to have better reading and writing skills than listening. This information can inform future lesson planning.

### 2 NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Unlike beginning students, students at this level can be asked what they need to work on and what their goals are, both short and long term. If most of your students are job-oriented, for example, it might make more sense to work on conversational and pronunciation skills than on academic reading and writing. However, if more students have ambitions of obtaining a university degree, then additional emphasis can be placed on developing their academic vocabularies.

### 3 VARIETY OF MATERIALS

Textbooks often cannot meet the varied needs of an intermediate class because of the range of abilities and interests, and instructors may find themselves relying on supplementary materials such as newspaper and magazine articles and websites for

teachers or chapters from select textbooks that allow duplication of class sets. If you notice a problem with present perfect tense, for example, you can just select a chapter from a grammar text to focus on that specific point rather than going through the whole text.

This variety of different materials increases the probability of reaching more students and holding student interest.

### 4 VARY INSTRUCTION

Just as the materials should be varied, so should the instruction. Instructors find themselves sometimes locked into a favorite mode of instruction, such as giving dictation, or playing vocabulary games, or student reading followed by class discussion. Using a variety of instruction rather than one type increases the probability of meeting all students' needs.

### 5 VARY GROUPINGS

And just as the materials and instruction should be varied in an intermediate class, so should the grouping strategies. Many ESL teachers have been trained in the value of group instruction, but not all students learn best this way. Some students learn best while working individually. The instruction should be varied from individual, to small group, to large group instruction throughout the course of a lesson.

### 6 FINE TUNE AS YOU GO

As the semester progresses, you may note common problems in paragraphing, for example or in stress and intonation. Give lessons in these

areas as you note the problems. Give frequent assessment, both formal assessments of quizzes and tests to the more informal homework checks as well as just walking around and noting student interactions in English during discussion. Use the information from these checks to adjust instruction.

**TEACHER CAN MEET STUDENT NEEDS AND SET UP A STRONG CLASS.**

## **7 STUDENT FEEDBACK**

Ask the students periodically how the class is going for them - they can give their feedback anonymously. I'll do several of these checks throughout the semester, starting several weeks in, perhaps after the first test. I'll ask students to write on a piece of paper the answer to the questions "How is the class going for you?" and "Are there any changes you'd like to see?" They then fold the paper and hand it in - no need to give a name. Most students just write things like "It's great," or "So far so good," but sometimes they have valuable feedback like "I'd like more reading," or "The teacher speaks too quickly"—sometimes painful but important information! Personally I like the validation of "Everything is perfect!" but this gives little information for improving the class. I'd rather know about concerns near the beginning of class when they can be addressed than in the course evaluation at the end.

The term "intermediate" encompasses a variety of different students: those who have just a little conversational fluency but strong reading skills, or those who have good conversational fluency but poor grammar and writing skills, those with defined vocational goals, and those who want to continue pursuing a university education.

**SERVING ALL OF THESE DIFFERENT STUDENTS WITH DIFFERENT SKILLS AND NEEDS IS NOT EASY. IN FACT, THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL MAY BE THE MOST DIFFICULT OF THE ESL LEVELS TO TEACH. HOWEVER, BY GATHERING INFORMATION ON THE STUDENTS AND THE CLASS, VARYING MATERIALS AND INSTRUCTION, AND GATHERING STUDENT FEEDBACK, THE ESL**

# How to Assist Your Intermediate Students on their Way to Fluency

**SOMETIME AFTER THE HIGH BEGINNING LEVEL OR A YEAR OF STUDY, SOMETHING HAPPENS TO MANY ESL STUDENTS.**

Formerly attentive eyes glaze over, always before enthusiastic students now are lethargic, absences go up, and sometimes students stop coming to class all together. “I’m so bored,” and “We’ve done this before” are frequent refrains about the class and instruction. What is going on? Instead of giving in to frustration, you might consider facing your students are dealing with the dreaded plateau.

## WHAT IS THE PLATEAU?

This is a basically intermediate level where students have acquired a certain amount of fluency. They can understand and be understood in most routine social situations in English. They are still markedly nonnative speakers, however, with distinct differences between their grammar and pronunciation than that of native speakers. Getting past this plateau and on the way to true advanced, fluent, and correct English speech is difficult, and it’s not coincidental that most second language learners worldwide don’t get past the intermediate level. So how do we help our students avoid getting stuck at eternal intermediate speakers and beat the odds in making it to the advanced level?

## 5 METHODS OF GETTING PAST THE DREADED INTERMEDIATE PLATEAU

### 1 ADDRESS CLASS NEEDS

Do a diagnostic at the beginning of class, such as having students write a “phone message” dictated by you and then do a simple writing assignment, such as a “life lesson” students learned. In this way, teachers can begin to get an idea of students’ varied skills and can begin to plan the activities around common needs—if most students need to work on past tense verbs, for example, or sentence fragments, then that is where the focus should be, no matter what the class text might suggest.

### 2 ADDRESS INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

If possible, interview each student, discussing his or her future plans and what he or she wants to get out of the course. If it’s not possible to interview each student, have them make tapes of themselves addressing their plans and goals. In this way, the teacher can find some common goals to focus on: perhaps a majority of students want to go into the health care industry, for example, suggesting a focus for vocabulary instruction. In addition, some common areas for pronunciation instruction, such as stress and intonation, can also be identified.

### 3 ADDRESS CURRICULUM AND MATERIALS

Many institutions are not prepared for addressing the needs of the intermediate student. I remember teaching a group of high beginners/intermediates the distinction between the simple and progressive present tense—over and over. The school had a “grammar –centric curriculum” and most of the materials seem to focus on this particular verb tense distinction. If the same material is repeated, of course students will complain of boredom. Look into instead some of their more advanced needs: grammar such as the passive voice and stress and intonation patterns for pronunciation, for example, are issues that can begin to be addressed at an intermediate level.

### 4 RELEVANT CURRICULUM

Most students at this level have identified specific goals, and may find some curriculum too elementary or irrelevant to their needs, hence the complaints of boredom. While the short stories of O’Henry and poetry of Robert Frost, for example, might be charming, especially to students of literature, ESL students might have limited patience for this as their needs are more immediately related to developing job or academic—usually non-arts and literature related—skills to survive in the work or academic world. Tie these goals to the curriculum by having students read and write relevant workplace and academic documents such as memos, reports, and

essays.

### 5 TIE THE CLASS TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Because they will shortly be entering this outside world, connect students to it! Have them go on fieldtrips, if possible, to important local sites. For example, my city of Sacramento, California is the seat of government of the largest and one of the most influential states in the nation, so taking students to the State Capitol and learning about what the government does and jobs that are generated by it is valuable learning for students. In addition, Sacramento is located in the Central Valley of California, one of the richest sources of agriculture in the world. A trip south to Lodi, California, for example, will give students exposure to the powerful wine industry. In addition, right in our city is a branch of C and H, the sugar company, again giving students exposure to the agricultural industry. These field trips can be tied back the classroom with related readings, as the history of wine and sugar production are long, multicultural, and rich in human interest. In addition to the readings, study of individual industries usually is replete with new vocabulary: for example, the word for the study of wine is “oenology,” something I learned not long ago. Besides field trips to places off campus, students can stay on campus and sit in on lectures of classes related to their interest by prior arrangement - usually the professors of these classes are happy to have them there. Finally, guest speakers in the fields of medicine, law, and technology can visit the class and talk about fields related to the students’ interests, other teachers might be good resources for these speakers as these are fields their spouses and friends could be in! Satisfying the needs of intermediate students is not easy. It can be all too easy to fall into the trap of repeating the same curriculum of presenting the verb tenses over and over again until students “master” them. However, given that it might take several years for such mastery and that students at this level have other needs, it is important for the growth of the intermediate student to expand the curriculum into more academic and work-related curriculum and materials to truly meet their needs.



# Where To From Here? Teaching the Advanced ESL Student

**CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'VE BEEN ASSIGNED YOUR FIRST ADVANCED CLASS, SOMETHING YOU'VE WANTED TO TRY FOR A LONG TIME. AND YOU'VE HAD YOUR FIRST CLASS SESSION. STUDENTS WERE BRIGHT, ENGAGING, AND PARTICIPATED ENTHUSIASTICALLY. THEIR ENGLISH IS STRONG AND CONFIDENT. SO WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?**

Well, their English is so good—fluent, correct, even precise—that you aren't quite sure what to teach them! You suspect that many of them know English as well as you. That might actually be true in some areas for some students—having formally studied English for many years, they might have a more precise understanding of grammar, for example, than the teacher, who relies more on native-speaker intuition-- but there are still some things that most advanced students can learn in an ESL class.

## HOWTO: TEACHING THE ADVANCED ESL STUDENT

### 1 PRONUNCIATION/ACCENT REDUCTION

Even fluent ESL students can usually use some work on their pronunciation. Have students do individual diagnostics by reading a passage while being taped. In this way, you can find common as well as individual concerns for the whole class. Focus on larger issues that might impede comprehensibility, such as faulty intonation patterns (such as failing to use rising intonation for questions) and stress (failing to reduce structure words and giving all words the same stress in a sentence). These are usually of more concern than relatively minor issues of individual speech sounds.

### 2 WRITING AND COMPOSITION SKILLS

Focus on writing beyond the college essay, which the students may have been studying for years. Instead find out what careers students would like to hold

after school, and focus on some of the writing they are likely to encounter in the workplace: memos, reports, analyses, and recommendations.

### 3 GRAMMAR, EDITING, AND PROOFREADING

As with pronunciation, even fluent ESL students will differ from native speakers in issues of grammar and editing. Have students start a portfolio, analyze their own writing in terms of the corrections you make, and from this they can create an inventory of their personal trouble spots, which may include word endings, such as “-s” and “-ed.” Have students then get into the habit of trading papers with a peer and proofing for these errors or make two or three passes looking for the problem areas in their papers before handing them in.

### 4 READING, INFERENCES, AND ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Advanced ESL students often have good reading comprehension skills, especially at the surface level - what they often lack, however, is understanding inferences or the underlying meanings. These underlying meanings are critical to comprehension as a whole. For example, a story I like to teach for inferences is “Reunion,” by John Cheever, a story of no more than several pages in which a boy calls his estranged father and asks to meet him at Grand Central Station for lunch as he's heading home, to his mother's, for summer break. The father meets him at the station, proceeds to take him to several restaurants where he gets into arguments at each with the staff and gets kicked out. They return to the station so the boy can catch his train, the father now in tears. The boy vows never to see his father again as he boards the train. ESL students are invariably confused by the story and why the father acts as he does, while adult native speakers are usually aware of a number of implications: the father is drunk, was drunk when he met his son, gets more

so as the afternoon wears on, he is an alcoholic, in fact, and the story makes a powerful statement on how substance abuse can destroy families.

Giving students a reading like this and discussing it—why is the father acting this way? Why does he keep going from restaurant to restaurant? — can help students spot these unstated suppositions and develop their inferential reading skills.

### 5 ACADEMIC LISTENING AND NOTETAKING

Even native speakers can struggle with academic listening and notetaking skills and must be trained in them. There are textbooks that build exercises around lectures from places like NPR, National Public Radio, on topics such as the ethics of stem cell research. I don't advocate necessarily using such a text as the core text—few texts at this level can meet that role—but a chapter every week or two is a good supplement to the class. Or the instructor could also download a lecture from the web and develop her own exercises.

### 6 STUDY OF IDIOMATIC LANGUAGE

Even advanced ESL students can use some work on idiomatic language. This doesn't mean the relatively rare “colorful” language such as “raining cats and dogs,” but the way that words tend to combine: “process cultivated over time,” “ongoing awareness,” and “insightful change of behavior” all occurred in one paragraph of an academic text opened at random. The class can spend some time each session or each week going over the idiomatic language that occurs in course reading.

### 7 FINE TUNING OF CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Often ESL students need to develop

their understanding of the everyday life and behavior of their new culture, often having lived here a short time and learned English somewhere else. Again, by “culture,” I don’t necessarily mean the big celebrations, like Thanksgiving, which students generally do learn about, but the everyday patterns of behavior that are so “minor” that they can go unnoticed. A Chinese student once expressed surprise, for example, that Americans, when exiting a building, generally turn back to see if anyone is behind and will hold the door if so. Similarly, recently a German student told me how shocked her husband was when, at a working lunch, an American colleague rose, went to the buffet table, came back with a plate of food, and continued with the meeting while eating. These behaviors may seem “natural” to most Americans (indeed, I am typing this article in a cafe, with a plate of food), and not worth discussing, but because people from other cultures are surprised by the behaviors, they are not “natural” but cultural. It is for this reason that novel habits students notice in their new countries should be discussion and writing topics.

## 8 HISTORY OF THEIR NEW NATION

Americans are notorious for their lack of understanding of their own history—fitting for a people obsessed with youth. But anyone who lives here should understand, for example, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement and their long-term effects. Even relatively recent history, such as the Vietnam War, was a watershed event, creating a permanent distrust in leadership, among other effects. Without understanding the Vietnam War, it may be hard to understand contemporary American life.

## 9 FILMS AND BOOKS

Both film and books are ways to simultaneously develop language and cultural understanding. The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, is a powerful novel on the American experience and generally recognized as one of the great American novels. And it is also manageably short, at fewer than 200 pages. A new movie version is currently being made, so studying the book and then the film could be a core learning experience.

## 10 RESUME AND JOB INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Finally, advanced ESL class is a great opportunity to work on resume and job interview skills. Some students are unfamiliar with the job hunt process, having come from cultures where people don’t compete for jobs as they do in the U.S. but rather are placed in them according to skill and education. Explaining the process, showing model resumes, and practicing interviews can be a big help to ESL students.

### SO DOES THE ADVANCED ESL STUDENT HAVE ANYTHING LEFT TO LEARN? ABSOLUTELY! THERE’S ALWAYS MORE TO LEARN.

The key is to be selective and choose those topics most helpful to students in transitioning into university classes or the workplace. By focusing on improving pronunciation, reading, and writing skills and teaching students job search skills needed to move into the workplace, class days will be filled in no time.



# What Every Teacher Should Know About Reaching Advanced Learners

**TEACHING ADVANCED LANGUAGE LEARNERS IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM TEACHING ANY OTHER LEVEL.**

Every teacher should have exposure to all different levels, but just like beginners, advanced students require a distinct kind of effort. We've devised some tips that every teacher should know about reaching (and keeping) advanced learners.

## REACHING ADVANCED LEARNERS

### 1 TAP INTO WHAT THEY KNOW

Because students are approaching fluency in English, they have several years under their belts of studying the language. This is a great resource for the teacher because you can tap into what they already know and expand upon it. For example, higher level learners generally have a good grasp of difficult tenses and grammar points. You can tap into this by challenging their expertise. Offer them opportunities to show off their knowledge by involving them in activities that offer a well-rounded, all four skills approach. One way is to require them do interviews of people outside of the class on a particular topic and then present that to the class. Another idea is having each of them be the teacher for a day, and allowing them to choose what and how they would like to introduce or review. Also, don't be afraid to ask your class for ideas on how they would like to learn. Get their input and then run with your creativity. Think of ways that you can draw out skills they already have and then focus on strengthening the skill.

### 2 CHALLENGE THEM IN NEW WAYS

Advanced learners know their grammar and often are hungry for a deeper understanding of the nuances of the language. There are lots of ways that you can challenge your advanced classes. One area where advanced

learners need to be challenged is in developing their vocabulary and more natural ways of speaking. This is where learning a lot of phrasal verbs and expressions comes into play, and can be quite advantageous. You'll want to find new ways of incorporating new vocabulary and seeing language in action. Notable ways to do this are by reading or watching movies. You can find lots of great resources, and may even want to consider giving them some good young adult fiction to read and decipher or have them watch animated kids' movies. Debates and in-depth guided classroom discussions can also be wonderfully adventurous and challenging.

### 3 APPROACH HIGH-LEVEL GRAMMAR

You can dive into more in-depth grammar and tense practice, and induce a truly interested and heartened response. As the teacher, you need to have an extremely firm grasp of anything that you review or introduce, because the students will have very complex questions. Reviewing or introducing topics like passive voice, reported speech, or higher level tenses can sometimes be intimidating to native speakers. Be sure that you are secure in your grammar knowledge when you go into an advanced level class. They will come up with amazing questions, and though it may not sound like fun, you may find yourself in some fascinating discussions about language usage and origin. Engaging advanced learners on that kind of level is really important to keep up their interest level and motivation. It is also a perfect time to dissect the language they have been so intimately involved with for so long. Take them on those grammatical rides, and dig in deep.

### 4 TEACH TO THEIR INTERESTS AND NEEDS

This philosophy applies to each and every class that you teach. You have to teach to the students' interests as well as to their needs. Advanced level

learners have very distinct priorities and many of them may have sizable goals they are working toward with their language skills. This takes getting to know your students by creating ways for them to share their interests and goals through classroom activities and interactions. Advanced students may be studying for any number of tests like the TOEFL or Citizenship tests. They may also have aims like getting into a college program or getting a better job. These are abundant topics that you can incorporate into your lessons. Their personal interests will vary, but it is a must to keep those at the center of your mind when creating activities and generating ideas. It will garner greater involvement and motivation from the students.

### 5 AVOID THE PLATEAU

The language learning plateau can happen at different stages and levels for students, but it is very common among advanced learners. It is a stretch of time where they feel their language acquisition has come to a standstill and that there is little progression being made. By challenging learners, maintaining an open dialogue and constantly engaging them with fresh practice you will aid learners in avoiding the plateau. Some ways to do this are encouraging them to take risks, creating ways for them to get out of their safety zone and showing them that there is always more they can learn and improve.

**TEACHING ADVANCED LEARNERS IS AN ADVENTUROUS LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR ALL TEACHERS. EVERY TEACHER CAN EMPLOY THESE TACTICS TO HOOK ADVANCED LEARNERS AND KEEP THEM COMING BACK FOR MORE! TAKING PART IN INFLUENCING ADVANCED LEARNERS' FLUENCY IS DEFINITELY AN AMAZING AND ENRICHING EXPERIENCE.**

# How to Present Complex Topics for Advanced Learners

TEACHING ADVANCED LEARNERS CAN REALLY BE A LOT FUN AND A TERRIFIC LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR THE STUDENTS AND THE TEACHER. THERE IS NO BETTER TIME IN A STUDENT'S CAREER TO EXPOSE THEM TO COMPLEX TOPICS THAT CAN BE UTILIZED IN A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT WAYS. FOLLOW THESE TIPS TO GET STUDENTS THINKING ABOUT THE BIGGER ISSUES IN LIFE AND A LARGER WORLD.

## HOW TO PRESENT COMPLEX TOPICS FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS

### 1 CHOOSING TOPICS

The biggest issue with approaching meaty topics in an ESL class is choosing what topics will offer your class the most mileage and learning possibilities. You have a lot of options, and a lot of your choices will be based on what will motivate your students. Think about what kinds of things will prompt them to get really passionate and involved. Here are some considerations to make with some of the various topical choices.

Social issues can be defined as problems or matters, which affect a group of people or the whole society in general, either directly or indirectly. Social issues also have a very wide scope. There are many different types of social issues, some of them very broad-based and others very specific. Social issues should pertain intimately to your class. So if you are overseas, you'll want to consider what localized social issues you can think of to bring into play that students will have knowledge and opinions about. A good starting point may be to have a discussion with your students about social issues. Then you could do a brainstorming activity in which they come up with social issues that are relevant to them, and then categorize them. Here are some examples:

- Homelessness, immigration, poverty: human rights-
- Global warming, pollution, recycling: environmental
- Unemployment: economic
- Cancer cures: health
- Information age: technology

- Elections, scandals, terrorism, war: politics

This list will be long and you can ask students to add as much detail as you would like. Just having this discussion with them about the issues that are central to their lives, is a discussion about considerable issues. Ask the students to choose five topics from their long list that they, as a group, would like to discuss, learn more about and base projects upon.

### 2 ACTIVITIES

From there you can devise some activities based upon the issues your students have chosen. Some of what you can do will be determined by the topics they chose. If they chose many controversial issues that could easily be argued, you can set up debates or projects in which they research a particular viewpoint of an issue. Debates are a wonderful way to get students talking, but they do take a significant amount of prep work and lead up time if they are really going to be successful. If the students chose a political topic an elaborate way to incorporate that into the class, is to have an election situation or debate between candidates. This also takes some prep work ahead of time, and students will each need to have a very specific role. Divide the class into small groups and then assign the groups a political party—could be Democrats, Independents, Republicans, or whatever is relevant to their country. Have each group decide what their three main topics are going to be (jobs, healthcare, immigration, etc.) that they will discuss and target. You can then either have a debate or election where each party has to take questions from a mediator and/or the public. This is a great lesson if it happens to be an election year. You can adapt it to be as involved or as simplistic as you want. Students will need time to research and put together their talking points.

If they chose issues that aren't so heated, but that are better-suited to discussion, you can formulate discussion topics or questions. Then formulate different ways to divide the class up and have days where you have three to four

stations set up. At each station a different discussion is taking place, and students can join in and move around as they choose. This is a more light-hearted activity that could be done for parts of a class and then students come back together as a group and debrief about what they gained from the discussions.

### 3 READINGS

One last strategy for bringing complex topics to light is to bring in a reading. It could be an article, a story, or even a book of your choosing. If students have shown interest in certain types of readings before, include readings which have strong morals, interesting outcomes, and plenty of space for analyzing and dissecting. Students might be a little leery at first, so you may want to start small, especially if you are going to focus on a work of fiction. There are guided readers that are available for ESL learners that you can tap into, and often those have built in discussion questions and activities. You can always come up with your own ways of how you want to generate discussion of larger topics with readings. You can have students answer questions at home and then do small group discussion. You could also have students pick an excerpt that they particularly like or that resonated with them and use that as your discussion starting point. One other thing you might like to try is to have students do predictions at a certain point in the story, or even write their own alternate endings. When readings have an underlying social issue like the book *The Help*, your possibilities for discussion and dissection of text, meanings, and language is unlimited.

UTILIZING COMPLEX SOCIAL ISSUES AS LAUNCH PADS FOR DISCUSSION AND DIALOGUE IS A BENEFICIAL WAY FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN NEW WAYS OF EXPRESSING THEMSELVES. STUDENTS WILL RESPOND BEST WHEN THE SUBJECT MATTER HITS HOME FOR THEM. BY BRINGING IN THESE TOPICS, AND ALLOWING YOUR STUDENTS TO VOICE OPINIONS, ARGUE, AND CHALLENGE ONE ANOTHER YOU ARE FACILITATING IN A VERY CONSTRUCTIVE AND MEANINGFUL WAY.

# How to Help Students Build Their Specific Academic Vocabulary

YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE, ANOTHER STUDENT GREETED ME AS I ENTERED CLASS WITH, “HEY! DID YOU BRING THE STUFF FOR THE THING?”

“YEAH,” I SAID. “IT’S IN THE YOU KNOW.”

And the frightening part is we were both native speakers of English and were discussing a class presentation we were preparing. (Fortunately, our professor didn’t hear this exchange.) Of course, this was not how we talked during the presentation but rather in a more informal situation where both of us understood each other’s cues perfectly: my classmate did indeed know where I meant by “the you know” and went there to fetch “the stuff for the thing.” So communication was indeed taking place, but this was with someone I had known for many years and in a context we were both very familiar with. Would such language, however, succeed with an unfamiliar audience and in a more formal, written communication? Of course not—someone not deeply familiar with the immediate situation would be left scratching his head. However, it seems with some writers this kind of vague and empty communication that leaves a lot for the audience to fill in occurs although perhaps at a more academic level. Instead of “stuff,” and “thing,” for example, writers use equally vague although more academic-sounding “elements” and “items.” Instead of “a bunch,” writers will use the more academic-seeming “several,” which I always took to mean three or four, but for many writers today seems to mean somewhere in between three and a thousand. And instead of using “you know,” directly, writers will proceed as if the audience does indeed know what they are thinking.

## SO WHAT’S A TEACHER TO DO? HOW DO WE TEACH MORE SPECIFIC & ACADEMIC VOCABULARY?

### 1 RAISE AWARENESS: CIRCLE ALL OF THE VAGUE LANGUAGE

Addressing almost any problem begins with becoming aware of it. Students don’t know they are being vague unless you tell them they are. Circling problem areas in student writing with “this is unclear to me” begins to raise awareness on the issue.

### 2 CHANGE THE PERSPECTIVE

Sometimes student writing stays on this vague, noncommittal plane because students believe that specific writing is somehow more elementary and less formal. They should be disabused of this notion and shown, through example, that specific writing is best. Pull out examples of writing by Joan Didion, E.B. White, and Martin Luther King and show these great writers are almost unfailingly specific. King, for example, does not make vague references to “some guys” suffering “a lot of different abuse” in a “certain place and time” but rather writes compellingly of the suffering of African Americans in 1963 Alabama—and it is only compelling because he writes specifically. The reader doesn’t care so much about unspecified “people” but might care deeply about specific fellow countrymen and women. King’s work is no less academic and great because it is specific but rather is great only because it’s specific.

### 3 CONTRAST SPECIFIC & VAGUE

Telling students to “Be Specific” isn’t very... specific. Often they have no idea what you mean. Take a paragraph of a great and well-known piece of writing, like the Gettysburg Address and add as much vagueness to it as possible: Instead of the familiar and fairly specific Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, read aloud “Some-time ago some people brought forth in some place some nation conceived in something and dedicated to some set of principles.” Don’t be surprised if students start giggling as they recognize the Gettysburg Address and realize how bad the revision is. This is a good sign: they are beginning to understand good writing.

### 4 QUERY THE WRITER

When asked specific questions, the writer is forced into giving specific answers. So when the vague, pseudo-academic vocabulary pops up in writing, pencil a question: “How many, exactly, is ‘several’?” or “What, exactly, are ‘elements’ here?” Then take the students’ responses and show how they can be stated in an academic manner.

### 5 SUGGEST ACADEMIC WORDS

Students often fall back on vague, nonspecific language because they simply don’t know the specific terms. Suggest language they may use instead: “By ‘water’ here do you mean a lake? Or a lagoon?” Is ‘machine’ here a tractor?” “By ‘nice,’ do you mean friendly? Compassionate?”

### 6 DECLARE VAGUE WORDS TABOO

Create and give out a list of “taboo” words that usually add nothing to writing and can be replaced with better words: “thing,” “nice,” and “cool” are likely suspects. Have students brainstorm similar words that to add to the list: this creates further buy-in and makes students more likely to search for better words as they helped create the list.

### 7 WRITERS QUERY THEMSELVES

Often students’ vague writing is symptomatic of vague thinking. There is no one “treatment” for vague thinking, of course, but one way to address it is to train students to, on coming upon vague language like the taboo words or the vague language they have circled, is to query themselves, “Who, exactly, do I mean by ‘some folks’?” and “Where, precisely, is ‘this weird forest place?’” Students can do this after getting used to your queries, and this creates a habit of thinking in specifics, which leads to better thinking and better writing.

### 8 WORK ON AUDIENCE AWARENESS

Another aspect of the problem of vague student writing is students not having a real sense of writing to anyone in particular, so they are not concerned about whether or not this unspecified audience understands them. Having students work in peer review groups, reading and commenting on each other’s work, creates this sense of audience. Students will then stop and ask themselves, “Will the group understand ‘stuff’?” Once the groups have worked together for awhile, it might help to mix them up and have students do peer review with a relative stranger in class, who isn’t used to their writing and who doesn’t know what they mean. See how well their writing communicates with a fresh audience.



# 5 Ways to Help ESL Students Start Improving Academic Vocabulary

**MANY ESL STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY YOUNG ONES, COME TO CLASS WITH FAIRLY STRONG CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH SKILLS, WHICH THEY HAVE LEARNED FROM INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR PEERS ON PLAYGROUNDS, IN PARKS, AND OTHER AREAS OF PLAY AND SOCIALIZING.**

What many young ESL student lack is academic English, the language used for academia, the professions, and business. Academic English is what is used in college classes and professional work, and research shows that a strong vocabulary leads to higher educational gains, higher-paying jobs, and improved life quality overall. With so much at stake, it is clear we should be concerned about our students' academic vocabularies. But how specifically do we address it? And what exactly is it? How does it differ from conversational vocabulary?

## QUALITIES OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

### 1 MULTISYLLABIC

Academic vocabulary tends to be multisyllabic, comprised of morphemes, or word parts, each of which carry meaning. Conversational vocabulary, on the other hand, because it is more contextualized, relies less on the words carrying meaning than academic vocabulary. Conversational English is contextualized, and the context carries the meaning. For example, a recent conversation with my daughter went something like “What time should I pick you up?” “Five, Mom.” “I’m sorry, what time?” “Five!” Not one word in that exchange has more than one syllable because of the context and the ability to clarify: I was able to check with my daughter about what time she had said. The context, of a mother dropping her daughter off in the morning and asking about the pick up time, is also familiar to most readers and requires little elaboration.

Look at this similar exchange in academic vocabulary:

*To: Parents*

*From: Principal*

*Re: Departure Time*

*In order to depart in a timely manner, please arrange to have your child at the school by eight a.m.*

*Please ensure that he or she is prepared with appropriate clothes and lunch. Failure to follow these directions will result in the child's inability to participate in the trip.”*

Note the numerous multisyllabic words here, the long and detailed sentences, and the impersonal tone—all are features of academic vocabulary in contrast to the personal, immediate, and monosyllabic nature of conversational.

### 2 LATIN ORIGIN

Many words in academic vocabulary are of Latin origin because institutions of higher learning in England used Latin while English, a Germanic language, was used in more every day settings. This is one reason students have difficulty with academic language—its vocabulary is very different from that of the English they already know. For example, in academic/medical vocabulary, it is “obese female” as opposed to the more familiar conversational (and rude as opposed to impersonal) “fat girl” or “fat woman.”

### 3 ABSTRACT

Academic vocabulary tends to be abstract, dealing with ideas rather than the concrete, as with conversational vocabulary. “Capitalism,” “violence,” “educational system,” “legislation,” “law enforcement”—all of these are abstractions I have seen in the news recently, and more suited for news reports or academic essays. More commonly, in conversational English, they are “money,” “fighting,” “school,” “law,” and “police” or “cop.”

Students already know the conversa-

tional version. What they need to learn is the academic equivalent or “translation.”

### 4 TECHNICAL

Academic vocabulary is technical and precise, meant to convey specific ideas, often when the context is reduced. So while a parent may tell his child to “Get down from there, now!” from an amusement ride, the sign on the ride may read “Please demount the amusement ride when finished.” The academic version, for example replaces the familiar “Get down!” with “Dismount” and the nonspecific “there” with “amusement ride,” demonstrating the difference between the two forms due to context.

### 5 IMPERSONAL

Finally, again because of the reduced context and distance between addresser and addressee, academic language is impersonal. While a parent might tell her child “Hurry up, or I’ll leave without you!” a letter from the bus company, because of the lack of relationship between the two parties, might say “Those who do not arrive promptly at 7 am are in danger of being excluded from the trip.” Although the basic idea is the same, the language is very different.

## 5 METHODS TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

### 1 READ

One of the major methods to improve students' academic vocabulary is to read extensively—academic essays, reports, and excerpts from content textbooks. In this way, students

will be exposed to a number of different academic words, some of them from their future majors.

## 2 KEEP A WORD JOURNAL

Studies show that students not only need to be exposed to higher-level vocabulary, but they also need to work with it in order to acquire it and make it a part of their own vocabularies. One way to do this is the use of a word journal, in which students record at least three new words they have encountered in each reading, a definition, the part of speech, and a new sentence with the word. This provides some extra processing to help students assimilate the new word into their own vocabularies.

## 3 TEACH MORPHOLOGY

Learning morphology, or the parts of words, is an excellent way to help students decode new academic words. Again, academic vocabulary is multisyllabic, and most of these syllables, or morphemes, carry their own meaning. As a simple example, words that end in “—ment” in academic English are almost always abstract nouns: government, employment, containment, etc. In another example, “morphology” is comprised of two morphemes, “morpho” or shape, form, and “—ology,” meaning “study of.” So “morphology” is the study of (word) forms.

## 4 SET UP DISCUSSION GROUPS

To further acquire academic vocabulary, students can be assigned groups, given a specific academic topic, such as gun control and the United States, and some academic vocabulary to go with it: “legislation,” “Congress,” “(Second) Amendment,” and so on. They can then discuss what they think about how gun control is practiced in the United States, using the vocabulary assigned.

## 5 ESSAYS

Finally students can write essays on academic topics, like the difference in the legislative process, or how laws are passed, between the U.S. and other countries. This topic, unlike more common topics like “My Favorite Place,” is more likely to draw on academic vocabulary because even to discuss such an abstract process as passing laws I will need abstract, multisyllabic words, unlike those used in describing specific places.

**ACQUIRING NEW VOCABULARY, AND AN ACADEMIC ONE, IS A DIFFICULT PROCESS, REQUIRING COMMITMENT OVER A PERIOD OF TIME.**

**HOWEVER, THE REWARDS IN INCREASED EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES MAKE THE EFFORT WORTH IT.**

# Phrases, Structures, and Register of Academia

**RECENTLY I WAS DRIVING MY DAUGHTER TO HER MUSIC LESSON AFTER SCHOOL, AND SHE NOTICED THE LARGE AMOUNT OF TRAFFIC, WHICH WAS STRANGE FOR FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON.**

I told her that given our economic situation in California, it was “not uncommon” for people to leave work early because their hours had been cut. “Why did you say it like that?” she asked. “Not uncommon? Why not just say ‘common’?” I started to laugh, realizing, having just gotten off work myself, I had brought the academic “register,” or situationally appropriate language, into a conversational one. The great early twentieth century writer George Bernard Shaw had actually warned against just the usage my daughter complained about with the silliness of “A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall dog across a not ungreen field.” But Mr. Shaw came from a journalistic background, a different register which values brevity.

So in answer to my daughter’s question I would say, “In an academic situation ‘not uncommon’ and ‘common’ are not exactly alike.” I agree that in other settings “not uncommon” is silly, but by using it in an academic setting, I actually mark myself as a member of this community. Second, there is a shade of difference between the two forms of “common” and “not uncommon”: if someone observes, for example, summer weather into November in California is “strange,” I might protest it is “not uncommon.” However, if I’m raising the point myself, I would likely say, “It’s common to have long summers in California.” “Not un--” seems to be in response to a previously raised point.

So “not uncommon” is a specific phrase that students can use to clearly mark themselves a member of the academic community. There are some other words, phrases, and structures that students can use to place themselves within the academic community and therefore—because to join

a community, you must speak its language—be taken seriously within that community and obtain a certain goal, such as permission to register late for a class. Many of these forms are, like “not un—,” rarely used outside of academia. In addition, because of their relative rarity or complexity, they may serve to obscure rather than illuminate an issue, sometimes deliberately.

## WORDS, PHRASES, STRUCTURES OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH

### 1 INDEED

This word is used to emphasize a point. It is one of those words that is rarely used in conversational American English although it is used in writing: “Class size is not shrinking in California. Indeed, it has grown exponentially over the past decade.” Here “indeed” connects two opposing ideas as well as serves to emphasize the second point.

### 2 SCARCELY

“Scarcely” is scarcely seen outside of academic writing. In conversation, American English prefers “hardly”: “I have hardly any money left at the end of the month.” However, in academic writing, preferred would probably be “There is scarcely any funding left for that particular project.” Since it seems to carry the same meaning as “hardly,” “scarcely” seems to be one of those words that exists solely to distinguish the academic from non-academic registers.

### 3 WITH ALL DUE RESPECT

This phrase seems to often precede a sharp criticism: e.g., “With all due respect, Dr. Smith, I find you very inflexible and unaccommodating,” serving as an apparent attempt to soften the criticism.

### 4 PLEASE ADVISE

This is a phrase than in recent

years seems to have crept into the ending lines of an email from students: e.g., “With three weeks left in your course, I haven’t completed most of the work. Please advise.” It’s a form I have a personal irritation with: usually my advice would seem obvious—in this case, take the course another semester--and with the use of this “magic phrase,” of “please advise,” the student hopes I will somehow fix the situation. This reveals another issue with language use: often people think there are “magic charms” to its use, and this is sometimes true—the right choice of words can open doors for the talented speaker.

### 5 IT HAS BEEN NOTED BY

This is a phrase found almost solely in the academic register, and is almost always followed by “experts,” “researchers,” and so forth. This phrase is another one that is used by writers to position themselves as members of the academic community, able to refer to previous research.

6 Avoidance of the use of the first person, even when necessary

e.g., “For the entire term, this writer has been researching the topic of multiculturalism in California—”

Well, who is “this writer”? I always think. This is an overgeneralization of the rule to avoid the first person in academic writing. However, as with most rules, there can be overapplication. Especially when asked to write about their own experiences, as college writers often are, use of the first person is almost unavoidable, the alternative being the really awkward “this writer” structure. Apply writing “rules,” which should be called in most cases “general principles,” where they make the most sense.

### 7 “ONE” AS A PRONOUN

Following this avoidance of the first person and general impersonality of the register, not only is “I” avoided, but also “he,” “she,” or “you.”



So instead of the more conversational and natural sentence “You have to do a lot of work to get a teaching credential in California” is the less natural but certainly more academic “In order to obtain a teaching credential in California, one must complete a number of steps.”

**ACQUIRING A NEW REGISTER IS NOT EASY - IN FACT, IT CAN BE AS DIFFICULT AS LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE. BUT THE REWARD IN THE ABILITY TO FUNCTION IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY IS IMMEASURABLE.**

## **8 USE OF PASSIVE VOICE**

Along with “one” and “this writer,” the academic register is replete with the use of the passive voice because of its very impersonalness: no agent of the verb or pronoun need be named at all. For example, in the example above for “one,” in the passive voice, this sentence would appear as “A number of steps must be completed in order to obtain a teaching credential in California.”

## **METHODS FOR TEACHING THE ACADEMIC REGISTER**

### **1 EXTENSIVE READING AND DISCUSSION IN THE REGISTER**

To learn this register - or any, for that matter - students must read and/or speak in it extensively. Assign essays in academic English and then have students discuss them. This will help in students’ acquisition of academic English. After all, they listened to many hours of conversational English before they could speak it fluently - the same holds true for academic English.

### **2 NOTICING THE FORMS OF THE REGISTER**

While reading along with students, make a point each session to focus on a couple of academic usages: a sentence with the passive, “indeed” used as a transition. Discuss why the writer made these choices.

### **3 ASSIGN TASKS THAT DEMAND THE FORMS**

Finally, in essays and other assignments you give students, assign the use of academic forms, such as three sentences in the passive voice. Acquiring a register requires practice: often students won’t practice unless directed to.

# Workplace & Academic Phrases: What Your Students Need to Know

RECENTLY I RECEIVED AN EMAIL FROM A STUDENT. SHE HAD NOT BEEN COMING TO CLASS—IN FACT, NOT ALL TERM, AND THIS WAS THE FIRST I HAD HEARD FROM HER, NOT A PARTICULARLY UNUSUAL SITUATION WHEN DEALING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS. WHAT WAS UNUSUAL WAS HER PROPOSAL TO MAKE UP THE TERM IN A WEEK.

Somewhat stunned, I flatly refused. This resulted in a return email which was such an odd combination of the formal, academic register --“indeed,” “shocking,” “with all due respect,” and the informal conversational style “last straw,” “swept under the rug,”-- that I was further irritated with her as it seemed pretentious. Then I realized the student was just attempting, only partially successfully, to use the academic register, probably to impress me in order to advance her cause, and combining it with the more known conversational. Academic and workplace vocabulary do not come “naturally” just by being exposed to it, but it is necessary in those situations requiring formality, distance, and logic, and requires practice. Furthermore, although different in form, workplace and academic vocabulary perform the same functions such as opening a communication, closing it, showing similarity and contrast, demonstrating results, etc., but in a more formal register than the conversational.

## 10 WORKPLACE & ACADEMIC TERMS YOUR STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW

### 1 TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is the traditional opening of a business letter, directed at someone the writer doesn't know. Somewhat archaic, it is still used in formal situations. Less formal communications will most likely open with “Dear Sir or Madam.”

### 2 IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT

This is used in an academic or business communication in order to call the reader's attention to something: “It should be noted that Monday is a holiday, and the banks are closed.” This is much more formal-sounding than “I just want to let you know—” which performs the same function but in more informal language.

### 3 TAKE INTO ACCOUNT

This phrase roughly means “to remember” or “to consider”: e.g., “In planning the schedule, please take into account the holidays at the end of the month.” It does have a different meaning than either “remember” or “consider” in that it implies that there are a number of factors to consider in making plans, and this is one of them.

### 4 MAKE USE OF

This phrase means about the same as the less formal “use”: e.g., “make use of existing resources” means the same thing as “use existing resources.” Although there may be a slightly different shade of meaning in that “make use of” implies using what is already there rather than going out and acquiring it, while “use” does not, this phrase demonstrates the tendency of business/academic phrases to use (or make use of) more words than necessary.

### 5 AS WE HAVE SEEN

This phrase has the function of referring back to an earlier point: “As we have seen, the company is in a financial down mode and must consider reducing—” Again, more words are used here than strictly necessary. While in general direct, as it makes claims to be, there is also a tendency of this register to use words to obscure rather than clarify meaning. The above sentence could be accomplished with, “We are losing money, and need to cut expenses,” some-

thing few want to hear.

### 6 THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT

With this phrase, the writer concedes a point to the opposition: “Vanilla is really the best ice cream flavor. This is not to say that chocolate doesn't also have merits...” A writer who can recognize other viewpoints is generally taken more seriously by the reader.

### 7 RAISE AWARENESS OF

“Raising awareness” is a concept that has its origins, I believe, in the Civil Rights Movement: civil rights abuses are so often ignored because they seem “natural” and just “the way things are,” so the first step to addressing a social ill such as segregation was seen as “raising awareness” that there even was a problem. This phrase has been expanded to apply to almost any problem: e.g., “Raise awareness on the lack of space in the workroom.”

### 8 TAKE ADVANTAGE OF

This is a phrase that does seem to have a different meaning than conversational English, where it also exists. In conversational English, “take advantage of” is often used to refer to exploiting people, perhaps sexually, as in “He took advantage of her naivety.” In academic/business English, which is more impersonal, the focus tends to be on exploiting the nonhuman: e.g., “take advantage of existing oil supplies.”

### 9 USE RESOURCES

“Use resources” is one of those phrases used a lot in the business/academic world, usually with a focus on saving or not spending money: e.g., “use our existing resources,” “maximize the use of our resources,” and “use our resources wisely.”

### 10 GENERATE A PLAN

Again, this is one of those

phrases that mean about the same as another, simpler one in conversational English, where we simply “make a plan” or “come up with plan.”

## HOW TO TEACH ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS PHRASES

### 1 CALL ATTENTION TO IT

The first part of writing in the academic/business genre is to notice it exists. When reading an academic essay or business letter, call attention to specific vocabulary items the author uses and discuss why he or she might have made those choices.

### 2 NOTICE THE FORM AND THE FUNCTION

After the students have some awareness of the register, work on analyzing it with them. How is this particular phrase functioning? Is there a comparable phrase we use in conversation? Have students “translate” something from the formal register to the informal and then as their skill grows, from the informal to formal. This begins practice with the register.

### 3 PRACTICE

Now is the time to work on actual practice with academic/business language. Assign students a topic and task, so that they are more focused on the language than they would be if they were deciding topic and task themselves: e.g., “Write an essay in which you argue for state-sponsored tuition in college” or “Write a letter in which you try to convince a business why you deserve a refund for a defective washing machine that began malfunctioning just as its warranty expired.” Remind students to stay in the academic/business register as this will cause people to take them more seriously and advance their causes.

### 4 EXTENDED PRACTICE

In further practice, students can begin choosing their own topics and matching the register to the topic and task.

Learning the language for business/academia is not easy, and students’ first attempts might be like my student’s in the introduction, an odd combination of the familiar conversational and the academic just being acquired.

**WITH PRACTICE, HOWEVER, STUDENTS CAN MASTER THIS REGISTER AND THE LANGUAGE THAT WILL INCREASE THEIR CHANCES OF ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS SUCCESS.**



# More Conversational and Academic Phrases

**YOU'VE PROBABLY EXPERIENCED IT, IF YOU'VE STUDIED A SECOND LANGUAGE: SITTING IN RUSSIAN CLASS, FOR EXAMPLE, FOR WEEKS, PERHAPS MONTHS, AND THEN MEETING AN ACTUAL RUSSIAN-SPEAKING PERSON AND REALIZING YOU CAN'T SAY ANYTHING TO HER.**

This is one of the largest complaints of traditional language instruction, and in all fairness, there are a number of culprits: the small amount of time devoted to language learning being one. But another concern is the means of instruction and the curriculum. If students spend large amounts of time conjugating verbs, they won't be able to string two words together for a conversation. Even if they focus on vocabulary, but learn words in lists, students still won't be able to string two words together. But if second language students learn language as a set of useful, everyday phrases — How are you? I'm fine. It's really hot today — they can begin to string two words together. Students are in language class for a limited amount of time, often as little as three hours a week, and this time should be spent on language they can use.

Most of language is formulaic, research has shown—even native speakers, in the pressure of online production, often fall back on formulas: e.g., “Have a nice day,” and “You, too!”

## PHRASES FOR CONVERSATION

The following phrases have been found to be among the most common in English, in *The Grammar of Written and Spoken English*, by Biber and his colleagues (1999).

### SENTENCE STARTERS:

These phrases are useful in that they can be used to start a sentence or even an entire conversation - the student, having memorized the first part, need only fill in the second part. As a student of Russian, for example, I

made ample usage of the phrase “Ya doomayo shto—” (“I think that—”), thereby signaling to the other participants in the conversation that I had a point to make and allowing me time to put that thought together. Many of the following phrases can be used in a similar manner. And they all can be used again and again, on a number of topics, explaining their commonality in the language:

### TO DEMONSTRATE A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OR LACK OF AGREEMENT ON A TOPIC:

*I don't think... I don't know...*

### FOR STORYTELLING OR RECOUNTING A CONVERSATION:

*I went to the... And I said...*

### FOR COMMANDS OR REQUESTS

*Have a look at... Can I have a...*

### COMPLETE SENTENCE RESPONSES

In response to a point made by another speaker, keeping the listener involved in the conversation

*That's a good idea... I don't like it...*

## ACADEMIC PHRASES

Even a significant portion of academic prose is comprised of “ready-made” formulaic expressions—readers of this genre expect a certain kind of language, and in using it, the writer demonstrates his membership in this community. Teaching students this language therefore helps them enter the academic writing community. Below are some of the formulaic phrases used in academic writing and their functions.

### INTRODUCTIONS

With the following, the writer introduces a topic or an example.

*In the case of... The nature of the...*

### CAUSE/EFFECT

*As a result of...*

### ADDITION

*In addition to the...*

### COMPARISON

With the following phrase, the author compares an example or point with one previously mentioned.

*In the same way...*

### COMPARISON

*At the same time...*

(This seems like a phrase to show comparison, but it is most often used for contrast: “I really like dogs. At the same time, I like cats as well...”)

### ENUMERATING POINTS

*In the first place—*

## METHODS FOR TEACHING

### 1 CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

Students must first be aware of the formulas that exist in everyday language and how to respond: the way many Americans today respond to “Thank you,” for example, is not “You're welcome” but rather “No problem.” This kind of actual, “real-world” language use is often not taught in textbooks because it tends to be highly specialized to time and place: in certain regions or by specific age groups. For example, once in when getting my laptop repaired, the customer service representative helping me responded “No problem” to my “Thank you” and then quickly retracted it with “I don't mean to suggest there was a problem...” When I assured him I understood what he meant by “no problem,” he went on to tell about a previous customer who was annoyed with his use of “no problem,” thinking he was suggesting that there was indeed one in serving her. Even native speakers, apparently, can misunderstand idiomatic, formulaic phrases, and should keep in mind their actual usage rather than the literal meaning.

Besides conversation, students can study their course readings for use of academic phrases. Opening any academic text to a random page is likely to reveal several academic phrases. Call students' attention to them: "What words does the author use to introduce the topic?" "How does the author use the phrase 'in other words' here?" This will demonstrate the many kinds of phrases and ways they are used in academic writing.

## 2 MATCHING

The next step, after exposing students to a variety of conversational and academic phrases, is having students match phrases to their meaning or function: e.g., "No problem"="You're welcome." This provides additional processing with the phrases.

## 3 SENTENCE COMPLETION

Most phrases comprise an incomplete sentence or thought: they are just the stem or beginning of a thought or sentence. Take advantage of this structure by having students complete sentences: e.g., "I want to—" or "Do you know—" in conversation, perhaps with index cards that have been passed out with the key phrase written on it.

In writing, students can complete sentences that begin with the more academic "In the case of—" or "On the other hand—"

## 4 PRACTICE

Students can extend the activities above, perhaps structuring an entire conversation or essay around the key phrases.

The instructor may also give out a handout of the key phrases and have students work as many as possible into a conversation or essay.

The prevalence of formulaic phrases in conversation and writing suggests how key these phrases are to fluency. It may be close to impossible to be fluent without these short chunks of memorized

language.

**LEARNING THESE PHRASES, HOWEVER DOES NOT COME "NATURALLY"—EVEN NATIVE SPEAKERS SOMETIMES JOKE ABOUT CALLING UP THE WRONG FORMULAIC PHRASES IN CONVERSATION, SUCH AS "YOU, TOO" TO A WAITER'S "HAVE A GOOD MEAL." SO WHILE THEY EXIST ON THE AUTOMATIC LEVEL, PHRASES DO NEED TO BE CONSCIOUSLY LEARNED. ENGAGING IN CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND PRACTICE PROVIDES THE PROCESSING THAT STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN THESE PHRASES TO BECOME MORE FLUENT IN THEIR SECOND LANGUAGE.**

# Still More Conversational and Academic Phrases

I CURRENTLY AM TEACHING AN ESL STUDENT WHO HAS A GREAT DEAL OF PROFICIENCY IN CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH, AND HE HAS EXPRESSED INTEREST IN LEARNING THE LANGUAGE FOR CONVERSATION, SPECIFICALLY COMMONLY USED PHRASES FOR CONVERSATION.

Students at the higher levels often express interest in phrases, perhaps because they have control over a certain number of words already, but also because they understand that language really exists in ready-made phrases, and that learning these might be a better investment of their time than trying to memorize a series of grammar rules and then trying to apply them in the correct situations. It is much easier to bring out the correct phrase than search for the correct individual words and grammar rules. Likewise, students in college writing classes find a strong need for academic phrases for writing fluency and “sounding academic.”

## PHRASES FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

Phrases in academic writing function to contrast two propositions or items, to emphasize a point, to negate it, to show cause and effect, and to exemplify—all the tasks of academic writing, which are demonstrated in its language.

### 1 FOR CONTRAST

All of the following phrases demonstrate some sort of contrast, which is often done in academic writing because of its reflective, analytical nature, where one might contrast the economic situation of two countries, for example, or the education system today and in the past.

- \*in spite of*
- \*in contrast to*
- \*despite the fact that*
- \*even though*
- \*on the other hand*
- \*Not only... but also*

(This phrase works in much the same way as “on the other hand” although it may not seem so at first: however, “Not only is she beautiful but also smart,” sets up a contrast of two qualities in applying them to the same person).

### 2 EMPHASIS/NEGATION

Each of the following phrases is used to negate some previous proposition, and do it emphatically.

*\*By no means...*

By no means should our support of this proposal be taken as lack of support for the president, who does not support it.

Used in much the same way are the following phrases:

*\*on no account...*

*\*under no circumstance...*

### 3 CAUSE AND EFFECT

*\*as a result of...*

4Exemplification

*\*an additional example is...*

## PHRASES FOR CONVERSATION

Phrases in conversation also perform specific functions. These are to emphasize, to negate, to clarify, to deny knowledge of, and to give a directive or suggestion. There is more “clarifying” language in conversation than in writing as it takes face-to-face where the parties can clarify meaning.

### 1 EMPHASIZING

*\*I'll tell you what...*

This can be used for emphasizing a point: “I'll tell you what is so important about this plan...”

It can also be used as a directive: “I'll tell you what you're going to do.”

### 2 NEGATING/DENYING KNOWLEDGE

*\*I don't know what...*

This can be simply a denial of knowledge: “I don't know what that means.” It can also be used as a brush-off: that is, as a means of ending a conversation with an individual: “I don't know what to tell you,” thereby signaling the speaker's inability or unwillingness to help.

*\*I haven't got a clue*

### 3 CLARIFYING

*\*That's what I'm saying*

*\*I mean you know*

*\*Do you know what I mean?*

*\*I thought I would*

(With this phrase, the speaker clarifies some internal intent that might not be clear to others: e.g., “I thought I would get up really early to see the sunrise.”)

### 4 DIRECTIVES/SUGGESTIONS

*\*You might as well*

*\*Hang on a minute*

*\*Let's have a look*

## METHODS TO TEACH CONVERSATIONAL AND ACADEMIC PHRASES

There are a number of methods to teach these phrases that can help students with their fluency in English. Some of them follow:

### 1 MATCHING

Various matching exercises can be done with these phrases, in which students connect part of the phrase with another: “On the—other hand.” Phrases can also be matched with their meanings or functions. These exercises give students practice with the form and meaning.

### 2 FILL IN THE BLANK

Fill in the blank exercises, in which students fill in a missing word



in the phrase, which has usually been placed in the larger context of a paragraph or sentence, gives students intense practice with the form while at the same time seeing how the phrase is actually used in authentic writing.

### **3 SHORT ASSIGNMENTS**

After the practice with matching and fill in the blank exercises, students are now more equipped with understanding of the function and form to practice using these phrases in short writing assignments, such as paragraphs or journals on familiar topics like “A Life Lesson” or “My Favorite Teacher.” The teacher can specify how many phrases students should use, perhaps three to five.

### **4 ROLE PLAYS**

Students can also do short role plays after giving students a situation: e.g., “You are lost in a mall parking lot. Talk to each other and try to find your car.” Again, students should use a certain amount of phrases, e.g., for directives and denying knowledge: “Hang on a minute...wasn’t it back there?” “I haven’t got a clue...”

### **5 LONGER WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Finally, students can do longer writing assignments, such as essays on the causes of war. Again, adding academic phrases will give their writing a more academic sound as well as increase connections between ideas.

**TEACHING STUDENTS ACADEMIC AND CONVERSATIONAL PHRASES IS TIME-CONSUMING BUT PAYS OFF ENORMOUSLY IN TERMS OF THE INCREASE TO STUDENT VOCABULARY AND FLUENCY.**

# Ranting, Preaching, and Other No-No's: Teaching Audience Awareness

## I'M GOING TO PUT THE TOPIC OF HITLER AND THE NAZIS ON MY SHORT LIST OF FORBIDDEN TOPICS IN MY COMPOSITION CLASSES.

Not that I find the topic unbearable - on the contrary, there is a lot of fine fiction and scholarly work on the topics of the Third Reich and the Holocaust—but this is published work by scholars or professional writers, people who have bothered to research their topic and who maintain some rationale perspective on it. In general, professional writers don't make ridiculous claims that Hitler was a great leader. However, nearly every time students are writing to the topic of leadership, someone makes this argument on the great leadership qualities of Hitler—and not just neo-Nazis, but rather ordinary students who clearly have not researched nor taken an objective look at the matter. If they had, they would probably determine that Hitler ruled by intimidation and hate-mongering: he broke all of his treaties with other nations, his own generals attempted to assassinate him, and at the end of his regime his country lay in ruins. By any rational measure, this is not great leadership. But that is of course the very issue—Hitler as a topic often is used to build an emotional argument rather than rational one. In fact, it usually precedes a rant that shows limited concern for the audience, as rants in general and “discussions” on a number of topics do. An essay and other rational, formal communication are the antitheses of ranting and preaching. However, a number of students persist in the belief that the essay is the occasion to spew their own emotional views on a topic. And when confronted, they often become hostile—or more hostile than they normally are—claiming their “freedom of speech” is being limited. How can this be addressed? Very carefully, but it is possible for the hostile ranter or self-righteous preacher to be drawn into the domain of rationale discourse.

## PRINCIPLES OF DEALING WITH HOSTILE RANTERS

### 1 “FREEDOM OF SPEECH” IS RELATIVE

Students really know this, from everyday life experience. Yes, they are “free” to tell

their girlfriends they are looking a little chubby these days, but this is not without repercussions: their girlfriends are “free” to end the relationship. It's no different with written discourse. While students are “free” to rave about Hitler, their reader is “free” to put the essay down. Your classmates, having read the material, are also “free” to avoid you.

### 2 YOU HAVE AN AUDIENCE

Many times students don't fully understand they are writing to an audience - they seem to think they are writing in a vacuum, or to themselves or some extension of themselves. This may be in part the fault of the university: students in fact are just writing to “the teacher,” whom they may just see as a faceless suit. This problem can be combated by giving students a sense of audience by letting them know you, the instructor, on a personal level, a little, so they begin to think twice about ranting or preaching at you as they have come to value your opinion. This same effect can be achieved through having students work in peer review groups. When I've worked in a small group of fellow writers for awhile, reading and offering opinions on each other's work, I begin to care about their opinions, and have an understanding of what they like and dislike, and I'll think twice about gratuitously dropping the “F-bomb” in my work.

### 3 YOUR AUDIENCE IS NOT A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

Again, this is relative: your teacher is, in fact, somewhat of a “captive” audience in the sense he is obligated by his contract to read your work. But he's about the only person in the world so obligated. And if your teacher only reads it because he has to, what about the other people who are not? Most audiences are not captive and free to put down the ravings about Hitler. Again, working with a peer group can help give this sense.

### 4 AVOID CERTAIN TOPICS

Certain topics, like religion, money, and politics, are generally not raised in conversation because they cause unease. In formal, academic writing, what are those topics that not only cause unease but also just cannot be written

about rationally? Often, they are Hitler and the Nazis, as mentioned earlier. Another topic I've discouraged students from writing about in an academic essay is the legality of abortion because the argument tends to be grounded in people's belief systems on the beginning of life, hard to argue rationally. There are other topics that are best to avoid, and may vary from class to class. Brainstorming with students the topics to avoid, coming to consensus on them, and then making up a list to hand around solves some of the problem.

### 5 SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENTS

Reminding students they have to support their arguments also tends to curtail ranting as ranting is used, generally, as a substitute for a rationale argument. For example, the argument “Abortion is evil because no decent person would ever do something like that,” is a circular argument (and the probable beginning of a rant) because the support essentially just repeats the claim: “Abortion is bad because it is not good.” Marking student papers with comments like “Support this claim—how do we know it's evil?” can, along with follow-up discussions on appropriate support, get students out of the rant mode and into one of rationale discourse.

### 6 PURSUE YOUR DISCOURSE GOAL

Most writing has some kind of goal, as communication in general does. It may be as simple as getting your roommate to Please Wash the Dishes, but it has some goal. What is your goal in writing the essay (beyond getting a grade)? If it is indeed to prove that Hitler was a great leader, show me—through rationale argumentation—his accomplishments. Don't rant at me.

*For various reasons, some students don't grasp that writing is an actual piece of communication meant to convince or otherwise impress a reader and not an occasion for their own personal tirades.*

Getting them to take a breath, come down from their soap boxes, and engage in rational discourse isn't easy, but can be done.

# How to Inspire Students to Write through Audience Awareness

**OFTEN STUDENTS ARE RELUCTANT TO WRITE BECAUSE THEY DON'T PERCEIVE THE VALUE OF WRITING: THEY THINK THEIR PAPERS ARE ONLY READ BY THE TEACHER FOR A GRADE.**

In general, there is in most modern, industrialized nations a school/"real world" divide, where what one does in school is seen as wholly separate from the rest of life, which is alarming because of course school is meant to prepare people for life. This divide is very apparent in writing instruction: the writing done in school is seen as not like any "real" writing, such as love letter or employment inquiry, with a specific audience the writer cares about, and therefore will take care about organizing the communication to this audience: choosing words and crafting sentences to convey meaning in a precise way. The writing in school seems to take place in a vacuum because the students often have no sense of any real audience that they want to share the school writing with.

**So how does the teacher create the sense of audience? Some methods follow.**

## HOW TO INSPIRE STUDENTS TO WRITE THROUGH AUDIENCE AWARENESS

### 1 LECTURE ON PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Talk about writing not being just "notes to yourself." Discuss the differences between personal writing and writing for an audience: in notes to myself I have strange abbreviations, for example, that only I can decipher: "c11 on ref" means I should call someone about repairing the refrigerator. I wouldn't give that note to my husband if I want him to be able to actually read it and make the call. This is why we have to take trouble with our spelling and punctuation when writing for an audience. Furthermore, if I'm going to write the company who produced my refrigerator with the intent of getting a replacement, I'm going to be even more careful about my language, and I'll have

to write at some length to achieve my purpose.

### 2 WORK WITH A PEER

Share ideas with a partner: discussing ideas with a partner creates an automatic sense of audience. Once students are discussing their writing ideas with someone else, and getting feedback like, "What? Could you explain that?" or "Could you give me an example of what you mean?" they gain in understanding of where they need to think about their ideas more, express themselves more clearly, and choose words in a more precise manner, and this understanding carries over to their writing.

### 3 PEER REVIEW GROUPS

Have students work in groups to review each other's work. They should exchange papers several days before the due date then come in and discuss the papers in groups a day or two before the paper is due, focusing on each group member's paper in turn, with the rest of the group all contributing to the discussion. Remind the students they are there as readers of each other's work: their role is not to correct it but to respond as readers—what moved them, what confused them, and so forth. Often the students' critiques are very perceptive, and again a sense of audience is created.

### 4 VISUALIZE THE AUDIENCE

I usually visualize an audience when I'm writing, imagining I'm reading out loud to it. Often this audience is my writing group. While I'm writing, I'm led to asking myself such questions as "Will the group understand that particular image, or is it too personal and idiosyncratic?" or "Will that language offend them?" This visualization leads to revision and self-editing. If students are finding that their peer review groups are working well, have them remain in the same groups for the duration of term. Tell them to imagine themselves in a dialogue with their peer review group as they are writing. In this

way, sense of audience becomes internalized.

### 5 ASK A PEER TO EDIT WORK

Before handing in a paper, students can have a peer edit it for errors only. You might focus each time on a specific kind of concern: commas, past tense endings, and whatever problems seem to be particularly prevalent in the class. If students know their papers will be edited by a peer, they are more likely to work on the papers themselves at home, rather like tidying up before the cleaning person comes because having her find a mess is embarrassing. Similarly, we wouldn't want a reader to be exposed to a messy paper.

### 6 CREATE A CLASS PUBLICATION

There are some more advanced techniques an instructor may choose once students are comfortable sharing their writing. One is developing a class newsletter, done on desktop publishing, and publishing parts of student work in it periodically. If students know their work might be published, they will work to polish it. A simpler and more traditional way to do this is to read from student work occasionally at the beginning of class, using it as an example of some technique, such as use of dialogue. Both of these methods, the class publication or reading aloud, can be done either anonymously or revealing the students' identities - either way, student consent should be gained first.

### 7 POST ONLINE. ASK FOR REVIEWS.

Have students post their work on a blog and ask for reviews. This can be done by setting up a class blog - students can volunteer to post their work, and their classmates can respond. Again, some instruction is needed on the appropriate way to critique work: "It was great... I liked it" is not a critique but a compliment. However-



er, “Your grammar stinks” is too general and inconsiderate to be useful. It can be helpful to give a couple comments on a work, one positive and then another suggesting an area for improvement. Remind students the goal is give the writer direction for revision.

## **8 ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO ENTER CONTESTS**

There are many writing contests, such as the numerous ones offered by Writer’s Digest. Some of the prizes are significant, such as cash rewards or travel and entrance fees to conferences. Encourage students to enter: entering a conference also creates a sense of audience and purpose because students have to follow the rules on word count, topic, and so on faithfully to qualify to win.

**CREATING A SENSE OF PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE FOR WRITING ISN’T EASY: TOO OFTEN WRITING IS VIEWED AS A DULL EXERCISE REMOVED FROM REAL LIFE.**

**BUT BY FAITHFUL APPLICATION OF A FEW STRATEGIES, THE TEACHER CAN LEAD STUDENTS INTO UNDERSTANDING THAT WRITING DOES HAVE PURPOSE AND IS MEANT TO COMMUNICATE WITH AN AUDIENCE.**

# How to Teach Argumentative Essay Writing

**WHETHER YOUR STUDENTS ARE PREPARING TO TAKE STANDARDIZED TESTS OR YOU ARE WALKING THEM THROUGH HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY, THE PERSUASIVE OR ARGUMENT ESSAY IS A STANDARD STRATEGY TO COVER.**

When the purpose in writing is to persuade another of your opinion, using the correct logic and following the correct layout are very important, and your arguments, if not written clearly and with support, will fall flat. When it is time to walk your students through the process of persuasion, follow this guideline on the argumentative essay to achieve a convincing result.

## HOWTO: TEACHING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

### 1 TOPIC CHOICE

When teaching a persuasive essay, you should make sure your students are clear on its purpose – to persuade or convince the reader that the position the writer takes is correct. This differs from other types of essays where the goal is to present information or show how something is similar to or different from something else. The persuasive essay is all about changing someone's mind. Some topics are better suited to this type of essay, topics that can be logically argued with facts, examples, expert opinions or logical reasoning. Still, they must be a topic on which someone can take an opposing viewpoint. Some writers may be tempted to choose a matter of preference or faith, but these do not make good topics for the argument essay since it is highly unlikely the writer will be able to alter the beliefs of the reader, so encourage your students to stay away from issues of faith or preference, like 'heaven is or isn't real' (since they cannot prove it,) and to gravitate toward questions they can support, such as 'students should be able to choose their own college courses'.

### 2 THE OPPOSITION

Though making assumptions is usually a bad idea, your students should start the argument essay with some assumptions about their readers. Since convincing the reader is the primary purpose of the essay, your students need to think about the person for whom they are writing, their audience. Knowing the audience can make the difference between a tolerable and a compelling essay. Your students should assume that the writer disagrees with the positions they are taking on their topic but they should not assume that the reader is unintelligent. There would be no purpose to writing this type of essay if the reader already agreed with the writer's position, but if the writer treats the reader as though he is less intelligent, the piece will have a condescending and offensive tone throughout. It is also important that your students think about why the reader holds the opposite point of view. This will be very important when it comes to writing the refutation.

### 3 THE ARGUMENTS

To prepare to write the persuasive essay, challenge your students to make two lists. One list should be reasons that they hold their opinion (or the pro side of the argument), and the other list should be reasons that the opposition holds their opinion about the issue (or the con side of the argument). If you are teaching a simple argument essay, the list of pros should be longer than the list of cons. If this is not the case, you may need to encourage your student to change to the other side of the argument.

Your students can start with any style introduction that seems most effective, but the body of the essay should be rather straightforward. The writer should choose between two and four of the most convincing arguments and write one paragraph about each. It is very important that he supports his opinion with objective proof – facts,

statistics, typical examples, and opinions of established experts – and not just statements of his own beliefs and opinions. Without this type of support, the argument will not be convincing. If you are teaching advanced students, this might be a natural place to look at logical fallacies and how to avoid them in this type of essay. Once the body paragraphs are written, have your students arrange their arguments in order – weakest to strongest – and end with the most compelling of the arguments.

### 4 THE REFUTATION

In this type of essay, just as important as arguing your points is arguing against the points of the opposition. When writing this type of essay, your students should not only show why they are right but also why the opposition is wrong. This part of the essay is called the refutation. Looking at the list of the reasons against their arguments, tell your students to choose the strongest point the opposite side might present. Then challenge them to think about why this argument is invalid. A strong refutation will address the argument and prove it is not logical, there is a better answer, or it is not true. Your students should spend one paragraph on the refutation, and it should come after the arguments in favor of their positions on the topic.

With the most important parts of the essay finished, your students simply need to add a conclusion to finish strong.

**THEY WILL WANT TO REMIND THE READER OF THEIR POINTS AND END WITH A CALL TO ACTION. THE OVERALL TONE OF THE ESSAY SHOULD BE LOGICAL AND NOT EMOTIONAL OR MANIPULATIVE. IF YOUR STUDENTS ARE ABLE TO WRITE THIS WAY, THEIR ESSAYS WILL BE CONVINCING AND EFFECTIVE.**

# Getting More Specificity Out of Writing

**SOMETIMES WHEN READING THE ESSAYS OF BEGINNING COMPOSITION STUDENTS, I'LL READ AN ENTIRE PAGE AND THEN REALIZE I DIDN'T REALLY PROCESS ANY OF IT BECAUSE IT'S FILLED WITH VAGUE, ABSTRACT LANGUAGE LIKE "ISSUE" AND "SOCIETY."**

In a way this is not bad - this shows students have recognized there is something called the academic register, that the language in their textbooks is different from what they use in the student union, and this is their attempt to emulate it. However, good writing, besides having a lot of academic words, also communicates to the reader and is direct and specific, not vague and abstract.

So the challenge becomes getting more specificity out of student writing while still encouraging students in their attempts to write more academic prose. There are some different methods to meet this challenge.

## 10 METHODS FOR GETTING SPECIFICITY OUT OF STUDENT WRITING

### 1 GIVE MODELS OF SPECIFIC WRITING

Many years ago, in one of my college classes, the instructor complained about something she called "distance" in my writing, a term I still am puzzled by because she never did really offer an example of what she meant by this or what she wanted instead. Predictably, I wasn't able to produce what she wanted. It is not enough to tell a student "Don't be distant" or "Be specific" because these terms are relative—what is "specific" to the student may not be to the instructor.

Showing examples of writing with the degree of specificity you would like to see in student writing would help the most.

### 2 ASSIGN SPECIFIC TOPICS

You know the saying borrowed

from the computer industry: "garbage in—garbage out." If you don't want to read a bunch of essays on our "issues" in "society," don't assign topics with that language in them. Students will faithfully lift it from the topic and scatter it all over their papers. Instead ask students to write what they think about capital punishment, or the Occupy Movement, or the so-called obesity epidemic. When writing about these specific "issues," students are themselves in their writing forced into specifics: it's very hard to write in generalities about capital punishment because the topic itself demands examples and details of specific cases in specific locations.

### 3 QUERY THE STUDENT

Sometimes just asking students "So tell me what you mean here by 'issue'?" forces them to think about what they mean. Sometimes students haven't really considered that essays are meant to communicate meaning and not just fill up the paper with words. Asking students to articulate their thoughts starts the process of thinking about, then saying, and ultimately writing what they mean.

### 4 TEACH SPECIFIC VOCABULARY

Another reason ESL students in particular use vague language is they simply haven't developed the appropriate specific language yet. Teaching some of academic language related to the topic is very helpful: e.g., "criminalize," "constitutional," and "legality," for example, are words that students will need in their academic careers as well as help them develop the specific topic.

### 5 TEACH USE OF THE DICTIONARY/THESAURUS

Used properly, these are great tools for expanding one's vocabulary. Show students how they can pull up an online thesaurus and find alternatives to "society" and other vague, over-used language.

### 6 HOLD DISCUSSIONS

Another reason students can ramble on at length in their papers without really saying anything is they don't know what to say or are afraid that what they say will somehow be "wrong." Having small group discussions on topics like the ethics and legality of same sex marriage makes students realize they do have things to say on these topics, and it's all right to say them—in a courteous manner. Ask that the students use their new vocabulary learned on the topic a set number of times: at least 3 new words per discussion, for example. The ideas shared in discussion can then transfer to writing.

### 7 SUGGEST DETAILS AND EXAMPLES

Sometimes when students seem truly stuck on writing on a topic like legalizing marijuana, I'll suggest that the student might consider an example, such as what happened under Prohibition, when the criminalizing of alcohol created a black market and increased organized crime, and if there might be parallels with marijuana. I offer this as something for the student to consider and form his or her own opinion on, if he hasn't considered it yet. Sometimes the student will reject my analysis of this part of the topic, stating that in this case marijuana and alcohol aren't comparable, and that's fine as long as the student is now writing and using details and analysis.

### 8 READING AND JOURNAL WRITING

A related reading should almost always be given prior to assigning a formal composition, with an informal journal response, in which students express their thoughts about the reading. Again, having them use the new words from the reading in their journals will develop academic vocabulary and ability to speak on this topic and will give students ideas to write about in their formal essays, as well, both of which should help eliminate the vagueness.



## 9 HOLD INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES

Meeting with each student individually sometime during the term can also be of help in getting students to vocalize concerns about their writing and ask questions. In turn, the instructor can ask questions about unclear portions of the student's writing. This is particularly effective with the quiet student, who may be too shy to speak up in class or a small group.

## 10 TABOO WORDS

I've forbidden use of certain words in composition, telling students they have to think of something different and more specific: "thing," "nice," "bad," "issue," and "society" are big offenders and probably we can mostly do without these words, in any case. There's almost always a better choice.

**VAGUE, PSEUDO-ACADEMIC WRITING IS USUALLY FAIRLY EASY TO PRODUCE—STUDENTS CAN USUALLY SCRAWL OFF PAGES OF IT WITHOUT MUCH REFLECTION. BUT IT CAN BE PAINFUL TO READ AND COMMUNICATES VERY LITTLE. WITH SOME PRACTICE, TEACHERS CAN GET STUDENTS INTO THE HABIT OF REALLY THINKING ABOUT WHAT THEY MEAN AND HOW TO SAY IT MOST EFFECTIVELY.**

# Two Sides to the Cigarette: The Smoking Debate in Your ESL Classroom

**IF YOU TEACH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN, SMOKING MAY NOT BE AN ISSUE YOU NEED TO ADDRESS VERY OFTEN IN YOUR CLASSROOM. HOWEVER, IF YOU ARE TEACHING ADULTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD YOU MAY FIND THAT THE ISSUE OF WHETHER SMOKING IS GOOD OR BAD FILTERS ITS WAY INTO YOUR CLASSROOM ON A DAILY BASIS.**

Different cultures around the world have very different opinions of smoking, and your students will often reflect that cultural bias. Like any controversial topic, though, the issue of smoking is useful material for getting your students speaking and expressing their opinions in the classroom. Try some of the following activities with your students the next time the issue of smoking drifts into your classroom.

## HOWTO: THE SMOKING DEBATE IN YOUR ESL CLASSROOM

### 1 PROS AND CONS

You can introduce the topic of smoking to your students by taking an informal survey - a simple raise of hands can tell you how many of your students are in favor of smoking and how many are opposed to the habit. Once each person has expressed which side of the debate he or she falls on, divide the class into two groups based on their opinion. Ask the anti smokers to work as a group to list all the reasons a person should not smoke. Ask the pro smokers to work together as well listing all the benefits of smoking. Challenge your students to make their lists as extensive as possible.

Once your students are thinking about the topic, give them some ideas of the bans that have been imposed on smokers in the United States. You can either gather some interesting facts from Wikipedia yourself or give your students some time to read about them on their own. How does each group feel about the bans that affect smokers? How do they affect nonsmokers? Do they think the laws are fair? Do they think any of the laws should be changed to be either less strict or more strict? How do they think these laws have affected most people's opinions about smoking?

### 2 PERSUASIVE THOUGHT

One of the most important aspects of persuasive speech or writing is the refutation. In the refutation, the person argues against what the opponent has argued for. Still working in your pro and con groups, give each group a copy of the arguments the other group listed for their position. Using that list, challenge both groups to come up with a refutation for each argument that the first group listed. Then, have them decide which three arguments are the strongest and write out the refutation.

If you like, this is a natural place to have your students write a persuasive essay or give a persuasive speech. Either way, students should start with an introduction, give the reasons for their side of the debate, refute the opponent's opinions and finish with a conclusion.

### 3 THE MEDIA

Smoking tends to be portrayed in the media in a certain manner. Often, it appears sophisticated or cool, and can be very attractive to younger children or teens. Over the course of a week, challenge your students to find as many examples of smoking in the media as they can. They may bring in magazine pictures, list movie clips or commercials, quote celebrities or print pictures from the internet. As your students bring their examples in, post them on a bulletin board in your classroom titled "Smoking Hot?" The pictures, written descriptions and quotations will become a kind of gallery for your students to look at. After your students have brought several items in and the gallery wall is looking full, ask your students to take some time to look at what is posted. Then have them write an emotional reaction to what they see. How do these pictures make them feel? Do they affect the beliefs they already hold? It is important that your students understand they will not be judged on their opinion or which side of the great smoking debate they come down on. You will be reading their pieces for grammar and style as well as logical organization.

### 4 HANDS ON DEMONSTRATION

You can use a hands on demonstration to show your students the effects of smoking. If your students are older, you can have pairs of students perform the experiment themselves by giving them the instructions and the necessary materials. If your students are younger, you should perform the demonstration for them. In any case, this activity should be done outside. For each demonstration you will need one or two cotton balls, a cigarette, some clay and a plastic bottle. Have one or more students put a cotton ball inside the plastic bottle. Then cover the opening of the bottle with clay to create a plug. This bottle will represent the inside of the body and show some of the effects of smoking on the lungs. Next, poke a pencil or other object through the clay until you can see it in the bottle and insert the filter end of the cigarette in the hole. Make sure there is a tight seal as this is the mouth. Light the cigarette and squeeze the bottle about a dozen times to simulate puffing on the cigarette. Then put the cigarette out and remove the clay plug.

Once you have performed the demonstration or your students have finished the experiment on their own, ask them some questions about it. In your discussion, ask your students what happened to the cotton balls, how they look and why these were the results. Also, ask how this experiment demonstrates the effects of smoking on the body. Have each person follow the experiment by writing a summary of what they saw and what the results of the experiment were. Also, ask your students to include a personal reflection in their piece about their opinion of smoking. Do they hold the same belief they had at the beginning of the unit? Why or why not?

Smoking is a controversial topic, and it can play directly into the dynamics of an ESL class because of cultural differences of opinion when it comes to the habit.

**THESE ACTIVITIES WILL GET YOUR STUDENTS TALKING AND WRITING ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF SMOKING AND PERHAPS INFLUENCE HOW THEY VIEW THE HABIT.**

# How to Turn Your Students on to Discussion

**YOU HAVE A CLASS OF TALKERS: THEY SIT IN SMALL GROUPS AND WILL CHAT ABOUT ANYTHING AND FREQUENTLY ABOUT NOTHING, THEIR SPEECH FILLED WITH “LIKE” AND “YOU KNOW,” DEVOID OF ANY APPARENT MEANING. BUT GIVE THEM A LEGITIMATE COURSE-RELATED TOPIC TO DISCUSS, SUCH AS THE NATIONAL ELECTION, AND THEY CLAM UP.**

When asked why, they claim either they don't want to talk about it or they don't know what to say—and they probably are telling the truth in that, not just avoiding the task. So how do you address this, your class who has nothing to say or a way to say it?

## **BEGIN BY EXAMINING THE TWO CLAIMS:**

### **1 STUDENTS DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT**

Why would students not want to talk about the assigned topic when they spend all day, it seems, talking to their peers anyway? It may simply be because it is an assigned topic, and as such it takes away student motivation to begin with. Or the topic itself might be too difficult, too boring, or too abstract for the students to address. All these factors can and should be addressed in designing discussion topics.

### **2 STUDENTS DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY**

Another problem is students don't know what to say on the topic. The reasons for this may be that the students don't understand the topic, don't have the knowledge base to discuss the topic even if they understand it, or don't have the language to discuss the topic—perhaps a little of all three. For example, I generally understand the idea of stem cell

research, enough to hold a position on it, but I really lack the knowledge or vocabulary base to get into an extended conversation on the topic without some prior preparation. It is the same for most of our students.

## **METHODS TO ADDRESS THE RELUCTANT DISCUSSION PARTICIPANT**

### **1 “SELLING” STUDENTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPRESSING ONESELF**

Besides the students who are just unsure of their ability to discuss ideas—and these include native speakers of English—are those students who just don't see the value of it: they view talk and discussion as a waste of time or somehow “uncool.” Therefore teachers should demonstrate the value of being articulate—that if you present your ideas in just the right way, you can open doors: convince others to fund your business, marry you, be your friend, allow you into a prestigious college, and so forth. It's really the articulate people who are actually “cool” and get rewards, not the silent and superficially “cool.”

### **2 STUDENT GENERATED TOPICS**

One way to really raise student enthusiasm for discussion is to allow students to generate their own topics, with some parameters. So if your recent class reading has been on the topic of the ethics of scientific research, for example, let students design their own discussion questions on the topic: for example, the ethics of spending resources on space exploration when there are so many immediate problems to address on this planet might be a question

that comes up. Teachers may offer guidance in design of the questions, but generally students are happy to design their own.

### **3 STUDENT GENERATED GROUPS**

One main reason that students don't want to work in groups is that they get “stuck” working with people they don't like or get along with. True, a good argument here is that part of adult life is learning to work with people we don't particularly like. However, student enthusiasm for discussion is raised by occasionally allowing students some input into choosing their groups—once a week, for example. And if they're trained to choose groups quickly and respectfully, then a lot of the difficulty in the logistics of groups is reduced. Finally a lot of the poor dynamics that can sometimes develop with groups is eliminated because students have chosen the peers they want to work with.

### **4 TOOLS FOR DISCUSSION: ADVANCING AN OPINION, LISTENING TO OTHERS, POLITELY DISAGREEING**

Another reason students don't like discussion is they don't have the tools for it: they don't know how to advance an opinion, for example, so they never really get a chance to speak, or they experience rudeness such as other students not listening or disagreeing in a belligerent manner. If students are taught in advance some of the skills of active listening, how to politely break into a conversation and give an opinion as well as how to disagree with another's viewpoint and still remain courteous, then a lot of the anxiety of group discussion is removed.



## 5 PREPARATION FOR ACADEMIC DISCUSSION

Once students have some mastery in discussing the topics they have generated, it's time to move on to academic discussion, a little different in the topics are not student generated, at least at the beginning, and they are not on everyday topics, such as how to manage a busy schedule and get enough sleep, but rather about academic topics such as capital punishment, stem cell research, gun control, and the like. These topics require a certain knowledge base as well as specific vocabulary. Therefore some preparation is needed beforehand, such as lecture and reading, before students will be able to discuss the topic. As their knowledge of the topic grows and they develop an opinion on it, students become more enthused about discussing it.

As the semester progresses, students become more aware of other issues to discuss and will suggest these topics to their groups.

**MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO HAVE A REASONABLY INTELLIGENT DISCUSSION, ESPECIALLY IN OUR ERA OF "LIKE" AND "YOU KNOW," CAN BE DIFFICULT.**

**HOWEVER, THROUGH STRATEGIES SUCH AS STUDENT-GENERATED TOPICS AND GROUPS AND TEACHING STUDENTS THE TOOLS OF ACADEMIC DISCUSSION, TEACHERS CAN TURN OUR "COOL" SILENT TYPES INTO ARTICULATE SPEAKERS.**

# 33 Controversial Topics and How To Teach Them

**CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS MAKE MANY TEACHERS WANT TO RUN AWAY FROM THE CURRICULUM SCREAMING, BUT FOR ESL TEACHERS THEY OFFER AN UNEQUALLED OPPORTUNITY TO FOSTER DISCUSSION IN THE CLASSROOM. THOUGH YOU MAY FEEL QUEASY AT THE IDEA OF TEACHING SOME TOPICS, USE THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES TO MAKE IT A TEACHING TRIUMPH RATHER THAN A CLASSROOM CATASTROPHE.**

## HOW TO TEACH CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

### 1 INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

Before giving students any materials supporting one side or the other about a controversial topic, ask them what they already know about it. This is only the first of many opportunities for discussion in your class. If you are teaching adults, you may be surprised at the experience your students may already have with a given issue. Also, letting students volunteer information may give you a heads up that they could have deep personal connections to the topic.

### 2 PRESENT BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE

Though you almost certainly agree with either one side of a controversial issue or the other, leading a unit on a touchy subject requires the teacher to be the moderator. As such, it is your responsibility to present both sides of the issue no matter where your opinions lie. You can present both sides by giving students two separate selections, each supporting the opposite opinion, or by presenting material that covers both points of view in one piece. Either way, make sure your students understand the issue, the problems connected with it and any unfamiliar vocabulary they may encounter.

### 3 FACILITATE DISCUSSION

After presenting both sides of the issue and making sure students understand the controversy, give small groups of students an opportunity to discuss the arguments each side presents. They will be sure to offer their own opinions, perhaps vehemently, and you should not pressure them with discussion as an entire class. As students talk about the issue, they will be able to help each other further understand the arguments posed by each side. Just be sure that all groups are allowing free expression from everyone. You may have to step in if one or two students are being bullied by opposing opinions. You want all your students to feel free to speak and express themselves even if their opinion is the minority. Remember, you are the facilitator.

### 4 EXPRESS YOUR OWN OPINION

After introducing both sides of the issue and allowing students to discuss their opinions, you can express your own opinion on the subject. Waiting until this point to uncover your own view point gives your students the freedom to express themselves honestly without fear of repercussion. Students can be intimidated to support a point of view in conflict with their teacher's. If you wait until students have already had the opportunity to discuss their opinions, you remove the intimidation that comes with disagreeing with the teacher.

### 5 PRESENT A CASE STUDY

Case studies are always a great opportunity to foster discussion. A good case study will not have a clear cut or straightforward course to a happy ending. Not only will struggling with the situation encourage discussion, it will provide a more lifelike and realistic use for language. Life itself is not cut and dry, and if your students will be using language in real world

situations they will have to express themselves in difficult circumstances. Encourage your students to take risks and express their opinions.

### 6 FACILITATE (MORE) DISCUSSION

Now that students have heard both sides of the issue, discussed the topic with their peers, learned where you stand on the issue and looked at a real life case study, it is time to discuss the issue again. Go back to the discussion questions you provided at the beginning of the unit and allow students to express any changes in their opinions or share things that they have learned. The goal in teaching a controversial subject is not to sway students to one opinion or the other, but they may change the way they feel after further discussion. They may also strengthen the beliefs they had at the beginning of the unit, but hopefully they can express themselves more clearly and give strong support for their beliefs.

When handled correctly, controversial topics can be a gold mine of conversation in the ESL classroom.

**THOUGH IT IS SOMETIMES NECESSARY TO CREATE DISCUSSION OVER SUPPLIED CURRICULUM TOPICS, USING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM ALLOWS A NATURAL AND EMOTIONAL PATHWAY TO CONVERSATION. IF YOU ARE SENSITIVE TO YOUR STUDENTS' OPINIONS AND AWARE OF THEIR FEELINGS, TOUGH TO TACKLE TOPICS JUST MIGHT PROVIDE THE BEST LESSONS ALL YEAR.**

## EXAMPLE CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS:

USING ANIMALS IN MEDICAL RESEARCH HELPS PEOPLE

GAY MARRIAGES ARE WRONG

WOMEN WILL NEVER BE EQUAL TO MEN IN THE WORKPLACE

YOU CAN'T HAVE A HAPPY FAMILY LIFE AND A SUCCESSFUL CAREER AT THE SAME TIME

MARRIAGE IS OUTDATED

THE DEATH PENALTY IS ACCEPTABLE IN SOME CASES

FOREIGNERS SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED TO VOTE

CELEBRITIES EARN TOO MUCH MONEY

MILITARY SERVICE SHOULD BE OBLIGATORY

WAR IS NEVER AN OPTION FOR SOLVING INTERNATIONAL DISPUTES

TORTURE CAN BE ACCEPTABLE IN SOME CASES

CURFEWS KEEP TEENS OUT OF TROUBLE

WE ARE BECOMING TOO DEPENDENT ON COMPUTERS

SMOKING SHOULD BE BANNED WORLDWIDE

SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS ARE EVIL

HOMEWORK IS HARMFUL

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE HOME

COMMITTING SUICIDE SHOULD BE MADE LEGAL

A MAN SHOULD HAVE A WIFE FOR THE FAMILY AND A MISTRESS FOR

PLEASURE

SOFT DRUGS SHOULD BE LEGALIZED

THOSE WHO CAN - DO, THOSE WHO CAN'T - TEACH

YOU WILL BE HAPPIER IF YOU STAY UNMARRIED

SOFTWARE PIRACY IS NOT REALLY A CRIME

WE DO NOT REALLY NEED RELIGION

YOUR RACE AFFECTS YOUR INTELLIGENCE

EUTHANASIA SHOULD BE LEGAL

OBESITY IS A DISEASE

VIDEO GAMES CONTRIBUTE TO YOUTH VIOLENCE

DRINKING AGE SHOULD BE LOWERED

STEROIDS SHOULD BE ACCEPTED IN SPORTS

CLONING HAS A LOT OF BENEFITS

PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENTS MAKE FAMILIES STRONGER

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT SHOULD BE ALLOWED IN SCHOOLS.

# Pro et Contra: 20 Stages of Teaching Controversial Topics

**DISCUSSING, DEBATING, AND WRITING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS HAS MANY BENEFITS FOR ESL STUDENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPEAKING, CRITICAL THINKING, AND WRITING SKILLS. IT IS ALSO AN ACADEMIC EXPECTATION THAT STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANALYZE A CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC AND TAKE A POSITION ON IT.**

Teaching controversial topics helps students in this task of analyzing a topic like same-sex marriage and the various perspectives on it and taking a position. However, teaching controversial topics can be difficult and should be handled with care. Following are some activities that move students from beginning discussion on issues to more advanced debate and are designed to take place over at least several class sessions.

Not all activities need be completed, and the instructor may choose to end the unit before progressing to the ending big debate, depending on the students' level, interest, and time constraints.

## BEGINNING THE DISCUSSION

**1 BEGIN BY PRESENTING SOME EVERYDAY ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS, SUCH AS A LIST OF "WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF--?" (A STRANGER DROPS HIS WALLET ON THE BUS, ETC).**

Have students discuss their responses in groups.

**2 TEACH SOME OF THE LANGUAGE RELATED TO ETHICAL DILEMMAS.**

For example, the use of the second conditional: "If I were you, I would—" or "If it were up to me—."

**3 ALSO TEACH SOME FORMULAS RELATED TO STATING OPINIONS:**

"As far as I'm concerned—" and "In my opinion—"

**4 DISCUSS GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION OF ETHICAL/CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS**

such as listening and not interrupting. Teach the language of polite disagreeing: "I understand what you're saying, but I think—"

**5 TO FURTHER THE UNDERSTANDING OF EXPECTATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION IN DISCUSSION, THE TEACHER CAN DEVELOP A RUBRIC THAT RATES STUDENTS BY HOW MUCH THEY PARTICIPATED AND THE QUALITY OF THAT PARTICIPATION.**

Go over the rubric with students so that the expectation is clear and frequently update them on their progress.

## EXTENDING THE CONVERSATION

**6 AFTER THIS BASIC INTRODUCTION TO DISCUSSING ISSUES, THE TEACHER IS NOW READY TO INTRODUCE MORE CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS.**

Start by explaining what a controversial topic is: a topic that reasonable people may disagree on, such as whether the government should provide health care to its people. There are a number of different perspectives on this issue: economic, human rights, etc. However, whether the people should have clean drinking water is not a controversial topic as no reasonable person would disagree with the position.

**7 AS A CLASS, BRAINSTORM SOME CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS AND PUT THEM ON THE BOARD.**

Students may have a hard time coming up with suggestions, so the teacher should have some topics prepared: same-sex marriage, capital punish-

ment, and mandatory school uniforms are all popular topics (see more example controversial topics here or here).

**8 CHOOSE ONE SAMPLE CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC AND TOGETHER COME UP WITH THE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON IT:**

a religious perspective, an economic perspective, etc. What would people from these various perspectives likely think about the topic?

**9 DIVIDE STUDENTS INTO GROUPS OF ABOUT THREE OR FOUR STUDENTS.**

Have students discuss the list of topics on the board that they came up and their various perspectives. Have them choose one topic for their group to discuss.

**10 ON THE BOARD, WRITE THE TERMS:**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Have students explain in their groups which position they take on the topic and why.

## MOVING INTO THE DEBATE

**11 COME TOGETHER AGAIN AS A CLASS.**

Review the groups' discussions. Select one topic as a class.

**12 TELL STUDENTS THEY ARE GOING TO DEBATE THE ISSUE.**

Go over the format of a debate, or modified debate—with each side taking a position on the issue, supporting it, and countering the other side's claims. Also discuss types of support and reliable sources for support.



## **13 EXPLAIN THE TERMS "PRO" AND "CON."**

Work together to list reasons "pro" and "con" for a sample topic, not the topic students have chosen.

## **14 TEACH THE ETIQUETTE OF DEBATE.**

Waiting your turn to speak, waiting to be recognized, listening to the other side and taking notes, and politely disagreeing.

## **15 ALSO TEACH SOME OF THE SPECIALIZED LANGUAGE RELATED TO THE PARTICULAR TOPIC:**

if the debate is on same-sex marriage, then "civil union," for example, is likely to come up.

## **16 FIRST DO A MINI-DEBATE.**

Have the students divide into pairs, and each member within a pair select a side, pro or con, and proceed to debate with their partner for two minutes on the issue.

## **17 FOR THE LARGER DEBATE, HAVE THE CLASS DIVIDE INTO TWO SIDES TO PREPARE.**

Students may want to adopt roles within their group as researcher, leader, etc. They may wish to do outside research on their topic to support their position.

## **18 ON THE DAY OF THE DEBATE, THE TWO SIDES, PRO AND CON, SHOULD FACE EACH OTHER.**

The teams should take turns introducing themselves, their position, and their major support. Then each side can provide a major counterargument. Finally, each side provides some additional comments, summarizes, and closes.

## **19 THE TEACHER MAY WISH TO FOLLOW UP WITH AN ESSAY AFTER THE DEBATE.**

Students are now prepared to write a persuasive paper, which is much like the written form of the debate, in that it involves taking a position on a topic and supporting it.

## **20 THE REMAINING TOPICS THAT WERE NOT USED IN THE DEBATE CAN BE LISTED ON INDEX CARDS TO BE PULLED OUT FOR FUTURE DISCUSSION OR DEBATE.**

Although requiring some planning and perhaps taking a little difficulty to set up, teaching, analyzing, discussing, and debating controversial topics reap huge benefits in developing critical thinking skills, writing skills, and discussion skills for ESL students.

# Help Students Improve Conversational Vocabulary and Structures

**MANY ESL STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WHO ARE NEW TO THE U.S. BUT MAY HAVE STUDIED ENGLISH FOR YEARS IN THEIR HOME COUNTRIES, COME TO COLLEGE HAVING SOME ACADEMIC VOCABULARY, ABILITY TO READ THEIR TEXTS, FOLLOW LECTURES, AND PARTICIPATE IN CLASS DISCUSSION WITH SOME DEGREE OF EASE, BUT THEY LACK CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH ABILITY TO USE OUTSIDE OF CLASS.**

I noticed this in particular recently when, in greeting a student as he was leaving the student union and carrying a plate of junk food, he explained he did not often eat French fries, as he was now. I responded, "I'm glad to hear that - they're not good for you." He looked puzzled. "Good me for me?" I assured him I did not mean him, personally. "You" often means "everyone" in everyday conversational English. This international student was a top student in class but struggled with simple conversations because of his lack of practice with native speakers of English. Many ESL students, both those who have lived in the U. S. as well as international students, share this dilemma, probably because it is more comfortable to read an English text than to try to participate in an actual conversation. However, even ESL students who are not planning to live in an English-speaking country would benefit from learning the vocabulary and structures of conversational English in order to carry on the casual conversations which occur even in academic and business settings. So what vocabulary and grammar should we teach, and how do we teach it to help students with their conversational English?

## **TERMS AND STRUCTURES OF CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH**

**1 CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH, AND CONVERSATION IN GENERAL, IS PERSONAL RATHER THAN IMPERSONAL.**

Therefore, terms related to the speakers' immediate situations and lives are emphasized. Personal pronouns such as "I" and "you," for example, are prominent in conversational English while they are not in academic English. In fact, many college instructors go so far as to tell students not to use "I" in a formal paper. While I would not go to this extreme, it does demonstrate the personal/impersonal dichotomy between conversational and academic English.

**2 CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH IS IMMEDIATE AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT:**

Therefore, terms related to the immediate context are emphasized. For example, it's typical to begin a conversation with a comment on the weather, or what one of the speakers is wearing, or what one of the speakers is doing—all related to the immediate situation and therefore "natural" for opening a conversation.

**3 BREVITY.**

Everyday conversations are generally relatively brief. As in the example shown earlier between me and my student outside the student union, a quick discussion about the student's lunch choice is fine - a more extended discourse on the nature of the American and Japanese diets would be inappropriate because most everyday conversations occur when the speakers are on the midst of some other activity, such as getting lunch between classes, and there is limited time for an in-depth conversation.

**4 ROUTINES.**

Related to brevity, conversational English is based on routines. For example, in running into a friend at the student union, there is a set of unspoken expectations about the conversational "routine" for this situation: "Hey! How's it going?" "Fine. Getting your lunch? How's it look today?" "Not so bad, but stay away from the fish. What class do you have next?" "Physics. Sorry, got to go!" Because these speak-

ers are probably in a hurry in passing between classes, there is a specific "routine" that requires little time and thought—a greeting, some comment on the immediate situation, and a farewell. Deviation from the routine may result in confusion or annoyance.

## **SIX METHODS FOR TEACHING CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH**

**1 RAISE AWARENESS.**

Students may be unaware of the difference between academic and conversational English. I like to give a few examples drawn from life or literature. A good one I just noted in a novel showed an older family member advising a younger about his affair with a married woman: "Be discrete." When the younger one asks what that means, his elder translates into conversational English "Don't get caught." English is full of examples like these: most utterances have both conversational and more formal or academic forms, such as the multiple ways to say "shut up": "Quiet, please," "You have the right to remain silent," and "Your silence is appreciated." Briefly discussing these differences demonstrates to students the differences between the academic and conversational.

**2 MODEL.**

Students from non-English speaking countries, while they may have studied English for years in classrooms, may have had very little real exposure to English in actual conversational use. Providing them models of this through short TV or YouTube clips showing speakers engaged in everyday English use will begin to close this gap.

Point out the routines the speakers go through: how they greet each other, how they develop the conversation, and then close it.

**3 REAL WORLD USE:**

Many students, particularly ESL

students, are very reluctant to venture out into the world beyond the university. Because they are going to need to do this eventually, students should be encouraged in this direction. Send them out to shopping centers, bookstores, or coffeehouses to note how people engage in conversations in an actual real life setting. Have them come back to class ready to discuss new vocabulary or phrases they learned.

## **4 HAVE STUDENTS PRACTICE WITH EACH OTHER.**

Once students have learned some of the language and structures of conversational English, have them practice with each other in pairs. Hold a class party in which students have to speak to multiple people or groups, just as in a real party.

## **5 PRACTICE IN REAL WORLD SETTINGS.**

In this exercise, all students will have to sign up for one real-world setting, such as a party or a meeting, in which they will have to engage in conversational English. Have them bring back a short report on what happened to share with their classmates. This also provides some accountability for actually doing the exercise.

## **6 ASSESS STUDENTS.**

Assessment does not have to mean a traditional pencil-and-paper test, which would make little sense for assessing conversational English and does not match the way students have been taught, in any case. Some alternate ways to assess are walking around the class while students are talking and noting how much time is spent in English or another language. Then the class can be brought back together so the instructor can discuss common concerns she noted. Students may also hold conversations before the rest of the class or with the instructor as part of assessment. A rubric should be used to note vocabulary and phrases used.

**CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH IS OFTEN NOT SEEN AS IMPORTANT AS THE ACADEMIC, PERHAPS RIGHTLY SO AS IT IS THE ACADEMIC STUDENTS MOST IMMEDIATELY NEED TO SUCCEED AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL.**

**NEVERTHELESS, CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF ANY STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE IN AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRY AND IS THEREFORE IMPORTANT TO BE TAUGHT.**

# How Do We Know He Killed His Wife? Teaching Inference

**THERE IS A GENERAL BELIEF IN OUR CULTURE THAT ASSUMPTIONS ARE BAD, THAT WE SHOULD ASSUME NOTHING, AND MANY PEOPLE, INCLUDING STUDENTS, PRIDE THEMSELVES ON ASSUMING NOTHING.**

However, in reality, much of every day life is made up of shared assumptions. When I stop at a traffic light, I am assuming other drivers will also obey the rules—I would not venture out on the streets otherwise. Rarely are my assumptions violated in this case, and it is notable when they are, with lawsuits and trips to the emergency room ensuing.

Assumptions, and cultural assumptions, hit home with me recently when, at the end of a story, a student asked me, “How do we know he killed his wife?” I answered that we didn’t, exactly. Still, he was heard threatening her - he bought a large insurance policy on her life, and he was found standing over her body with a loaded gun—I’m going with the inference he killed her. The student was persistent in that we should assume nothing, and, if I were on the character’s jury for murder, there would be some validity to this, to assume nothing. But I am merely a reader and need only go with the best evidence available.

## **IMPORTANT POINTS OF TEACHING INFERENCE**

### **1 BEST EVIDENCE.**

Go with what all the signs suggest. This is especially true in higher level reading, when readers are expected to make those connections because the writing is so information-dense the author can’t make all of them for you. When doing a reading, pause frequently to ask students why they think a character did a certain thing or why they believe something happened.

### **2 CONTEXT COUNTS.**

I once asked a student, who was hobbling into class on crutches: “Sports injury?” This was a fair inference in the context of a university and young

students, and in fact, I turned out to be right. It would not be such a fair inference with an older man coming out of Denny’s restaurant on crutches. As another example, a man doing some landscaping work on a neighbor’s house one afternoon called out to me, “Do you know where a subway is?” I couldn’t fathom why he would be asking about a subway in a suburban California neighborhood, a place notorious for its dearth of public transportation, until I realized he meant Subway—a sandwich chain. In midtown Manhattan, a subway is a train... in California, it’s probably a restaurant.

### **3 INFERENCE IS OFTEN BASED ON THE ASSUMPTION OF SHARED KNOWLEDGE.**

I gave students the example of a movie I had recently seen in which an FBI informant on the Mafia, on returning to his office and opening his desk, found a dead rat. His reaction was one of extreme fear—he took this as a threat on his life, based on his cultural understanding of “rat” as one who goes to the authorities. Someone from another culture or situation wouldn’t have the same reaction: someone from China, for example, who didn’t have that cultural understanding of “rat,” or who is not involved with organized crime, as in my case—I do understand the idioms “rat” and “rat someone out,” but since I have never informed on the Mafia, to me a dead rat in my desk would just be a dead rat, and I would not draw the same inferences the man in the film did. This seems to go with the “Best Guess” element—what is the best guess on the meaning of “rat,” given the situation?

### **4 INFERENCE AREN’T INFALIBLE.**

An inference is a best guess, based on the situation and what is known at the time. The man knows he has snitched on the mob, and he jumps to certain conclusions about a dead rat left in his desk. But he could be wrong—it may be just a rat. My student coming in on crutches could have simply fallen down the stairs at her home. Getting students

to accept this - that they don’t always have to be right in their inferences, and probably won’t be - can take many hours of class time and practice.

### **5 INFERENCE HAS A LOT TO WITH THE ASSUMED AUDIENCE AND HOW MUCH THE READER CAN EXPECT THAT AUDIENCE TO UNDERSTAND.**

I will assume a lot less from an American vs. non-American audience, for example, in discussing my family’s celebration of American Thanksgiving. “Yeah, the turkey was dry, and the game was boring,” might be the way I dismiss this year’s Thanksgiving to another American. I’m not going to go on at length about the history and common practices of the holiday and risk boring him—he knows, probably, what I mean about dry turkey and “the game.” However, I understand I’ll probably have to explain a little more at length to someone new to the culture.

## **METHODS FOR TEACHING INFERENCE**

### **1 REAL LIFE CONCEPTS.**

Begin by pointing out things in the room or around campus: “Tom’s jacket and hair are wet. What can we infer?” He’s just come from across campus, it’s started raining since I came to class, and so on. Continue with applying the inference to ourselves: “I’m probably going to want to put on my jacket before going out,” and so on, to show that we actually do use inferences every day.

### **2 GO THROUGH A FEW LINES OF YOUR LATEST READING AND ASK STUDENTS WHAT THEY UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE PIECE:**

“How do you know it’s his own house he woke up in and not someone else’s? How do you know he lives in a city? How do you know it’s an American city? Can you tell what part of the country?” to show we infer all the time.



### **3 SHOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REASONABLE AND UNREASONABLE INFERENCE, PERHAPS DRAWING ON A PAST EXAMPLE.**

For me to infer my student on crutches had a sports injury was a reasonable inference. It would be less reasonable to think she had fallen from her dorm roof—though this could conceivably be true. It just wouldn't be a reasonable/best evidence inference.

### **4 ACADEMIC TEXTS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS ASSUME A LOT—PERHAPS WRONGLY—ABOUT STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE BASE.**

Going through a difficult reading and discussing what the reader seems to assume students know can be insightful—highlighting what they believe the author thinks they know (and what they probably don't).

### **5 STUDENTS ARE ALSO NOTORIOUS FOR WRITING WRITER-BASED PROSE:**

that is, writing that is more “writer” than “reader” friendly in that it relies too much on inference and supposed shared assumptions, as if the reader in some way were an extension of the writer: for example, writing about a family celebration and its own specific, individualistic traditions and then assuming the reader will understand that. Audience awareness can be taught with inference: in giving the assignment, ask the students to think about the possible audience and how much can be expected for about readers to know about the topic and how much needs to be explained. Tell students to imagine themselves in dialogue with that imagined audience and think about how they would modify their language and how much they would explain. This develops in writers a sense of audience.

Although we do it every day, drawing inference does not always transfer directly to academic skills.

**WITH PLANNED INSTRUCTION, THE TEACHER CAN SHOW STUDENTS HOW TO USE THIS SKILL FOR COLLEGE READING AND WRITING.**

# So How about those Giants?

## Teaching the Fine Art of Small Talk

“SO HOW IS EVERYONE?” PAUL ASKED. “FINE,” I RESPONDED. “SHANA’S ON A SCHOOL TRIP THIS WEEK.” “OH, YES, SCHOOL TRIPS. MY SONS USUALLY HAVE FOUR A YEAR. KELLY AND I CHAPERONE...”

This recent conversation was not between me and a close friend, as you might be surmising but rather between me and my accountant. We rarely communicate besides on the phone and even then only several times a year. This necessitates the use of small talk, that discussion on relatively unimportant matters that not many people do well. “Small talk” is actually complex in its rules and practice and is something of an art form—a lost one, much like the art of conversation itself.

Why do we need small talk at all? Small talk is for those occasions when spending time with someone we don’t know well—a stranger at a party, a classmate outside an office—but we need to talk to the other person because ignoring him or her would be rude.

However, because he or she is a stranger or relatively so, we want to avoid potentially sensitive topics. Small talk is so widely practiced that being able to successfully conduct a conversation in small talk is necessary for social success, including that of our ESL students.

### TOPICS TO AVOID FOR SMALL TALK

#### 1 RELIGION

The United States is a diverse nation, including in religion—so much so that it is written in our Constitution that state business is separate from religious because of the potential for conflict if one majority religious group gained control within the government. Likewise, religion is a topic avoided in most public settings especially with relative strangers because of the potential for conflict at worst or discomfort at least.

#### 2 POLITICS

Politics is another volatile topic, like religion, for similar reasons—people tend to have deeply-felt or strong opinions on these topics and the potential for conflict is great if two people disagree. There are, of course, some minor topics on which most people can agree—like presidential candidate’s bad haircut or poor control of the English language, despite being a native speaker. Other than these light topics, politics should be avoided in small talk.

#### 3 SEX AND OTHER PERSONAL INFORMATION

“TMI” is an idiom in current use in the U.S., an acronym for “too much information.” One goal of small talk is to avoid making the listener uncomfortable. Some topics, like the sex life or health of the speaker, are too personal for small talk.

### ACCEPTABLE TOPICS FOR SMALL TALK

So there are a lot of topics that are not suitable for small talk, mostly because of their sensitivity. So what is some suitable material?

#### 1 THE WEATHER

A conversation on the weather sounds boring, right? Not really—I just had an online conversation in which the participants spent a few minutes discussing the weather conditions in our different parts of the world—from the pouring rain in New Zealand to the dangerously hot and dry California. And since everyone experiences weather and nobody has control of it, everyone could contribute to the topic, say something interesting, and not get angry at someone else—the Californians could hardly blame the New Zealanders for having more water.

#### 2 SPORTS

Sports are, like weather, a relatively “safe” or neutral topic, particularly if the conversation participants are

from the same locale—in all likelihood they support the same team and can spend a few moments congratulating or commiserating with each other on their team’s progress, or lack thereof. Even people who support competing teams rarely become hostile in their opposing interests, and competitive remarks tend to remain good-natured. ESL students frequently can contribute to these conversations with their stronger knowledge of sports like soccer, as it’s called in the U.S., and football elsewhere.

#### 3 CURRENT, NON CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS

There are those current events which are virtually free of controversy: most will agree on the humanity of the billionaire giving away another million to charity or the horror of a mass shooting. Part of the reason people discuss these topics publicly is that we are momentarily bonded with each other in agreeing upon the event.

### THE PRACTICE OF SMALL TALK

#### 1 TEST THE WATERS

People begin “So how about those Giants?” to find out if the other party is interested and can contribute to the conversation. Small talk is a dialogue, not a monologue.

#### 2 ENGAGE IN THE TOPIC

Even though you may be discussing the weather, engage in it enough to keep the other party interested. Add your personal experience and “take” on the topic. Almost any topic can be interesting if the parties engage. And almost any topic is boring if they don’t.

#### 3 KNOW WHEN TO BREAK IT OFF

There will come a point when you’ve said all that you can say about the weather, the other party seems bored, or that time demands you move on to the main point of your call or visit.

## **4 TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

Sometimes instead of breaking off the small talk, the parties involved find they have enough common interests to move beyond the small talk phase and into more serious discussion. That is fine and one of the points of small talk, to find out if there is enough common interest to move beyond small talk.

## **5 SHOW YOUR PERSONALITY**

Even if it is only in a small way, the person you have engaged with for this short period of time should be left feeling as if they have spoken with an actual person with something real to say, even if it's only about the weather. Someone I was speaking to recently in a social situation, for example, told me the weather and terrain of my city, Sacramento, California, reminded her in some ways of her native Pakistan. That's an original observation I won't forget soon, and I'll remember that conversation and person who said that.

**SO DOES SMALL TALK HAVE TO BE BLAND? ABSOLUTELY NOT.**

**DESPITE ITS NEGATIVE REPUTATION AS BORING AND REPETITIVE (“HOT ENOUGH FOR YA?”), SMALL TALK DOES NOT HAVE TO BE BLAND. IT IS AN ART FORM, AND AT ITS BEST PUTS OTHERS AT EASE, LEAVES THEM WITH AN INTERESTING INSIGHT, AND PAVES THE WAY TO A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP—OR AT LEAST THE NEXT STAGE OF THIS PARTICULAR INTERACTION.**

# Don't "Learn to be a Lady" and "Learn to be a Woman" Mean the Same Thing? Teaching Connotation

**ONE OF THE HARDER THINGS TO TEACH IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION IS CONNOTATION, OR THE UNDERLYING MEANING AND ASSOCIATIONS OF A WORD.**

This was driven home for me as a teacher one day last semester when I was teaching Maya Angelou's essay ironically titled "Finishing School," about her first work experience as an African American maid in a wealthy white home. In discussing the title and what it might mean, my students, mostly urban, first-generation minorities with at least some ESL background, were stumped until one student blurted out "It's where you'd go to be learn to be a woman." I replied, "Close, but actually, it's where you'd go to learn to be a lady." Again, confusion— isn't "lady" and "woman" the same thing? No, not exactly—they are denotatively, according to dictionary meaning, approximately the same—adult female. But the connotation, the underlying, secondary meaning, is different. One learns to be a lady from other ladies, it seems to me—to walk correctly and sit correctly and pour tea. One learns to be a woman from a man, in all probability, given the sexual connotation to the phrase.

Connotation is subtle, indirect, and to an extent, subjective, containing emotional content. Just the word "lady," for example, for many has pleasant associations, conjuring up images of their mother or favorite teachers. To others, however, the term "lady" might suggest confinement and oppression, with its association with rules and propriety and even social class. Although a difficult concept, connotation should be taught. Not understanding the connotations of words can lead to misunderstandings and embarrassment: while an extreme example, the mistake of calling a male "pretty" rather than "handsome" is one that a student wouldn't want to make.

**SO HOW DO YOU TEACH CONNOTATION, GIVEN ITS DIFFICULTY?**

## **1 START BY RAISING AWARENESS ON THIS ISSUE "CONNOTATION."**

Teach the terms "denotation" and "connotation." Illustrate their relationship, perhaps graphically, with "denotation" and "lady" and on top and "connotation" on the bottom with "lady's" connotations: polite, proper, neat, etc.

## **2 ILLUSTRATE THE CONCEPT WITH A WORD WITH NUMEROUS SYNONYMS, LIKE "GOOD-LOOKING"**

Brainstorm the synonyms to "good-looking": beautiful, cute, pretty, handsome, etc. What is the difference in connotation between "beautiful" and "pretty"? What is the difference in connotation of "cute" when applied to man and a woman? A child? An inanimate object, like a house?

## **3 WHILE READING, TAKE NOTE OF THE AUTHOR'S WORD CHOICE AND DISCUSS CONNOTATION.**

"Why do you think he called his brother a 'clever' businessman in the second paragraph? What's the connotation of 'clever' here?" Other possible questions to ask: What are some connotations to "clever"? What are some other words that mean about the same thing as "'clever'"? How are their connotations different: what is the difference between being "clever" and being "intelligent"?

## **4 WATCH A CLIP FROM A TV OR MOVIE, PREFERABLY RELATED TO THE COURSE READING, AND TAKE NOTE OF THE CHARACTERS' WORD CHOICE.**

"When she said 'sorry' in that particular tone, 'sorry,' with the stress on the second syllable, does the meaning change from the usual meaning of 'sorry'? What is the connotation? Is she really sorry?"

## **5 ACT IT OUT.**

Take a short scene from a reading and act out a scene with a peer. Vary the connotation through varying sentence and word stress as above. How does even the meaning of "Good morning" change when said as "Good morning!", stressing the last syllable? How does the speaker feel about the morning?

## **6 HAVE STUDENTS PRACTICE CONNOTATION IN JOURNALS, USING THE SAME WORD IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, OR USING SYNONYMS OF THE SAME WORD, VARYING CONNOTATION.**

For example, challenge them to write about a "smart" person and come up with different synonyms for "smart," varying the connotation appropriately: e.g., "She's intelligent because she understands math very well but also crafty because she can beat you at cards."

## **7 HAVE STUDENTS READ A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE ON AN IMPORTANT TOPIC, SUCH AS THE UPCOMING NATIONAL ELECTION.**

Note the author's use of connotation. How are key terms like "politician" used? Are the connotations positive or negative? Why? Can we judge something about the author's perspective on the topic from the choice of words and connotation?

## **8 HAVE A STUDENT DESCRIBE SOMETHING FOR THE CLASS: FOR EXAMPLE, THE PARK NEAR THE SCHOOL.**

Let others know his or her perspective by use of connotation. Describing it as "stark, bare, and lonely" sounds very different than "solitary, quiet, and peaceful," although it might apply to the same place. The class will listen then decide what the speaker's feelings about the



place are based on the use connotation.

## **9 OR DESCRIBE A PERSON FOR THE CLASS.**

See if the class can tell your relationship to the person by your use of connotation. Is it your mother, girlfriend, little sister, professor? Does use of connotation vary with each?

## **10 DO IT IN WRITING.**

Students can describe something, like the classroom or the quad, using pleasant connotations. Then they can pass their papers to a partner, who will describe the same thing in negative terms, by changing connotation.

**CONNOTATION CAN BE DIFFICULT TO TEACH BECAUSE IT IS SUBJECTIVE IN NATURE.**

**NOT UNDERSTANDING HOW TO INTERPRET CONNOTATION AND HOW TO USE IT CAN LEAD TO EMBARRASSMENT AND MISSING OUT ON IMPORTANT INFORMATION. THERE ARE, FORTUNATELY, SPECIFIC ELEMENTS TO THIS IMPORTANT CONCEPT THAT CAN BE DEFINED, PRACTICED, AND TAUGHT.**

# So Many Ways to Say I'm Sorry: Teaching Apologies

**EVERYBODY MAKES MISTAKES. IT'S A FACT OF LIFE, AND WE ALL HAVE TO TAKE A MOMENT TO EXPRESS OUR REGRET FROM TIME TO TIME.**

So how do you teach your ESL students how to apologize in English? After all, not every culture has the same expectations when it comes to apologies. In U.S. culture, a good apology contains 6 parts.

Here is the anatomy of a good apology that you can present to your ESL students when they are learning to say I'm sorry.

## THE ANATOMY OF A GOOD APOLOGY

### 1 A REQUEST FOR THEIR ATTENTION

Before apologizing, the offender needs to ask the offended for their attention. Depending on who the offended person is, the request may be casual, informal or formal. A person might start with a phrase like 'excuse me, can we talk about something', or 'I wanted to talk to you about what happened yesterday'.

### 2 AN ADMISSION OF WHAT HAPPEN

The next step in apologizing is to state what happened without making excuses. The speaker might say something like 'I know I hurt your feelings', 'I caused a problem', or 'I forgot to do something'. The speaker should be honest and respectful of the other person.

### 3 A SINCERE ADMISSION

The third piece of an apology is a sincere admission that you did something wrong. The apologizer can say something like 'I messed up', 'I made a mistake', or 'I should not have done that'. The more specific the speaker can be, the better received the apology

will be.

### 4 THE APOLOGY

Step four is the actual apology. These words are what makes an apology an apology. The speaker should say 'I'm sorry' or 'I apologize'. Speakers should be careful to say 'I'm sorry I...' rather than 'I'm sorry you...' or 'I'm sorry if...' The two latter phrases are likely to cause more offence or increase anger in the already offended.

### 5 SOME HUMOR (OPTIONAL)

Depending on how close the apologizer is to the offended person, he might choose to include humor to lighten the mood. This can help diffuse a tense atmosphere or melt the anger of the offended person. Particularly helpful is self deprecating humor, something that pokes fun at the person who offended.

### 6 TIME TO FORGIVE

Finally, the offended person should have time to forgive the offender. Depending on how serious the situation is, this may take seconds or days or even longer. Someone offering a good apology gives the other person time to resolve his or her feelings and seek reunification. It is key to avoid putting pressure on the offended party.

Now that your students know what they should include in a good apology, give them a chance to practice.

Role plays are great for this type of language practice. Start by brainstorming with your class different situations that would demand an apology like the ones below. These situations should range from the minor inconveniences, honest mistakes and serious offences.

Then brainstorm a list of phrases your students might use when making apologies in each of these situations. Once students have a plan and the vocabulary for their apology, have pairs of students choose a situation and role play an apology to one another. Make sure each student plays the role of the offender and the offended. If you like, have students come to the front of the class and perform their apologies for the class. This can be a fun activity for particularly dramatic students, and you can encourage entertainment and humor.

## MINOR INCONVENIENCES

Stepping on someone's foot

Arriving late for class

Receiving the wrong food at a restaurant

## HONEST MISTAKES

Forgetting to do something

Offending another person

Damaging something accidentally

## SERIOUS OFFENSES

Cheating on a spouse

Stealing something

Intentionally hurting someone

# Teaching Devices for Coherence and Cohesion

**SOMETIMES WHEN READING A STACK OF STUDENT COMPOSITIONS, I'LL RUN ACROSS A SECTION OF WRITING THAT GOES SOMETHING LIKE "MY FIRST CAR WAS UNRELIABLE. A CAR WAS UGLY, TOO." I'LL FEEL MY ATTENTION START TO DRIFT, MY EYES CLOSE...**

I confess I have been known to put my head on my desk and drift off, only to be waken hours later by a family member. Not that the writing was so bad, but the lack of idea organization, coherence, and connection between those ideas, cohesion, is very tiring on the reader, who has to work to make sense of the passage. And the reader, after all, should be doing minimal work - it is the writer's job to work to make the connections as clear as possible. Some attention is paid to coherence and cohesion in student composition textbooks, which typically give lists of words and phrases like "however" and "in addition to" and their functions. However, the problem with coherence and cohesion in student writing usually goes beyond the lack of these simple words and phrases which are relatively easy to teach and learn—it is not very difficult, that is, to remember to put such a connecting device at the beginning of each paragraph, which is usually how composition textbooks address them. However, it is not the lack of these terms that wears on the reader. No, the lack of connections is deeper and more intrinsic to the writing.

## **PROBLEMS WITH COHERENCE AND COHESION IN STUDENT WRITING**

### **1 LACK OF CONNECTIONS: JUMPING FROM TOPIC TO TOPIC**

In the paragraph quoted from above, the writer jumps from the car's unreliability to its ugliness from one sentence to the next. Later in the paragraph, the writer picks up both topics again, again jumping from topic to topic. There should be some internal organization of the paragraph, with all the sentences on the car's unreliability grouped together and then its ugliness, perhaps

also ordering the ideas by importance, addressing the appearance first then building to the more important unreliability.

### **2 LACK OF LINKING WORDS**

Linking words, or transitions, do have their place, in this case signaling the reader when moving from point to point and the importance of those points: "First, the car was ugly....The most important problem, however, was the car's unreliability." Providing such linking words guides the reader through the paragraph, signaling when the topic or subtopic is changing and in what direction it is going.

### **3 LACK OF SYNONYMS**

Another "tiring" element in the sample paragraph beginning is the repetition of "car...car..." instead of varying with the vocabulary with "car... automobile...vehicle...Ford." Using different terms like this actually creates more connections in the text because it emphasizes the theme, the main point, of the car, and tying sentences together in a way that continual repetition of the word "car" doesn't. Suggest students use their word processing program's thesaurus to check for synonyms, and this will expand their vocabularies as well create more cohesion to their writing.

### **4 MISUSE OF PRONOUNS**

Pronouns can be misused or not used enough even by professional, experienced writers, who might make the mistake of writing something like "Joe stopped the car. Joe got out and popped the hood. Joe saw steam coming out. Joe closed the hood..." etc. This reads as choppy and disconnected. Much more fluid is "Joe stopped the car. He got out and popped the hood. Then he saw steam..." and so forth. Instead of constantly repeating Joe's name but rather varying it with pronouns, a sense of connection across sentences is created.

### **5 MISUSE OF ARTICLES**

In "My first car was unreliable: a car was ugly, too," the article "a" was misused - the article should be "the," because this is the second mention of the car, and the reader is left wondering if this is a different car the writer is introducing. Misusing articles this way is typical of ESL students as articles do not exist in a number of languages. Teaching students the correct use of articles, especially the use of "the" for the second mention of something, will help them create cohesion in their writing. So these are some elements to create coherence and cohesion in student work: organization, linking words, synonyms, pronouns, and articles. What are some methods to teach these devices? They follow:

## **METHODS TO ADDRESS LACK OF COHERENCE AND COHESION**

### **1 LOOK AT SAMPLE ESSAYS**

Look at the writing of someone like William F. Buckley in the classic essay "Why Don't We Complain?" and note the progression from a hot train coach, where no one complained, to a movie theater and bad projector where no one complained, to complaining in general. The reader sees the connections and is not confused. Discuss how the effect was achieved.

### **2 REVISE A PARAGRAPH**

Read aloud a paragraph with coherence/cohesion problems, perhaps one you created. With students note its lack of organization, of transitions, of synonyms and so forth. Have students revise it for better cohesion and coherence.

### **3 REVISE A PEER'S WORK**

Have students read each other's work, perhaps aloud. When it is not your own work, it is much easier to note the lack of connections as it won't make sense to you - you will have to work to understand. This is not the case with your own writing, of course, which you

are very familiar with, and you can “see” the connections between the ideas even when they’re not actually on the paper.

## **4 REVISE OWN WORK**

After having revised sample paragraphs and peers’ work, students can now go back to their own papers and see them more critically, looking for the elements they have noted in their classmates’ work: have they grouped ideas? Used transitions and synonyms? Proofread their pronouns and articles? Give students a checklist of items they should look for in revising for coherence and cohesion.

Coherence and cohesion are often dealt with superficially in writing materials, often confined to use of linking words.

**HOWEVER, WHEN READERS COMPLIMENT WRITING, THEY OFTEN SAY “IT FLOWS WELL,” BY WHICH THEY PROBABLY MEAN IT HAS GOOD COHERENCE AND COHESION. TEACHING OUR STUDENTS THE ELEMENTS OF COHERENCE AND COHESION WILL HELP THEM CONNECT THEIR IDEAS BETTER AND MAKE IT “FLOW.”**



# Rome is a Place Where ... - Tips for Teaching Adjective Clauses

"I AM FROM ROME. ROME IS VERY NICE. PEOPLE EAT SPAGHETTI IN ROME. I LIKE IT A LOT." ANY TEACHER WHO HAS EVER ENCOUNTERED WRITING LIKE THIS KNOWS THAT STUDENTS LIKE TO WRITE IN SHORT SIMPLE SENTENCES.

To push them out into more complex sentences, a fun grammar point to teach is adjective clauses. They're one of the most commonly used grammar structures, and they're incredibly useful for teaching students to add more detail in their writing. Stuck on how to approach this complex topic? The best way is to start simple. There are a lot of exceptions and nuances with adjective clauses. Eventually your students will learn all of these, but you don't have to put them all out there at once. Start with the basics and teach them how to use who, which, and that. Once they feel comfortable, add in where and when. After that, throw in whose and teach the difference between identifying and non-identifying adjective clauses.

## START WITH THE BASICS

### 1 WHO, WHICH, THAT

These are the simplest of adjective clauses to explain and use. *The boy who I'm going to marry is handsome. The class that I'm taking next semester seems difficult.* Emphasize that although that is acceptable for both people and things in essential adjective clauses, most native speakers will use who for people and that for things.

### 2 SUBJECT OR OBJECT CLAUSES

Just as adjectives can modify either subjects or objects, adjective clauses can do the same. *Subject: I am only friends with people who recycle. Object: The man who(m) I am friends with recycles.* Note that whom is only possible in object clauses - it can be easily found by identifying the second subject that comes after the pronoun.

### 3 WHERE, WHEN

When teaching where and when, be sure to explain that both words show the position of something, either in place or time. *Rome is the city where I'm*

*getting married. Early morning is the time when I'm happiest.* If you have a preposition (read: pre- POSITION), you are now indicating the position, so you don't need where or when. *Rome is the city that I'm getting married in. Early morning is the time that I'm happiest at.* You can also teach them to be more formal. Note the change of relative pronoun and preposition movement: *Rome is the city in which I'm getting married. Early morning is the time at which I'm happiest.*

### 4 WHOSE

Tell students that whose is always followed by a noun that belongs to the subject/or object. Be sure to teach them the difference between whose and who's. *Tom Jones, whose name I'm taking, is an engineer. Tom Jones, who's an engineer, is going to be my husband.*

### 5 IDENTIFYING VS. NON-IDENTIFYING

Whether you call it restrictive/non-restrictive, essential/non-essential, or necessary/unnecessary, be sure to explain this important rule. *My brother who lives in New York has a baby. My brother, who lives in New York, has a baby.*

Use similar sentences that only differ by punctuation to illustrate the difference in meaning. In example A, I have more than one brother, but both of them live in different cities so I can identify them by this information. In sentence B, I only have one brother, so I'm giving extra information that you don't need to know to understand who I'm talking about.

Remind your students that extra information = extra punctuation, and we only use commas with non-essential adjective clauses. We also only use wh- words in these clauses (no that allowed). Practice reading these sentences out loud to show how the comma creates a pause.

## ACTIVITIES TO TEACH & PRACTICE ADJECTIVE CLAUSES

### 1 MIX AND MATCH ADJECTIVE CLAUSES

Write down the names of famous people,

places, or things on note cards (Lady Gaga, Rome, a smart phone, etc... ) Give students a second blank note card and instruct them to write an adjective clause that describes their card (e.g. The singer who wears crazy costumes... or The city that I want to visit). Collect both the name cards and the adjective clause cards from all the students and shuffle them. Redistribute one name card and one adjective clause to each student. Have the students stand up and try to match the adjective clause to the name. When they are finished, tell them to combine them to create a sentence (e.g. The singer who wears crazy costumes is Lady Gaga).

### 2 TABOO

This popular game is a hit with the students and is great to teach adjective clauses. To make it easier on the teacher, provide blank note cards to the students and have them make their own game cards. Tell the students to use only nouns and underline the target noun at the top of the card. Underneath, have them write three taboo words with "x"s next to them so students will know which words they cannot say. You may need to institute a rule that says when describing a word for their team, students must describe the word with an adjective clause - they can't simply say synonyms.

### 3 GUESS WHO

To practice the use of adjective clauses to describe people, have one class period where students aren't allowed to use names. For example, if students want to refer to other students in the class, they must say, "I want to ask the student who has a purple shirt to borrow a pencil." This is also a good skill to reinforce the idea of identifying/non-identifying clauses because if they just used "the student," we wouldn't know who they were referring to.

Students don't have to be at an advanced level to learn adjective clauses, especially ones that have who, which, and that.

As soon as students learn wh- questions, they're reading to begin combining sentences with relative pronouns and improve the complexity of their sentences.

# Don't Address the Teacher as "Yo, Dude": Teaching Register

**ONCE ON THE FIRST OR SECOND DAY OF CLASS, A YOUNG MAN—NICE, POLITE, FIRST-GENERATION AMERICAN---IN TRYING TO GET MY ATTENTION, CALLED OUT, "YO, DUDE!" AND THEN WAS CONFUSED WHEN HE WAS MET WITH SHOCKED LAUGHTER FROM THE REST OF THE STUDENTS.**

This highlights a problem with students like this one who have ESL background but are otherwise acculturated Americans and may very well consider English their primary language. These students are sometimes called "Generation 1.5," because they are between cultures. They have fluency in spoken English but may be somewhat uncertain about the use of register, or situational variety of language. "Yo, Dude" is okay for the dorm, not okay for the classroom. Immigrant students might also have the problem of using too formal a register for the situation: "Pardon me, miss, may I introduce myself?" at a fraternity party, for example.

A native speaker of English would realize the inappropriateness of this, those more new to the language, or who did not speak it in their homes, may be more uncertain about which forms are appropriate in which situations. In extreme situations, this uncertainty can lead to conflict when the listener, seeing only that the speaker appears to be fluent in English, assumes he is being deliberately rude when he misuses register. It is therefore important to teach register to learners of English.

## **SO HOW CAN REGISTER BE TAUGHT?**

### **1 FIRST RAISE AWARENESS ON REGISTER.**

Define it as situationally appropriate language. Give examples of it: "Yo, Dude" is okay for the dorms, but how do we say this in an academic setting? How about 'Excuse me, Professor'?" Often students are resistant to this

notion, that the words that come out of their mouths actually matter, that people judge them based on those words, and that varying your language according to the context is not being inauthentic or phony. Students should be gently reminded that what we say, and how we say it, actually counts and can affect us and others.

### **2 OFTEN A READING ON THE TOPIC OF REGISTER IS A GOOD WAY TO PROCEED.**

Amy Tan's "My Mother's English," about her Chinese-born mother's learner English and how it affects both the mother and daughter is very powerful. For example, Tan recounts an incident she describes as typical in which she had to pretend to be her mother in a phone conversation with the mother's stockbroker because Mrs. Tan, the mother, had learned through painful experience that her English, while strong enough to communicate meaning, was somehow not "good" enough for situations like talking with a stock broker, and people didn't take her seriously. This raises awareness of the fact that register exists in language and does make a difference.

### **3 CONTINUE IDENTIFYING REGISTER OVER THE SEMESTER.**

After engaging in a new reading, ask students if the writing is more conversational or academic. Why do they think so? Identify the features of academic language, such as longer, more complex sentences and multisyllabic words, often of Latin origin - conversational English tends to have shorter words Anglo-Saxon in origin.

### **4 IDENTIFY DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF REGISTERS AND THEIR USE AS THEY COME UP.**

For example, is there such a thing as a 'business' register? What are its features? When might it be useful?

Is there a "medical" register? People often complain about not understanding their doctors - this is in part because, while speaking English, doctors often use a medical register that is challenging for people outside the field to understand. For example, patients might be described by doctors as "nonambulatory" rather than "can't walk," "noncompliant" rather than "won't follow directions," and "morbidly obese" instead of "fat to the point of possible death." All of these terms from the medical register--"ambulatory," "compliant," "morbid," and "obese"-- have Latin roots, as does much of the academic, nonconversational register in general because when Rome conquered England it left its language on most of the institutions of higher learning. Learning at least some of these Latin-based forms can help students greatly in learning the language of power—that register used in colleges, doctor's and lawyer's offices, and businesses.

### **5 HAVE STUDENTS PRACTICE USING A DIFFERENT VARIETY OF ENGLISH THAN THE USUALLY USE, LIKE WRITING A LETTER OF COMPLAINT TO A COMPANY IN THEIR "USUAL" MORE CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH AND THEN IN PRECISE BUSINESS ENGLISH.**

Will the letters get different results? In what way? Which would they, as readers or recipients of the letters be more likely to respond to favorably and why?

### **6 HAVE STUDENTS WORK ON REGISTER IN THEIR OWN WRITING.**

Have them take a writing they've completed and examine it. Are there features of conversational English in it? A lot? How could they revise using more academic language?

## **7 NOTICE USE OF REGISTER OUT IN THE WORLD.**

Notice the different registers people speak with.

Read the letters to the editor in that day's paper, listen to a radio broadcast, watch people in conversation at Starbucks. What register are they using? What features identify it as that register? Why do you think the speakers chose that register? Assign students to just notice register like this over a weekend and come in to discuss a couple of examples that struck them.

## **8 ROLE PLAY.**

Have students practice asking for the same thing - money, for example—in different situations. How would the register vary if you were asking your mother? Your best friend? Your boss? A government agency?

## **9 PRACTICE USING DIFFERENT REGISTERS IN SOCIAL SETTINGS.**

Once students have noticed register in a number of situations and role played it in class, it's time to try it out in the world. Encourage students to have short conversations in such settings as the park, a coffee shop, and an office. Have them come back and tell their class about it.

**REGISTER CAN BE DIFFICULT TO DEFINE AND EXEMPLIFY, BUT IT DOES EXIST.**

**ALL LANGUAGES HAVE REGISTER, THE VARIETY OF LANGUAGE USED IN SPECIFIC SITUATIONS. UNDERSTANDING HOW TO USE REGISTER APPROPRIATELY CAN HELP STUDENTS IN THEIR ADJUSTMENT TO A NEW CULTURE.**

# Hedges, Euphemisms, Apologies, & Requests: Language for Politeness

## NOT A LOT OF OUR LANGUAGE IS DIRECT, I REALIZED RECENTLY AFTER AN EXCHANGE AT A RESTAURANT.

“So have you had a chance to look over the menu?” the waitress asked at the beginning of the meal. “What do you want?” would be, of course, far too blunt, and “Have you had a chance to look at the menu?” does indeed function the same way. Similarly, the waitress said “I’ll just put the check here on the table for whenever you’re ready” at the end of the meal - she would never say, “You need to pay now.” In fact, a lot of our language is made up of similar language for politeness.

## LANGUAGE FOR POLITENESS

### 1 THE HEDGE

The Hedge “I’d really like to come to the party on Saturday, but I’m not sure if I can,” means “I probably won’t be there.” The speaker needs to respond to this invitation but doesn’t want to give a direct “yes” or “no” and instead hedges, or approaches the invitation indirectly, to avoid offending the host or committing himself to coming when he can’t.

### 2 EUPHEMISM

Euphemism is the “pretty language” we use to cover up a sensitive matter: “a little heavy,” for “fat,” for example, and “mature” for “old.” Because euphemisms are very indirect and an attempt to in some way evade the truth, they can be confusing for even native speakers. The instructor should go over some of the sensitive or “taboo” topics of American culture—death, aging, weight—and some of the common euphemisms for them. Usually, the more sensitive the topic, the more euphemisms it will have: think of how many alternate ways we have to say “to die”: “passed away,” “bought the farm,” “kicked the bucket,” “went to heaven,” and so on.

### 3 THE APOLOGY OR PSEUDO-APOLOGY

The Apology or Pseudo-apology: “I’m sorry I’m late. Traffic is miserable,” or similar apology with an excuse is necessary for such minor transgressions as lateness. In contrast, a “pseudo-apology” is often used as an expression of sympathy: “I’m sorry to hear about your father’s death.” This is obviously not actually an apology but an expression of sympathy, and mistaking its function can lead to some rather comical exchanges: e.g., “It’s okay, it’s not your fault.”

### 4 REQUESTS

All languages have some way, and usually many ways, of asking for help: all of us do this, of various people, and over different things, sometimes just in the course of a day. So there are many ways to ask for help. Generally speaking, the closer the relationship and/or the smaller the request, the less formal and polite the language. As the favor grows bigger and/or the relationship more distant, the more polite the language. For example, I might say to my brother, “Hey, lend me a quarter for the parking meter, please?” but to a board of directors of a foundation, I would say, “I sincerely request that you seriously consider funding this worthy program...” Switching the two registers, or levels of formality and politeness, would be completely inappropriate.

### 5 TERMS OF ADDRESS:

“Sir,” “Ma’am,” and “Miss”: When is it polite to use these, if at all?

“Sir” is used with adult males. “Ma’am” is used for an adult female, “miss” usually for a teenager or young adult.

These are used when the addressee’s name is not known: e.g., “Sir, would you have the time?” They are also used for customers and clients: e.g., “What can I get for you, Ma’am?”

Some interesting notes on terms of address: “Lady” in American culture is not polite when used as a means of address: rather it is a dishonoric, as in “Lady, move your car.” “Boy” as a term of address for male service people, especially African American ones, has long fallen out of use in the United States, seen rightly as racist. However, “girl” is still heard to refer to, not address, female service people, such as waiters, no matter the age of the person: e.g., “I already gave my order to the girl,” when “the girl” might be sixty years old.

## METHODS TO TEACH THE LANGUAGE OF POLITENESS

### 1 TEACH THE TERM

Explain the entire concept of politeness and how different cultures have different ways to show politeness. Ask for examples in U.S. culture: “excuse me” being a common one that people use when they really mean “move.” Ask for similar examples from students’ own cultures.

### 2 RAISE AWARENESS

Show a clip from a TV or part of an article and ask students for examples of polite language: “What term does the writer use for ‘older person?’” and “What words does the actor use for his friend’s grandmother death?” In this way, students begin to understand that people do use the language of politeness frequently.

### 3 CORRECTION

Show a TV clip or read a news article in which there is some violation of polite language. Work with students to identify the offending parts and see if they can correct them: e.g., “The actor keeps calling his friend ‘fat,’ - what can he say that is more polite?”

### 4 SITUATIONAL APPROPRIATENESS



Discuss situations where polite language is really necessary: when addressing a client or customer, in a professional or business setting, in a ceremonial or religious situation, meeting someone for the first time, and so on. Also discuss places when it would not be appropriate, such as in an emergency situation like a fire or in casual gatherings with friends or family.

## 5 ROLE PLAY

After students have had a chance to work with the language of politeness, have them work on role-play. Put students in groups and pass out index cards with the basic situation on it: “Your friend asks about your grandmother, who had been sick. Your grandmother actually died last week. What should you say?” or “Your coworker asks you to have lunch with him. You’re too busy. What do you say?”

**BECAUSE THE WHOLE POINT OF THE LANGUAGE OF POLITENESS IS OFTEN TO COVER UP AN UGLY REALITY, SUCH AS DEATH OR THE NEED FOR MONEY, UNDERSTANDING IT CAN BE DIFFICULT, EVEN TO NATIVE SPEAKERS. HOWEVER, UNDERSTANDING HOW TO USE THESE VARIOUS LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS OF HEDGES, EUPHEMISMS, AND APOLOGIES IS NECESSARY TO NAVIGATE SUCCESSFULLY IN ENGLISH.**

# Teacher, What's a Yankee? Well, It Depends...Contextualizing Language Learning

**FOR A LONG TIME, AS A CHILD, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT A "YANKEE" WAS.**

Sometimes, as in the phrase "Damn Yankees!" it seemed to refer to the people from the Northern states during the American Civil War. Other times, as in "Yankee thrift" or "Yankee ingenuity," it seemed to refer to individuals from only New England states, and then still other times seemed to be directed at Americans in general.

If I tried to ask an adult what "Yankee" meant, she would usually respond with another question, "Who said it?", which just further confused me, leaving me with the impression that "Yankee" was something pejorative, something one shouldn't say. But of course the adults were right in this case: who a "Yankee" is depends on who says it. If the speaker is from within the United States, she probably means someone from the north, probably New England: outside of the United States, and he's probably referring to Americans in general.

To further complicate matters, at one time in history "Yankee" was actually how the American soldiers referred to the British troops, as in the song, "Yankee Doodle Dandy," which mocked their effiteness. But the context of that particular cultural reference, the American Revolution, has long disappeared.

**MUCH OF LANGUAGE IS CONTEXT SPECIFIC**

The question "Where are you from?" also demonstrates the contextualized nature of language in that the answer to this depends on where I am now. If I'm on campus, I'll reply, "The ESL Department." If I'm in my hometown, I'll answer, "The Greenhaven neighborhood." If I'm in New York, I'll respond, "California," and if in Paris, I'll say, "The U.S." Mixing the answers up would seem strange, perhaps bizarre (Imagine responding to the copy clerk on campus that you're from the United States when he asks where you're from

because he needs to know where to direct the copies.) Students should for this reason be taught the contextualized nature of language and how it is based on situation.

**WHAT MATERIAL SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN TEACHING LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT?**

## 1 IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT TO MEANING

Meaning shifts according to the setting and situation. For example, a number of years ago I passed a young woman sitting on quad of the university where I teach, talking on her cell phone. I heard the phrase "breaking up," and I thought at first she was ending a relationship with someone—the almost exclusive meaning of the term "break up" when I was in college. Then I realized she probably just meant she was having difficulty with her cell phone signal—a new meaning to the term "break up" in the electronic age.

## 2 MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS OF WORDS

As can be seen above, words generally have more than one meaning, sometimes multiple meanings. Even words we think of as being simple, concrete, and with one meaning, like "ball," for example, have actually multiple meanings: besides the toy that bounces, a ball is also a formal dance, or a good time in general, as in "have a ball!" It can also mean "aware" or "clever," as in "on the ball." I became aware of this fact when teaching my developmental reading class, and while reading a Mark Twain piece, a young man, a native speaker of English, asked me, "What's a lark?" Assuming he would know the literal meaning of "a kind of bird," I launched into the explanation of "In Twain's day, a 'lark' was a good time, on the spur of the moment, like 'they went to Paris on a lark.'" The student then asked, "So what does

Twain mean when he says 'Get up with the lark?'" Many words have multiple definitions. That's why it's important to consider the context of the word as well as teach students multiple meanings of a word when introducing or explaining it. Now I would never introduce the word "Yankee," for example, without discussing some of the different meanings nor offer an explanation of a word without knowing something about context.

**METHODS TO TEACH CONTEXT AND LANGUAGE**

## 1 EXPLICITLY TEACH THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF WORDS

Teach students that words have multiple meaning for different contexts.

One method to this is to write a single word like "green" on the board. The first definition students are likely to come up with is the color, of course. Then ask students what else it can mean. It can also mean young and inexperienced—as in "a little green for the job"—and environmentally aware, as in "go green", it can also mean money, as in "I need some green." Discuss where each of these meanings, under what circumstances, might be used—a neighborhood improvement meeting, for example, is likely to use the meaning associated with the environment, not money. Write all of these meanings on the board.

Then give out cards with different simple, concrete words on them—"home," "hot," "dog"—and ask students to go through the same process, of coming up with as many meanings as possible, and share what they come up with their peers.

## 2 MATCH THE APPROPRIATE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

Going back to the beginning of the article, start with the question "Where are

you from?” and have students select from possible answers—China, Stockton, Grace Covell Hall. Add in variable of the situation (you’re at the airport/you’re at the student union), and the answer changes, depending on the situation given them.

### **3 TEACH STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT AMBIGUOUS STATEMENTS**

If asked politely, Americans almost never mind answering questions about their language, which we tend to be proud of, and will take time to explain a word or term to a nonnative speaker.

### **4 ROLE-PLAY**

Give students their roles and situation, and give out a question: e.g., “You’re at a student party, and Alberto, you ask Daniella where she is from.” See if they can choose the correct response.

The English language can be ambiguous to even native speakers, this is evident in that we’re sometimes reduced to spelling words out loud (e.g., “I meant the R-E-D book, not R-E-A-D book!”) in order to clarify.

**SO GIVEN THAT IT IS PROBLEMATIC TO NATIVE SPEAKERS, IT IS ALMOST EXPECTED THAT NONNATIVE SPEAKERS SHOULD HAVE QUESTIONS. TEACHING STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR LANGUAGE, AS WELL AS TEACHING THEM THE MULTIPLE MEANING OF WORDS, WILL ACTUALLY HELP THEM FUNCTION MORE INDEPENDENTLY IN THE LANGUAGE.**

# Avoiding the “We All Agree” Syndrome: Teaching Discussion in the Reading Class

Last semester in my reading class, we were discussing the session’s reading, Kate Chopin’s “Story of an Hour,” her classic short story about the joy a young woman feels on hearing the news of her husband’s death—not that she had hated him - she had just felt shackled by matrimony, and now she felt free.

At the end of the story, when her husband unexpectedly returned home, the news of his death a mistake, the woman dies—“of a joy that kills.” In discussing the story, I went over some of its themes and the common perspectives on those themes—that women in the story’s time, the mid-nineteenth century, were often oppressed by marriage, and that widowhood in fact could give a woman a certain amount of freedom and status she wouldn’t have enjoyed as a married woman.

After class, a young student came up to me and expressed her shock that a woman would feel joy on her husband’s death. And I agreed with her that it was pretty shocking, and the author may have intended that, and so forth. We talked some more about the story and came to some agreement that the character was probably feeling mixed emotions on her husband’s “death.” As she was leaving, the young woman said “So I can see this differently from you?” The question surprised me, and I responded that not only could she do that, she should, that it was encouraged for students to form their own opinions on course material. The incident brought home for me that often college students, especially young ones, really aren’t used to the process of evaluating information, drawing conclusions, and forming some opinion on that information because they have often come from school systems where they are just given information and are expected to accept it without evaluation. If this is true of students raised in the United States, a culture that promotes freedom of thought and expression, it would be even more true for those not from such a culture.

## ISSUES IN TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING FOR DISCUSSION

Often instructors will avoid teaching this process of developing one’s own stance on material through critical discussion because it is a difficult process, time consuming, and somewhat messy. A class engaged in heated exchange of ideas is not always an orderly class. In addition, it does take time and effort, as students do not develop critical thinking and speaking skills overnight and may well be resistant to a process they are not used to. However, teaching this process is worth the time and effort invested as it pays off large dividends in the quality of student discussion, which almost inevitably carry over to writing skills as well, and essays become more thoughtful and developed.

On the other hand, students who have not learned the process of an academic exchange have discussions that are quiet, easy, short—and boring. Everyone agrees with each other, answers the discussion questions, and then pronounces “We’re done!” as they, too, would just as soon avoid the difficulty of a more critical examination of the issues.

Following are steps to improve the quality of your class discussions to avoid the “We-all-agree-and-we’re-done” phenomenon.

## KEYS TO HAVING SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSIONS IN A READING CLASS

### 1 TEACH DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FACT AND OPINION

Sometimes students fail to go much beyond discussion of the facts of a story—“The family lived in New Orleans a long time ago”—because they have a basic confusion of the difference between a fact and an opinion. Address this confusion by modeling the difference between

fact and opinion with examples such as “The story is set in New Orleans” and “New Orleans is an appropriate setting because of its long and colorful history.”

Then have students label a series of such statements as either “fact” or “opinion” and go over as a class. You may follow this up by having students take “fact” statements—“At the story’s writing, women did not yet have the vote in the U.S.”—and turning them into opinions.

### 2 TEACH THE RULES OF DISCUSSION

Students often have flat, short, and boring discussions because they don’t know the rules of an academic discussion. Often students are good at agreeing with each other but don’t know how to politely disagree or even that this is possible. A good discussion, however, almost demands disagreement—a discussion in which everyone agrees is not really an academic discussion but merely a conversation. Learning this, that discussion requires disagreement, is a major hurdle.

Therefore, learning some basic language like “Well, I understand your point, but I disagree, and here’s why” is important. Finally, students need to learn they must contribute to a discussion and advance it - they can’t just say “I agree with Jorge,” and be done. They must elaborate on why they agree because the other students--having been trained to--will ask them why. Finally, the teacher will not give them points for just agreeing.

### 3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS THAT GO BEYOND BASIC INFORMATION

Sometimes, of course, the teacher is at fault for boring discussions (see ‘How to Lead Discussions: No Need to Speak Like Obama’). If students are given “discussion questions” such as “Who are the main characters?” and “Where is the



story set?” then of course students will have discussions that stay on a superficial, factual level. However, a question like “How does the setting contribute to, or fail to contribute to, the story?” will spark more disagreement and discussion.

## **4 INTRODUCE AN OPPOSING POINT OF VIEW**

If, after the above steps, the students continue to insist “We all agree” during discussions, the teacher can himself take the opposing view: “I think the main character’s reaction to her husband’s death is perfectly understandable,” forcing the students to argue that stance with the teacher because they can’t claim, if they are opposing views, that they agree with each other and also agree with the teacher, they’re forced into defending their view.

## **5 HAVE STUDENTS DEVELOP OWN DISCUSSION POINTS**

After students have had some practice with “real” discussions that go beyond the surface, have them start developing their own discussion points. After doing a reading, students can work together to come up with points they’d like to go over in discussion. Then for the next session, they should come prepared to discuss those points.

Does an ESL teacher have to resign herself to boring discussions in the reading class in which students either don’t talk at all or just agree with each other? Absolutely not!

**WITH SOME CAREFUL TRAINING, STUDENTS CAN HOLD ENGAGING DISCUSSIONS THAT WILL PREPARE THEM TO WRITE BETTER AND SUCCEED IN THEIR COLLEGE LIVES.**

# From “Shooting an Elephant” to the Occupy Movement: Academic Discussions on the Use of Force

**2012 SAW UPRISINGS AROUND THE WORLD, FROM MY OWN LOCAL “OCCUPY SACRAMENTO” MOVEMENT TO THE OVERTHROW OF THE PRESIDENT OF EGYPT.**

Indeed, “The Anonymous Protester” was Time Magazine’s Person of the Year. I mentioned to my husband, a veteran of the 1960’s protests, that there seemed to be parallels between the Occupy Movement, which began as a protest against Wall Street and quickly spread around the world, and the civil disobedience so prevalent in the 1960s - he snorted and said that the 1960’s protests had a point. While it may be that the 1960’s protests were more focused on specific social ills such as segregation, it seems to me both protest movements, of the ‘60s and today, have a discontent directed at authority—authority gone awry. It’s probably not coincidental that the young adult generation involved in the current protest movement—the generation in our classrooms, in other words—would be mostly children of the 1960’s protesters.

So how does all of this relate to our classrooms? It’s very relevant—in terms of discussing issues of human rights, of use of force, about appropriate and non-appropriate rebellion against authority.

This was all driven home one afternoon last fall, when I was in my ESL reading class, discussing the scheduled reading, George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant,” his classic essay on the misuse of power. In this essay, Orwell was serving as a British Empire police officer in Burma and was forced into killing an elephant—when he didn’t want to, when he was the “white man with the gun,” the person supposedly in power, and when the elephant was harming no one at the moment—all to avoid loss of face in front of the Burmese. Coincidentally, we were reading this essay the day after a now-infamous event at nearby University of California, when in a videotape that went viral, campus police pepper-sprayed a group of student protesters

who were passively sitting on the quad.

The protest movement has material on the use of force and of democracy ripe for discussion, reading, and writing.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

These are discussion points that will probably come up on the use of force and can be modified according to the teacher’s reading and situation.

### 1 WHO WAS “RIGHT”?

Is there always a “right” and “wrong” party in events like this? Who will probably end up taking the blame, and should he or she take the blame?

### 2 DOES CONTEXT MATTER IN THE PROBLEM?

Does past behavior, the surroundings, what the victim “might” do or has done count? Does it matter, for example, that the elephant had already killed someone? Did it matter in the pepper-spray incident that the Thanksgiving weekend was approaching - it was cold out, services would be closed, and therefore the campus administration not without reason wanted the protesters to dismantle their camp, and they refused?

### 3 WHAT ALTERNATIVES WERE THERE?

What should or could the aggressor have done instead? The victim? Should the protesters at UC simply have moved when asked? What could the police have done before spraying them? What more could Orwell have done before resorting to using a gun?

### 4 ARE THERE ANY ABSOLUTE WRONGS IN THE MATTER OF USE OF FORCE?

Should people always obey police, for example, whether or not they agree with them?

### 5 WHAT DO INCIDENTS LIKE THE EVENT AT UC SAY ABOUT DEMOCRACY?

Is it merely an anomaly, or is does this event show our democracy is in peril in some way?

## METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

### 1 OPENING THE DIALOGUE.

What do you think about the events at UC last week? Sometimes students have an “I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-this-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-the-class” attitude. Often this attitude is based on a fear of “getting in trouble” in some way. Be patient and persistent, make the connection to the reading explicit, briefly, if necessary. Allow different students to speak, and show the fear is baseless.

### 2 OFTEN STUDENTS HAVE ALREADY FORMED A SET OPINION ON THE READING OR EVENT:

“The Occupiers should have moved when the police told them to. They’re just irritating and have nothing better to do.” Gently questioning and pushing against these assumptions: “Were the participants in the Boston Tea Party ‘irritating’ to anyone? Perhaps that is their tactic? And does irritation give the police license in the level of force used?” can further stimulate discussion.

### 3 BREAK STUDENTS INTO GROUPS.

Once the discussion has started, the teacher can break the class into smaller groups of three or so, each group getting its own set of pre-typed questions on the topic. Within the group, students can assign roles such as leader, to keep discussion going, recorder, to take notes to be collected for participation points, spokesperson, to share with the

class when called on, and so forth. This gives students a task to accomplish and each student a role. Discussion like this can easily take up a class period. If the teacher has not prepared questions because of the timeliness of the current event, just a single question on the board is often enough: "What could the police have done differently?" Ask the students to come to consensus in their groups.

#### **4 WRAP UP, DEBRIEF.**

Call the class back together as a whole. Go over main points that were discussed in each group as time allows. Collect notes from each group as desired for participation points.

#### **5 WRITING TOPICS.**

Once students have discussed the topic, they can now write about it. I see writing in this case as an extension of the discussion begun in class. Students already may have settled on a topic from discussion they really are passionate about: another benefit to discussing these kinds of topics is the joy of seeing the formerly apathetic student suddenly enthused. In this case, if the discussion topic is an appropriate writing topic, I'll let the student write to that.

#### **6 GUIDELINES FOR WRITING TOPICS: THE TOPICS SHOULD BE SPECIFIC ENOUGH TO GENERATE INTEREST BUT ALSO BROAD ENOUGH FOR CRITICAL THINKING.**

For example: What are your ideas about the use of force? When is it appropriate? When not? Support with your own experiences and ideas drawn from the reading and discussion in an essay response. The essay should be of 500 words with a thesis and supporting paragraphs. Giving students specific guidelines like this allows them to develop their own ideas yet in academic format.

**STUDENTS ARE RESISTANT SOMETIMES TO BEGINNING A DISCUSSION ON A TOPIC THAT HAS BEEN CONTROVERSIAL, BUT WITH GUIDANCE CAN BEGIN DEVELOPING THEIR READING AND WRITING SKILLS. CONTROVERSY, AFTER ALL, IS WHAT WE TEND TO GET PASSIONATE ABOUT. AND WHO WANTS TO DISCUSS OR WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING THEY ARE NOT PASSIONATE ABOUT?**

# Facts, Opinions, & Theories: How to Talk about Them to Students

With students - undergraduate and graduate level alike - there is a basic confusion of what is a fact, what is an opinion, when they should be used.

A young student approached me recently, for example, surprised she could include in discussion her own opinion of a character in the story and that opinion could differ from mine, the instructor's. Also common is to take cultural values—"Capitalism is the best economic system"—as factual, a given, that does not need to be defended. Then words like "theory," "law," "subjective" and "objective" further muddy things at higher levels. Misconceptions surrounding these terms are rampant. Part of concern is that the terms themselves exist in some way on a continuum: for example, if enough evidence exists to support my opinion, and enough people agree with me, does it actually begin to somehow enter the realm of fact? It is actually not a given, not factual, that capitalism is the best system - wouldn't most reasonable people agree, however, that war is a negative and should be a last resort in terms of relations between two countries? Would that enter the realm of "fact"?

## DEFINITIONS OF THESE TERMS

### 1 FACT

A fact is something verifiable and not arguable: University of the Pacific is in Stockton, California. I can pull out a map and show you, and it is very difficult to argue the point with me without seeming a little crazy.

### 2 OPINION

An opinion is arguable. University of the Pacific is a beautiful campus. I can show you pictures of the campus and support my opinion by describing the lawns, the trees, gardens, and the buildings, however you can still disagree with me, claiming, for example, that brick buildings in your opinion are ugly, and not seem crazy.

### 3 THEORY

A theory, in the scientific sense, is a best description of the facts, of why something is. The theory of evolution uses the fossil record and DNA analysis to describe how life developed. This is different from the everyday use of the word: "I have a theory about why my husband is always late," meaning I have a guess or supposition about his behavior not built on evidence.

### 4 LAW.

A law is a theory that has been proven numerous times, such as the law of gravity. Long after the fall of an apple gave Newton the inspiration for his theory of gravity, apples continue to fall down from trees. They don't defy the law and fall up. If they did, the law would have to be revisited.

### 5 OBJECTIVE

True objectivity is without bias, without perspective, reporting events as they occur. We think of a camera's view as objective, taking in a room, for example, exactly as it appears.

### 6 SUBJECTIVE

Something that is subjective is from a particular perspective and bias. All human reporters are subjective—even a camera, in the hands of a human photographer, becomes subjective—recording a room, a church at a wedding, in a certain way and, through the use of light, for example, making the room more beautiful than it might seem in other circumstances.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FACT AND OPINION

### 1 OPINIONS ARE BAD, FACTS ARE GOOD

An old TV program featured a detective who, on interviewing witnesses on a case, would insist, "Just the facts,

Ma'am" when the witness began rambling on with her perceptions. Actually, detectives don't go around crime scenes gathering "facts" from the public—the reason they would talk to the public would be mostly because they are interested in people's opinions of the crime. Why would the police go to the neighbor and ask about the victim's comings and goings to just to learn that the victim left home at 8:30 am every day and came back at 5:30 pm without fail? Why wouldn't they want to hear the neighbor's opinion on the victim's comings and goings—that the neighbor thought the victim was crashing bore, for example? Whether or not this is "true," it does reveal something about both the victim and neighbor, it's valuable information. Facts police can usually gather themselves.

### 2 ALL OPINIONS ARE EQUAL

My mother recently didn't want to hear her doctor's opinion on her case—it was just an opinion. I tried to explain to her that the opinion of her doctor pertaining to her health was qualitatively different from mine, for example, or her granddaughter's, or even her son-in-law's, who is a doctor but not in the correct specialty in this case. I don't know how much I got through to her.

Similarly, students, especially at lower levels, think that they shouldn't include their opinion—it's just an opinion, and of no worth. On the contrary, that's what your reader generally wants to hear—your thesis is your opinion—supported, of course. Even when I as your teacher tell you "Describe the University of Pacific," I am really asking for your opinion. I don't want to hear "University of the Pacific is in Stockton, California and is a small private campus with several thousand students." I know all of that or can easily learn it from the university website. I want to hear your opinion of it. Facts in this case make for dull writing because the writer can't develop the ideas: I can do nothing with "University of the Pacific is in Stockton." So what? "University of the Pacific is an excellent small, liberal arts school" is



something that can be developed, and here is where facts are important—as the details, not the main ideas. Give the student population details as support for the quality of the school, not as main ideas of themselves.

### **3 WRITING SHOULD BE BASED ON “FACTS”**

Most writing actually is opinion. You would probably not want to read an essay that recounted “just the facts” of the life of Abraham Lincoln, for example. It is the writer’s particular take and perspective on his life and how he managed his marriage, the country, and the war that is interesting.

### **4 A HUMAN WRITER CAN BE OBJECTIVE**

Some people pride themselves on somehow doing this, being “objective.” This isn’t possible. The facts that I was born female, American, and in the latter part of the 20th century inform how I view the world and how I write. The best I can do is acknowledging my perspective and biases and try for balance and objectivity.

### **5 BIAS IS BAD**

The very term “bias” has an ugly sound to many Americans, conjuring up images from the pre Civil-Rights era, perhaps, where “bias” was something that intruded in the lives of many Americans in a negative way. “Bias” actually just means a predisposition for or against something - again, we all hold it, based on past experiences. My own bias in terms of housing, for example, is of single-family units in suburban neighborhoods. That is what I grew up with, that’s what I picture when someone says “house.”

## **HOW TO TEACH FACT/ OPINION CONTINUUM**

### **1 TEACH THE DEFINITIONS OF DIFFERENT TERMS.**

Use examples. In this way students can begin differentiate their use of the terms.

### **2 IN READING, ASK STUDENTS TO POINT OUT FACTS AND OPINIONS.**

Which seem to be verifiable facts in the reading? What points can be argued?

### **3 WHEN READING, ASK STUDENTS TO EVALUATE A WRITER’S VIEWPOINT.**

What seems to be his perspective? What are her biases?

### **4 WHEN READING, ASK STUDENTS TO EVALUATE THE QUALITY OF OPINIONS AND HOW WELL THEY ARE SUPPORTED.**

### **5 WHEN WRITING, GET STUDENTS IN THE HABIT OF BEING CRITICAL OF THEIR OWN BIASES.**

Are they taking too many things as given? Do they need to support their ideas more?

**TEACHING THE ART OF EVALUATING FACTS AND OPINIONS AND APPLYING THEM APPROPRIATELY ISN’T EASY, BUT IF TEACHERS GET INTO THE HABIT OF HELPING STUDENTS EXAMINE THEIR READING IN THESE TERMS, AND TO APPLY THEM TO THEIR OWN WRITING, THEY WILL BECOME CRITICAL THINKERS AND WRITERS.**

# No, Wikipedia is not an Academic Source: Teaching Appropriate Research and Citation Methods

**ALMOST EVERY TIME I ASSIGN A RESEARCH PAPER, I'LL GET COMPLETED PAPERS TURNED IN THAT LIST WIKIPEDIA AS A SOURCE AND SOMETIMES EVEN WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY.**

I have a required number of sources, so students apparently sometimes “pad” their numbers. But I think there is something else going on here. Students have the entire Internet at their disposal, after all, so certainly they can find more appropriate sources. But that may just be the problem: what’s an appropriate source? Students today are exposed to an unprecedented glut of information, and have no way to evaluate it. It becomes our job to teach them how, and this is teaching the research process itself.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS TO TEACH**

### **1 SELECTING A TOPIC**

Encourage students to choose their own topics (within reason): something they have an interest or even passion in. This passion will carry them through the research process, which can be challenging, in a way that researching something they don’t care about will not. And this is more authentic to the task, in any case. Why do professionals conduct research? Because they want to find out more about a topic. That should be students’ reason, as well.

### **2 APPROPRIATE SOURCES AND WHERE TO FIND THEM**

At the beginning of a research project, I always bring in a bag of print materials from home, everything from Time magazine to Applied Linguistics, and spread it out. Which sources are popular? Which are academic? Time is popular: it has no citations from experts, was written by staff writers, and has advertising. However, Applied Linguistics has no adver-

tising but has citations and was written by contributing writers so is scholarly. Have students evaluate some material on their own and share their judgments with the class. See if they can agree that their papers should mostly cite scholarly work.

Also discuss places to locate scholarly articles: Google may not be the best way. An example I like to give is from my own experience doing some research on The Holocaust. If you Google “Holocaust,” perhaps millions of search results come up, many of them are the home pages of hate groups whose mission is Holocaust denial.

However, if you use a more select search engine like Academic Search Premier, available through many universities, most of the hits you get, while smaller in number, will be the work of scholars writing in their area of expertise. It is much better to get a select group of articles you can actually use than a lot of material of dubious quality.

### **3 COMPONENTS OF THE RESEARCH PAPER**

Often students are at a loss on how a research paper is put together. I like to tell them it is much like the essay format they have already learned, although this time they are supporting their theses with research rather than personal experience. So, if, for example, I’m supporting a thesis that learning to play a musical instrument has numerous positive effects on academic performance, I would not rely on my personal experience to support this thesis. I’ll need research from experts in music education.

I might, however, use an anecdote from my experience to open the essay, much as I would in a more usual essay, and in the conclusion I would still summarize my main points.

The major difference in content is the addition of research.

### **4 APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE**

Another major difference between research writing and other writing students have done is the language. The tone of a research paper is more formal. The focus is on the research and its process and is therefore more impersonal. The use of the “I” voice is discouraged. In addition, the passive voice is used a lot because of this focus on process over the personal. It is helpful, when working on a research paper, to review the various tenses of the passive voice with your class.

### **5 STANDARD FORMAT MLA/APA**

It’s also good when teaching the research paper to spend a day or two on standard MLA or APA format. I’ll go over in-text citations, how to set up the bibliography, and let students pick which format they’d like to use, as long as they don’t mix them up. I tell students that I consider learning MLA/APA a developmental process, and I don’t count errors and subtract points but rather look for general correctness and whether a reader could locate students’ sources if she desired-- a major purpose of citing.

## **METHODS TO TEACH THE RESEARCH PAPER**

### **1 SHOW A COMPLETED RESEARCH PAPER/EXAMPLE**

Many students have never really seen a completed research paper. Imagine constructing a dress with no idea or model of what the finished product is supposed to look like. I’d refuse to do it. So I like to start the research process by pulling out one of my old research papers, showing its different components, discussing the process I went through in writing it, and passing it around. Even if they don’t really understand the model paper’s topic, students now have a sense of the construction of the paper.

## 2 USE OF KEYWORDS

Teaching students effective use of keywords is important because, as in my “Holocaust” example, student will often do a broad search that yields too many sources to sift through: “more” is not “better.” Teaching students to narrow their topic with the use of “and”—for example, “Holocaust and the United States” will narrow the search to just those sources that mention both the Holocaust and the U.S., focusing then on the U.S. role. This gets students to focus their topics at the same time.

## 3 LIBRARY TRIPS

Many students have never been to a library—perhaps in their lives, having grown up in the digital age. Librarians can help students with not only locating sources but also on the research process itself, what the library’s databases are, and how to search them.

There’s a lot to cover when teaching research, from encouraging the original desire to the final editing of the bibliography.

**BUT THE VALUE YIELDED IN EXCITING STUDENTS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND DRAWING THEM INTO THE ACADEMIC WORLD IS WORTH THE EFFORT.**

# 10 Tips to Teach Collocations

**COLLOCATION, OR HOW WORDS OCCUR TOGETHER IN SPEECH AND WRITING, IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF SPEAKING AND WRITING FLUENTLY. TO BE ABLE TO PRODUCE NATIVE-LIKE SPEECH AND WRITING, STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW WHICH WORDS WORK TOGETHER WELL.**

For example, in English I “do exercise” not “make exercise”: “do” collocates with “exercise.” Words are learned and stored in memory in groups, not in isolation. Handing out traditional vocabulary lists of isolated words is of little value if students don’t know and haven’t practiced the context in which the word may occur. For example, teaching the word “regard” is more powerful if taught with the collocations and phrases that go with it: “in regard to,” for example. “Contrast” should be taught with its collocate, “in” as in “In contrast.”

Knowing the collocates a word occurs with like this will make students less likely make mistakes in grammar, word choice, and use of idiom and also contributes to fluid speech and writing as students are less likely to need to stop to search for the correct word.

## **PROBLEMS ENGLISH LEARNERS HAVE WITH COLLOCATION**

One of the biggest problems with collocation is its arbitrary nature: there is no “rule” or reason that it’s “in regard to” and not “on regard to”—it just is.

### **1 LACK OF AWARENESS: STUDENTS NEED TO HAVE A PROBLEM BROUGHT TO THEIR ATTENTION BEFORE THEY EVEN KNOW IT IS A PROBLEM.**

They may be unaware that some words go together better than others, especially as this doesn’t tend to be emphasized in language instruction.

### **2 FIRST LANGUAGE TRANSFER IS ANOTHER ESL PROBLEM WITH COLLOCATION—STUDENTS TRANSFER THE APPROPRIATE COLLOCATION FROM THEIR FIRST LANGUAGE.**

“Make” and “do” confusion is common, for example, among students of Latin language backgrounds: e.g., “make my homework” rather than “do my homework.”

## **TEACHING COLLOCATION**

Vocabulary instruction in general, and certainly the instruction of collocation, is not much emphasized. However, there are some general principles for teaching collocation:

### **1 TEACH STUDENTS THE TERM “COLLOCATION” AND THE RATIONALE FOR LEARNING IT.**

Once they know the rationale behind instruction, they become more motivated to learn.

### **2 NOTICE WHICH WORDS GO TOGETHER WHEN GIVING OUT A NEW READING.**

Call students’ attention to key words and the words that “go” with them, and have them underline collocations. On any given page, for example, there is likely to be numerous collocates. Spend some time practicing and interacting with these collocations with each reading.

### **3 FOCUS ON “SALIENT LANGUAGE,” LANGUAGE STUDENTS MAY USE A LOT OR THAT IS RELATED TO THE CURRICULUM:**

for example, the phrase “on the other hand” is used a lot in academic language, and students often make mistakes in it: “in the other hand,” “on the other hands,” etc. Explicitly teaching the phrase and practicing it is a valuable investment of course time.

### **4 CONTRAST TWO WORDS:**

make      do

list their collocates

### **5 EXTEND IT:**

Have students make a list of

things they need to accomplish that week, using “make “ and “do.” This establishes some of the differences between the two words (which are largely collocational).

### **6 MATCHING EXERCISES/COMPLETION EXERCISES:**

have students complete a sentence with the correct collocation or match words to their collocates: do homework, give a presentation.

### **7 SURVEYS:**

have students survey their classmates about their activities, including verbs and their collocations, for example.

### **8 HAVE STUDENTS PRACTICE THE PHRASES YOU’VE TARGETED.**

Once students been explicitly taught “in contrast to” and “on the other hand,” for example, have them practice these collocations in journal and essay assignments.

### **9 WRITE A SKETCH/DIALOGUE.**

Put some collocates on the board learned from reading over the last week: e.g., “regular exercise,” “healthy diet,” “small portion size” and have students create a dialogue in pairs and practice it.

### **10 WRITE POETIC DESCRIPTIONS OF BELOVED PERSON OR PLACE WITH ADJECTIVE+NOUN COMBINATIONS OR ADVERB+ADJECTIVE COMBINATIONS.**

Again, give students some of the language for the task on the board or in a handout: “dear friend,” “old friend,” “passionately embrace,” “fond farewell,” etc.

Then have them create a poem with it.

Vocabulary instruction can be challenging as we have not received much guidance in it as ESL teachers, as language teaching has traditionally focused on the teaching of grammar.



The traditional vocabulary list may be of little value as words are not learned and used in isolation but rather with the phrases they occur in. By first raising students' awareness of collocation and then practicing it, students can develop their vocabulary, grammar, and use of idiom in their second language.

# Mix Them Up: Teaching Sentence Variety

## Variety

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS OF STUDENT WRITING IS ITS LACK OF VARIETY IN SENTENCE STRUCTURE.

STUDENTS SEEM TO LEARN ONE BASIC PATTERN OF SUBJECT, VERB, AND OBJECT AND STICK TO THAT WITHOUT FAIL. REASONS FOR THIS VARY: STUDENTS MAY LACK THE CONFIDENCE TO STRAY FROM THIS PATTERN, THEY MAY ALSO LACK KNOWLEDGE OF THE DIFFERENT STRUCTURES, CONNECTING WORDS, AND TRANSITIONS NECESSARY TO CREATE SENTENCE VARIETY. IN ADDITION, ALTHOUGH LACK OF SENTENCE VARIETY IS CERTAINLY NOT AN ESL PROBLEM ALONE, ESL STUDENTS ALSO LACK A NATIVE SPEAKER'S INTUITION ABOUT WHAT "SOUNDS RIGHT" AND MAY JUST BE UNAWARE IN THE FIRST PLACE OF THE MONOTONOUS NATURE OF THEIR WRITING. FINALLY, ALTHOUGH THIS IS A FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM IN STUDENT WRITING, STUDENTS ARE RELUCTANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT IT, AND TEACHERS RELUCTANT TO TEACH, BECAUSE IT IS SO "BORING," AND OFTENTIMES BOTH GROUPS THINK THAT AS LONG AS THERE ARE NO "ERRORS" IN WRITING, IT IS "OKAY."

So the problem becomes first recognizing and then addressing the issue.

## SO HOW DO WE ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM OF LACK OF SENTENCE VARIETY?

### 1 RAISE AWARENESS

Raise Awareness. Students must be aware of the problem before working on it. Write a short paragraph with only simple sentences or rewrite a paragraph from a famous text such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Read the paragraph aloud and invite comment. Ask what would improve it. Often students become aware of the concern in this way—when it's read aloud, they become aware of the lack of sentence variety, especially when it is a text they have encountered before. Then give out a revised—or the original—version of the same paragraph with sentence variety this time. Discuss the difference and why the revised (or original) version is better.

### 2 TEACH DIFFERENT SENTENCE STRUCTURES

Explicitly teach different sentence structures. At this point, after becoming aware of the issue, students are ready to learn different sentence patterns. There are three basic structures for students to learn, a good number for recall. Teach these three with examples:

**simple sentence (subject-verb):** 'I study at the university'.

**compound (essentially two connected simple sentences):** 'I study at the university, and I have many classmates'.

**complex (a sentence with an independent clause and dependent clause).** 'I study at the university because I want to earn my degree and enter a profession'.

### 3 TEACH CLAUSES

Clauses should be taught at this time, as well. A simple sentence is the same as an independent clause — it has a subject and a verb and stands by itself ('It's raining.'). A dependent clause has a subject and verb but does not stand alone ('Because it's raining'). This is a lot of material to cover and can easily take up a class period. Give students a chance to practice these sentences, perhaps by adding the practice to the paragraph of simple sentences already introduced: have students vary the simple sentences with compound and complex.

### 4 TEACH CONNECTING WORDS

Teach different connecting words. Show students that words like "because" and "so" and "but" found in compound and complex sentences are needed not only for variety but also for comprehension—a paragraph without these words not only lacks variety but also lacks connections between ideas. Again, this might be demonstrated best by taking a well-known passage and removing all its connecting words and discuss how easy it is to understand and then comparing it to the original.

### 5 TEACH FRAGMENTS AND RUN-ONS

Teach the concept of fragment and run-on. A good time to teach fragments and run-ons, two common problems in student writing, is while teaching sentence structure because a fragment is often a dependent clause ('Because it was raining') and a run-on is two or more independent clauses run together without the correct punctuation ('It was raining so I took a coat but I got wet anyway because the bus was late so I was late for work...') Have students look at a paragraph of writing—perhaps student writing from a prior semester with the name removed—and have students find the run-ons and fragments. Discuss how to edit for them, which for fragments is often just to attach the lone dependent clause ('Because it was raining') to a nearby independent clause ('Because it was raining, I didn't ride my bicycle.')

### 6 PROVIDE EXAMPLES

Show students a paragraph with a variety of sentences. Point out how easy it is to read as the connections between ideas are clear. Do this throughout the semester—discuss how an author used sentence structure to his or her advantage. Often, as students develop an "eye" and an "ear" for this, they become more excited about perfecting their own prose and developing a sense of ownership of their writing. Developing this sense of the language and of good syntax contributes directly to students' sense of themselves as writers.

### 7 'WHEN YOU WRITE, INCLUDE AT LEAST...'

In giving assignments, tell students to include so many compound and complex sentences: for example, "In your essay, include at least five compound or complex sentences." Often students will not do something unless specifically assigned, and this ensures they are including sentence variety.

### 8 'READ & IDENTIFY...'

Have students look over a page of fiction that you bring in. Have them

identify the fragments/run-ons on the page—the ones that are in the original, that is, not written in by you, the teacher. Discuss why the author might have written it that way. Does Stephen King not know a run-on? (He began his career as an English teacher, by the way!) Rewrite the paragraph, correcting the sentence “errors.” Discuss the stylistic reasons fiction writers, as opposed to academic writers, might use fragments and run-ons.

## 9 GIVE A QUIZ ON SENTENCE VARIETY

Give a quiz on sentence variety. Have students first revise an already-written paragraph with only simple sentences, and have students include sentence variety. Students should then write their own paragraphs, including at least one of each of the three types of sentences. Again, students often don't bother to learn something unless tested.

## 10 ASSESS PROPERLY

Don't forget to assess fragments and run-ons. Have students trade essays before turning them in, editing a peer's work for fragments and run-ons. Also test them on their ability to mark and revise a paragraph with fragments and run-ons written in.

So does teaching sentence variety have to be “boring”? Absolutely not.

**BY FIRST CALLING ATTENTION TO THE PROBLEM AND THEN BY PRACTICING EDITING IN A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES, STUDENT INTEREST AND MOTIVATION CAN BE HELD. IN ADDITION, IN DEVELOPING THEIR KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENT TYPE OF SYNTACTIC PATTERNS, STUDENTS' SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THE LANGUAGE, OF THEMSELVES AS MASTERS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, ALSO DEVELOPS, ALONG WITH THEIR WRITING SKILLS.**

# My Brother is Very Success:

## Teaching Morphology

SOMETIME DURING THE SEMESTER, HAVING READ TOO MANY SENTENCES IN ESL STUDENT COMPOSITIONS LIKE “MY BROTHER IS VERY SUCCESS,” IT OCCURS TO THE ESL INSTRUCTOR THAT BANGING HER HEAD AGAINST THE WALL OVER ISSUES OF VERB TENSE AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE MAY BE OF LIMITED VALUE COMPARED TO OTHER WRITING PROBLEMS.

ESL writing, particularly at lower levels, tends to be permeated with errors of word form (or parts of speech or morphology). This is something unique to ESL writing: native speaker writers, even weak ones, generally don't write sentences like “My brother is very success” because their native speaker “intuition” “hears” the wrongness of that sentence.

So if word form is such a big issue, why then do we spend so little time on it? The problem is multifaceted. One concern is tradition: in a grammar class, we focus on verb tense and sentence structure and articles. That is how our textbooks are written, and that's what we teach. Another issue is that the kinds of word form errors and their causes are multi-faceted and difficult to address: for example, dropping off the ending, and using the noun instead of the adjective, as in “My brother is very success,” is just one type of problem in word form, while verb tense errors tend to be much more uniform and easily identifiable, such as switching to the present when telling a story that happened in the past. A final part of the problem is there is no real established methodology for teaching word forms, as there is with teaching correct verb tense.

### SO WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT TEACHERS CAN TEACH WITH WORD FORMS?

#### 1 INTRODUCE THE CONCEPT.

Teach parts of speech and places in a sentence: nouns function as subjects and objects, verbs generally follow subjects in statements, adjectives typically precede nouns.

#### 2 TEACH COMMON WORD ENDINGS AND RELATIONSHIP TO PARTS OF SPEECH:

for example, words that end in “-ment” are generally nouns, “-ly” adverbs, “-ful” or “-full” adjectives.

#### 3 ALSO TEACH THE COMMON BEGINNINGS OF WORDS:

learning prefixes like “pre-,” “un-,” and “non-,” for example, helps students expand their vocabulary.

#### 4 TEACH WHEN TO USE THE GERUND (E.G. WRITING STORIES) AND THE INFINITIVE (TO WRITE STORIES).

Discuss when to use each—for example, the gerund is used as the subject of a sentence:

“Writing stories is my hobby.” This gets students focused on the issue of word form. In the same way, you can teach when to use the present and past participles: “Her stories are interesting - I am interested in them.”

#### 5 FOR MORE ADVANCED LEARNERS, DO SOME FURTHER STUDY OF MORPHOLOGY AND TYPICAL ROOT WORDS AS WELL AS PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES AND THEIR MEANING IN ENGLISH.

For example, just taking the word “morphology” and understanding that “morph” means “form” and “ology” is “study of” helps expand vocabulary and to learn words like “metamorphosis” (change form) and “psychology” (study of the mind).

### WHAT ARE THE METHODS FOR TEACHING WORD FORMS?

#### 1 IT'S A GOOD START FOR MANY STUDENTS TO LEARN THERE IS SUCH A THING AS

#### WORD FORM AND THAT THEY CAN'T TAKE A FAMILIAR WORD LIKE “FREEDOM” AND USE IT WHOLESALE ANYWHERE IN A SENTENCE,

as the many ESL teachers who have read the sentence “America is a freedom country” thousands of times over the years can testify.

#### 2 INTRODUCE WORDS WITH VARIOUS FORMS.

After students have some understanding of the concept, take a word with a number of permutations such as “succeed” and show how it can change form according to function in the sentence: “My brother succeeds at most at what he does, “I have a successful brother”, “I think my brother's efforts at his new job will be a success.” When introducing new vocabulary, introduce other forms of the word.

#### 3 EDIT A PIECE WITH MISTAKES IN WORD FORM.

Once students have had some exposure to the concept and some examples, it's time for them to practice on their own. Give out a paragraph you wrote yourself, or take a paragraph from a well-known work, and create errors in word form—the ones you see most in your students' papers: “success” for “successful,” “freedom” for “free.”

#### 4 PRACTICE THE HABIT OF READING ALOUD.

Do native speakers of English think about the parts of speech of the words they choose as they are writing? Of course not — they wouldn't be able to write fluently if they did. They have “native speaker intuition” of what “sounds right.” Students can draw on what they have of this already and further develop it by reading aloud.

#### 5 INTRODUCE COMMON PARTS OF WORDS AND THEIR MEANINGS:

prefixes such as “trans-” (between), suf-



fixes, such as “-able” for adjectives and “-ed” for past tense verbs, and roots, “-port-” (to carry). See if students can then determine the meaning of words from these parts: e.g., “transported” carried between (in the past). Finally have students see how many other words they can come up with, using the word parts: portable, transferred, etc.

## **6 AT THIS POINT, STUDENTS ARE READY TO APPLY WORD FORMS AND WRITE THEIR OWN PARAGRAPHS ON SUCH TOPICS SUCH AS FAVORITE HOBBIES**

- this is likely to call on a variety of word forms of the same base word: reading, to read, have read, etc . Have them read their papers aloud to check the word forms. Trade papers with a peer. and edit each other's work, focusing on the word forms.

**WORD FORM/PARTS OF SPEECH IS OFTEN NEGLECTED BECAUSE IT'S AN AREA OF LANGUAGE LEARNING THAT IS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE AND TEACH. IT IS, HOWEVER, AN AREA WHERE STUDENTS OFTEN MAKE THE MOST MISTAKES. TEACHING WORD PARTS CAN HELP DEVELOP STUDENTS' FLUENCY, EDITING SKILLS, AS WELL AS EXPAND VOCABULARY.**

# America is THE Free Country?

## Teaching the Article System

**SOMETIMES ABOUT MID-SEMESTER I REALIZE I'M REALLY TIRED READING SENTENCES LIKE "AMERICA IS THE FREE COUNTRY." (ACTUALLY, THEY USUALLY READ "AMERICA IS THE FREEDOM COUNTRY," BUT LET'S FOCUS ON ONE ISSUE AT A TIME.) "REALLY?" I SAY TO THE OFFENDING STUDENT WRITER. "THE ONLY FREE COUNTRY, HUH?"**

He usually looks confused. "No. It's the free country. Not the only free country."

"Oh, but the free country actually means the only free country," I explain.

His continued look of puzzlement tells me it's time for instruction in the article system in English. Mistakes like "America is the free country" indicate a confusion with articles, or words like "a," "an," and "the." This confusion is common among ESL students, largely because many languages have no article system or one radically different from the one in English. It is often this confusion over the use of articles that clearly distinguishes a native from nonnative speaker - even if the nonnative speaker is perfectly intelligible. Native speakers almost never make mistakes in article use. In addition, articles are so hard for nonnative speakers to learn. Therefore, the use of articles clearly distinguishes native from nonnative speakers who are otherwise strong speakers, so this is an area that should be focused on to build the competency of our ESL students.

**SO WHAT ARE SOME IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE ARTICLE SYSTEM TO TEACH? SOME POINTERS FOLLOW:**

Teach the articles in English: "a," "an," "the," and "0" (or no article).

Teach how articles are used: they almost without exception precede a noun.

Teach article meanings—"a" and "an" actually mean "one," so they are never used with plural nouns. They are also

nonspecific or general:

"A teacher walked in the classroom," for example, does not identify the specific teacher and also suggests that the teacher in question may not be the specific teacher for that room.

"The" indicates specificity or second mention of the topic of discussion: "A teacher walked into the classroom. The teacher picked up a marker," suggests that only one teacher is under consideration: the use of "the" highlights the second mention of the same topic. However.

"A teacher walked into the room. A teacher picked up a marker," suggests two separate teachers are involved because "the" is not used for the second mention of a teacher.

Finally, "The teacher walked into the room" suggests some specificity with the use of "the": "the teacher" is a specific teacher, probably the teacher for the room.

Finally, sometimes no article is used, for plural and generic topics:

Teachers work hard.

The speaker here means teachers in general, not a specific teacher or group of teachers, so no article is required.

These are some good overall rules about articles. Now how do you teach them?

### METHODS OF TEACHING ARTICLES

#### 1 TEACH WITH NOUNS

Generally speaking, any learning occurs best in its authentic context, and this is especially true of language learning. Language does not occur in isolated individual words and should not be taught that way. Articles occur with nouns, so when teaching new vocabulary that includes nouns, these nouns should be taught with the articles they

are used with: e.g., in the living room are an armchair, a coffee table, and the new television.

#### 2 TEACH A LIST

I would usually discourage teaching language in lists, but some lists, like a shopping list or list of items to pack for a trip, are authentic uses of language and an opportunity to practice articles: "a carton of milk," "light bulbs for the downstairs lamp," and so forth. Give students a topic for their list: e.g., "You are shopping for a dinner for someone you want to impress, like the president of your book club. What do you absolutely need to buy for the party? Discuss with your peers." As students discuss and write their lists, they will be using articles.

#### 3 NOTICE ARTICLES

Read a paragraph from your textbook aloud to the class. Have students follow along in their books. Then together note the use of articles. Discuss why the author made the choices he or she did with articles. How would the meaning change if another article were substituted?

#### 4 DELETE THE ARTICLES

Give out a paragraph with the articles deleted. Have students work in pairs to decide which articles should be filled in. Reading aloud often helps because often students who are at the intermediate level and higher have developed a sense of the "sound" of the language, of what sounds right and what doesn't.

#### 5 DISCUSS A TOPIC

Have students discuss in small groups a topic that will demand multiple uses of different articles: "An Ideal Vacation," for example, will call upon both uses of articles in both the general for abstract discussion of vacations and the specific article for more specific places. Circulate as students talk, mentally noting any common problems, and then at the end pull the class together for a brief

discussion.

## 6 PRACTICE IN WRITING

Have students write a short essay whose topic will call upon article use: the topic “A Good Leader,” for example, is likely to call upon multiple uses of articles as students discuss both leaders in general and specific leaders.

## 7 PROOFREAD

Have students edit their own or their peers' work. When handing back an essay, for example, have students look over their own papers, or trade with peer, focusing just on the articles. Again, have students read parts aloud, marking in pencil areas of concern. Circulate and answer questions as needed.

TEACHING ARTICLES IS OFTEN NEGLECTED FOR MULTIPLE REASONS: THEY ARE HARD TO NOTICE AND ADDRESS AS STUDENTS COME FROM LANGUAGE BACKGROUNDS WHERE ARTICLES ARE NOT USED. IN ADDITION, STUDENT SPEECH AND WRITING IS USUALLY COMPREHENSIBLE DESPITE ARTICLE MISUSE, AND THE SYSTEM FOR ARTICLE USE IS RATHER COMPLEX. HOWEVER, INCORRECT ARTICLE USE DOES TEND TO MARK THE SPEAKER AS A LEARNER OF ENGLISH, AND MORE CORRECT USAGE SHOWS SOMEONE WHO HAS NATIVELIKE SPEECH, SO ARTICLE USE IS AN IMPORTANT AREA TO ADDRESS WITH STUDENTS.

# As I Was Saying: How and Why to Teach Discourse Markers

DISCOURSE MARKERS ARE THOSE PARTS OF THE LANGUAGE THAT CONNECT ONE PIECE OF DISCOURSE, OR EXTENDED SPEECH/WRITING TO ANOTHER, SUCH AS AN INTRODUCTORY PHRASE OR ONE THAT RAISES A NEW POINT OR COUNTERPOINT.

THESE MARKERS ARE IMPORTANT IN CONNECTING PARTS OF THE DISCOURSE AS WELL AS CONTRIBUTING TO FLUENCY. IN ADDITION, THEY GUIDE THE LISTENER OR READER IN THE DIRECTION OF THE DISCOURSE. FOR EXAMPLE, THEY SIGNAL THE SPEAKER'S OR WRITER'S DESIRE TO OPEN OR CLOSE A CONVERSATION. THEY EXIST IN BOTH WRITTEN AS WELL AS CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE, AND THERE ARE BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL MARKERS.

Students need to know discourse markers because they are important clues in the change of direction in a lecture, a conversation, or essay. For example, it can be nearly impossible to enter or exit a conversation in American English without some discourse marker like "I just want to say..." or "Anyway..." (In my particular dialect of California English, the stress is on the second syllable in the latter, and there is a long pause following, indicating the speaker's desire to draw the conversation to a close or to move on to the next topic.)

It is also important to learn which markers are more appropriate to writing or speaking. More than once I've had a student turn in a paper with the conversational marker "Last time I checked" (as in "Last time I checked, we have free speech in this country"), when the more appropriate marker would be "In my experience..." or "To my knowledge..." in a formal paper.

Knowing discourse markers is important to fluency and appropriateness.

Let's begin by identifying some common discourse markers and their functions.

## COMMON DISCOURSE MARKERS IN SPEECH

- 1 AS I WAS SAYING...**  
(to bring the conversation back to a former point)
- 2 ANYWAY...**  
(to move on to another point or to close a conversation)
- 3 HERE'S THE THING/THE THING IS...**  
(to raise an important issue)
- 4 I'M GLAD YOU BROUGHT THAT UP BECAUSE...**  
(to add onto a point just raised)
- 5 AT THE END OF THE DAY...**  
(to conclude an argument)

## COMMON DISCOURSE MARKERS IN WRITING

- 1 ON THE OTHER HAND...**  
(to move to an opposing viewpoint)
- 2 IN THE CASE OF...**  
(to introduce an example)
- 3 IN ADDITION TO...**  
(to raise a new point or example)
- 4 FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE...**  
(to introduce an opposing or different viewpoint)
- 5 IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS...**  
(to conclude)

## TEN WAYS TO TEACH DISCOURSE MARKERS

- 1 RAISE AWARENESS.**  
Call attention to discourse markers while reading or listening to conversations or lectures. Once students start paying attention, they'll be surprised how often these are used in both formal and informal situations. Just as an example, in the TV series, "Monk," popular in the first decade of this millennium, the title character Adrian Monk, a former police detective with a series of mental health concerns like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, has the verbal tic of using the marker, "Here's the thing," usually when introducing one of his obsessions to an unsympathetic audience. Playing a clip from a TV series like this to your class can get them to notice discourse markers in speech.
- 2 HAVE STUDENTS LOOK FOR DISCOURSE MARKERS IN READINGS.**  
Call attention to how a writer opens a piece, moves on to another point, introduces a counterpoint, and concludes. Discuss how effective the writer is in the use of discourse markers and what might be more effective.
- 3 HAVE STUDENTS MATCH DISCOURSE MARKERS TO THEIR MEANINGS.**  
After students have had some practice recognizing markers in both spoken and written discourse, have them match cards with the discourse marker on one card and its definition/function on other. In this way, students are clarifying and making explicit what they have implicitly learned through exposure.
- 4 DELETE MARKERS FROM EXTENDED PROSE.**  
Have students make substitutions. The next step would be to take a couple of paragraphs of written discourse, delete the markers, and see how well students



fill in the deletions. Have them compare their answers with each other and then go over the paragraphs with a class as a whole. It can be surprising how many “right” answers students will come up with for each item: often more than one marker will work well in the same situation.

## 5 JUMBLED WORDS:

have students create discourse markers out of a stack of word cards. Have them practice the markers they came up with in a couple of sentences.

## 6 GIVE OUT A LIST.

Ask students to practice using the discourse markers on the list in conversation and writing. Challenge them to include at least three discourse markers in their next journal or other writing assignment.

## 7 WRITE SOME DIALOGUE.

Have students write a conversation between two friends in the cafeteria, or a husband and wife at dinner, and so forth. Give students the basic situation and perhaps topic of conversation (weekend plans, finals, etc.), and have them write the conversation. Tell them to include at least three conversational markers.

## 8 PERFORM THE DIALOGUE.

Once their dialogues have been written and checked by the teacher, have volunteers perform. Have the class comment on the use of markers and how realistic they seemed: too formal or informal, for example.

## 9 ASSIGN WRITING WITH MARKERS.

When giving their next essay assignment, have students include three markers per paragraph/10 markers per paper, or whatever number is right for you.

## 10 HAVE STUDENTS EDIT EACH OTHER'S WORK.

Sometime when my writing appears in print, I'll notice problems with it I didn't see before, especially if I didn't have someone else look it over. Even experienced writers need a second pair of “eyes” on their work because we are not objective about our own work and tend to see what we think we wrote rather than what we actually wrote. Before turning in their papers, students should trade papers with a peer and edit each other's work, specifically focusing on markers. Have students circle areas of concern in peers' papers and discuss at the end. The role of a peer editor is not to correct work but to be a second pair of “eyes.”

**DISCOURSE MARKERS COMPRISE A LITTLE-DISCUSSED BUT IMPORTANT AREA OF LANGUAGE.**

**IT IS THROUGH DISCOURSE MARKERS THAT WE MOVE AND SIGNAL THE DIRECTION OF THE CONVERSATION OR WRITING. KNOWING THEIR CORRECT USE WILL HELP STUDENTS FUNCTION WELL IN ENGLISH.**

# The Capitalist System is the Best Economic System: Everyone Knows That. Addressing Underlying Assumptions

OFTEN, WHEN READING STUDENT PAPERS, I'LL COME ACROSS A STATEMENT THAT READS SOMETHING LIKE "THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM IS REALLY THE GREATEST ECONOMIC SYSTEM. OTHER SYSTEMS EVENTUALLY COLLAPSE BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF COMPETITION," AND THEN BREEZES ON, WITHOUT PAUSING TO ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE ARGUMENT OR EVEN ACKNOWLEDGING THAT THERE ARE ASSUMPTIONS.

When asked, student writers often become defensive, even going so far as to say, "I didn't address the assumptions because it's a given. Capitalism encourages competition, which is good. Everyone knows that." Does everyone really know that? Possibly—maybe indeed all the leaders and citizens of various communist states really know how great capitalism is but are just not saying, for a variety of reasons. Does this exempt the student from addressing the assumptions and making the argument? It does not. But convincing the student of that may be an argument in itself.

## GETTING STUDENTS TO MAKE THEIR ARGUMENT

### 1 UNPACK THE ARGUMENT

For example, the statement "The capitalist system is the best because it encourages competition" is based on several assumptions:

Capitalist systems are competitive.

Other systems are not competitive.

Competition creates the best economic system.

To be addressed, the assumptions have to be made explicit—that is, they

have to be "smoked out." To do this, the instructor can write the claim on the board and discuss what the author seems to be assuming the audience already knows and agrees with. Once the assumptions are written out, discuss whether it's fair to assume the reader really shares these beliefs to the extent they don't need to be discussed or if anyone might reasonably disagree. Students will usually begin seeing the point here, that assumptions do have to be addressed and supported. However, they may still be uncomfortable with the process as it seems like some things like "America is a great country" are just a given and shouldn't be questioned.

### 2 ACKNOWLEDGE THE DISCOMFORT

When my student told me that it was "a given" that capitalism is the best system and really did not need to be addressed, I think what he was really saying was it is almost a matter of faith that should not be questioned. Capitalism, like the existence of God and the ultimate good of the nation, are sacred icons in U.S. culture: questioning them can seem almost sacrilegious.

And while I can agree that questioning the support for God's existence is not the task of the writing classroom, we can certainly question the good of the capitalist system and demand support for its value when writing about it—at the same time acknowledging students' discomfort with this process. After all, no one said gaining an education would always be a comfortable or easy matter. And the reader may in the end agree with the author, that capitalism is indeed the best system.

However, the writer is not excused from making the argument and must still go through the process of examining the

value of the claim.

### 3 SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT

Once students have unpacked their claims of underlying assumptions, they'll realize the assumptions—and the claims themselves—need to be supported, once they are exposed, written on the board in bare, simple statements: "Competition is good." Discuss the kind of support that is needed to support claims like this. This leads to a discussion of what is appropriate support and what a valid and reliable source is: quotes from students' parents and their own personal experiences usually being less valid than research on the topic or opinions of experts.

### 4 DEVELOP THE HABIT OF CRITICAL EXAMINATION

From their own writing, this process of examining arguments extends into other areas. In going over course reading with students, ask them about the author's claims: What is her major argument in the reading? Does she support it well enough? What are its underlying assumptions? Have students progress to the critical examination of each other's work, noting the assumptions and need for support in their peers' work. In this process, students will lose the habit of accepting claims on faith and begin critically examining them. In this way their thinking skills will develop along with their writing skills.

### 5 DEVELOP THE HABIT OF CIVIL DISAGREEMENT

Many people bemoan the disappearance of civility from American culture. A large part of this is our unfortunate inability to politely disagree on matters of any importance anymore: we either shout or clam up. We seem to be

unable in many situations to “use our words,” as mothers urge their toddlers to do when upset (rather than fists). It is the teacher’s job to teach students how to use words to politely disagree: “Excuse me, but I don’t see that you’ve supported that claim” or “I am going to have to disagree with that point and for this reason” are acceptable and even welcome methods to counter an argument.

## 6 QUESTION

Part of the process of critical thought is the habit of questioning. Have students take a statement that they accept as true—it can be as simple as “The sky is blue” to the more complicated “Capitalism is great”—and examine it. “Is that really true? How do I know that? Are there any times when it is not true?” With this process students lose the habit of accepting statements on blind faith just because they are posed as affirmative statements or they are in writing, which many people tend to do.

**CRITICALLY EXAMINING ARGUMENTS AND QUESTIONING “GIVENS” IS A DIFFICULT PROCESS BECAUSE IT SEEMS “NATURAL” TO MANY PEOPLE TO ACCEPT WRITTEN STATEMENTS AS A “GIVEN.”**

**HOWEVER, THIS PROCESS IS A MICRO-COSM OF COLLEGE STUDY ITSELF AND DEVELOPS STUDENTS’ CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING SKILLS, GETTING THEM INTO A LIFELONG HABIT OF NOT ACCEPTING SUCH “GIVENS” AS TRULY GIVEN BUT RATHER LOOKING AT THE ASSUMPTIONS BENEATH.**

# All Americans are Fat and Lazy: Teaching the Fallacy

**AT SOME POINT MID-SEMESTER, IN MY INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED CLASSES IN ESL WRITING, IT OCCURS TO ME THAT STUDENTS REALLY NEED TO BE TAUGHT THE LOGICAL FALLACY AND HOW TO AVOID IT.**

This is after listening to them in discussion making statements like “Women are weaker than men,” with other students often accepting that without further questioning: “Weaker how? All women? Which men?” Or they will write something about The Occupy Movement and how it must be valid because “so many people are involved in it.” Clearly, some introduction to the logical fallacy is warranted. Not only will students learn about these basic errors in thinking, but they also will develop analytical and critical thinking skills and improve discussion and writing skills.

## **WHAT IS A FALLACY AND WHICH FALLACIES SHOULD WE TEACH?**

A fallacy is a logical error: something went wrong, or is missing from, a chain of reasoning. It's important for student to learn these to recognize these in one's own and other's arguments. To be able to write and debate effectively, students need to know what a fallacy is. Critical thinking skills are also improved in the ability to take apart an argument and look for the fallacies.

I like to begin by introducing the concept and then using examples drawn from student experience if possible.

## **COMMON FALLACIES**

### **1 THE STEREOTYPE/OVERGENERALIZATION**

Both of these involve applying to the individual the traits of the whole group - a stereotype applies specifically to people, an overgeneralization to things. I like to use stereotypes about my own group, “All Americans are fat and lazy,” which usually gets a laugh from students - apparently they have been exposed to that particular stereotype, and I avoid

potentially offending a student. I point out because of its sweeping nature, a stereotype can be defeated by pointing out one exception: I'm American and neither fat nor lazy, therefore, the stereotype does not hold. I also offer students a “cure” for fallacies: in this case of stereotypes, modifying language to be less all-inclusive: e.g., it is fair, less fallacious to say “Many Americans struggle with weight control due to mostly cultural factors, like lack of exercise and fast food.”

### **2 AD HOMINEM ATTACK**

“Ad Hominem” literally means “to the person,” when the argument focuses not on the opponent but on the opponent's personal life or appearance. I might offer an example from student life: e.g., “Professor Johnson is such a bad teacher. He's so fat and sloppy, and his shoes are unpolished,” is an ad hominem attack because it focuses mostly on the poor guy's physical appearance. It would be more fair and valid to discuss his ability to lecture or his grading policies, which go to the argument on his abilities as a professor being discussed.

### **3 CONFUSING TIMING WITH CAUSE**

This can be a difficult one to approach because even skilled critical thinkers make the rather easy mistake of thinking that because two things occurred together that they must be causally related. An example I offer from campus life is “I stayed up all night, drinking coffee while I studied, and I got an ‘A’ on my test. Therefore, caffeine improves grades.” I work with students to examine this by asking “What else might be going on here? Can we really say it was coffee that caused the good grade? Maybe it was the studying, and coffee had nothing to do with it? Or the causation was the other way, perhaps: the studying all night caused the need for coffee?” This also models questioning claims based on poor reasoning.

### **4 BANDWAGON**

The bandwagon fallacy is the “everyone's doing it - therefore it must be good” falsehood. An example the teacher could offer is that at one time not very long ago almost “everyone” in the U.S. smoked—a majority of adults, that is. “Everyone” could be wrong. This could be applied to student life today in the Occupy movement: if students choose to do it, fine—they should, however, know why beyond “everyone” doing it.

### **5 SLIPPERY SLOPE**

This fallacy predicts far-reaching, disastrous results from one event: e.g., “If the professor doesn't give us extra time for studying for the exam, we'll fail the test and then fail out of school. We won't get jobs, and we'll wind up homeless. And the terrorists will have won!” This usually gets laughs from students because of its obvious extremeness—it would be more reasonable to simply say “The teacher should give us extra time to study so that we have a chance to do well on the exam.”

### **6 NON SEQUITUR**

A favorite example I offer for this is drawn from my own life: on receiving a parking citation from the local university campus police in the mail, I responded in writing with two claims:

“This is not my car, and I wasn't on campus on the day in question.” I forgot about it, considering the matter resolved, until receiving a return letter from the campus police: “Parking laws are enforced every day at Cal State.” This leaves students either laughing or scratching their heads because it's a classic non sequitur, “it doesn't follow”... in this case, the campus police's rebuttal about the laws being enforced every day did not follow or address the claims I made about not being on campus and not owning that car but seemed rather to address some claim I didn't make, like “It was only a Sunday.” It is likely the campus police didn't even read my letter



but was offering a standard response. In discussing this event, I am also able to review some key vocabulary for arguments, like “claim” and “rebuttal.”

## HOW TO TEACH THE FALLACY?

### 1 FIRST INTRODUCE AN ACADEMIC ARGUMENT (AS OPPOSED TO THE EVERYDAY USE OF THE TERM):

a claim that is supported.

### 2 INTRODUCE THE CONCEPT OF “FALLACY” AND DRAW ON EXAMPLES FROM CAMPUS LIFE, AS ABOVE.

Often students are eager to share fallacies they’ve encountered.

### 3 START WITH AN EXAMPLE OF POOR REASONING AND FALLACIES.

Just looking through the newspaper’s section of letters to the editor will reveal fallacies from ad hominem to non sequitur.

### 4 IT’S A CAMPAIGN YEAR IN THE U.S.: PLENTY IN THE PAPERS, IN SUPPORT OF A CANDIDATE OR AGAINST ONE.

“She’s a good businesswoman, therefore she’d make a good governor” was a fallacy in a recent California election. Or ad hominem attacks (to the person): “Obama has suspected Muslim background, therefore, he wouldn’t make a good president.” Often a candidate’s personal life comes under examination: “Former New York Mayor Giuliani went through a divorce. He can’t handle his marriage, how he can be a good president?” These kind of ad hominem attacks are rampant in the public dialogue. Have students question these fallacies by asking critical questions that go to the premises that the falla-

cies are based on through modeling questioning such as the following: “Do you then believe Obama is lying about his religious faith? A lot of evidence, such as long-term church membership and his own testimony, suggests he is Christian, not Muslim. Even if Obama is lying about his religious faith, what of it? What would suggest a Muslim cannot be President?” or “Do success in marriage and in political leadership really draw on the same skills? Aren’t being successful in marriage and in politics really different things? If I have a successful marriage, does that mean I can lead the country? If we limit our presidency to only those who have successful marriages, are we really limiting our base of candidates?” From this dialogue, students will be more informed and thoughtful than much of the American public, and they will learn the habit of questioning the statements that often rest on unfounded assumptions that really permeate the public dialogue.

The teacher should, of course, in this exercise remain focused on the exercise of critical analysis of the candidates and beliefs of them—for example, in this exercise, Giuliani and Obama are of opposing parties, and I am only of one of them—but I did not, I hope, favor one over the other in analysis of the criticism leveled at them - they were equally unfair attacks.

### 5 IT’S TIME FOR STUDENTS TO EXAMINE FALLACIES IN THEIR OWN WRITING.

Have students write a paragraph arguing from a particular perspective—for or against gun control, for example, and give reasons for their position. They should then examine their writing for fallacies, then trade with a peer and do the same.

**IT TAKES TIME TO TEACH THE FALLACY, TIME OUT OF THE REGULAR CURRICULUM, PERHAPS, AND TIME TO PREPARE EXAMPLES. HOWEVER, THE RESULTS IN HELPING STUDENTS IMPROVE CRITICAL**

**THINKING SKILLS AND THE HABIT OF CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ARGUMENTS ARE INVALUABLE AND WILL SERVE STUDENTS THE REST OF THEIR COLLEGE CAREERS AND BEYOND.**

# That's Plagiarism?: Teaching Paraphrase Skills to Pre-university Students

**LEARNING HOW TO PARAPHRASE ANOTHER'S WORDS IS DIFFICULT FOR ANY WRITER, EVEN MORE SO FOR NONNATIVE SPEAKERS WHO COME FROM COUNTRIES THAT DON'T HAVE ANY CONCEPT OF PLAGIARISM.**

Many EFL students want to attend a U.S. university - however, they lack the academic skills to write college level papers which involve research. Even if you teach students who don't need to do academic research, paraphrasing and summarizing are beneficial tools for reading comprehension. Below are some ways to teach your students the valuable skill of paraphrasing.

## **HOW TO TEACH PARAPHRASE SKILLS TO PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

### **1 EXPLAIN PLAGIARISM**

As many countries don't have intellectual copyright laws, many students don't understand the concept of giving credit to an idea that didn't come from them. Use concrete illustrations of "stealing" to help them see the connection. For example, you present the scenario that the students work together to make food at a restaurant. How would they feel if someone used their food without paying for it? Then move to more abstract notions, such as music and movies. How would they feel if someone used the songs which they wrote, and they never got any money for them? Finally, move to ideas and show them how stealing someone else's idea is related to stealing someone's work, even though there is no physical product that you can touch. Regardless if they agree or disagree that intellectual property deserves to be protected, explain that most universities feel this way and they can be in trouble if they don't take plagiarism seriously.

Next, it's important to explain that plagiarism can be both intentional and unintentional. Students can be punished

similarly if they copy a paper from the Internet, copy a paper from another student, or use one or two ideas from a book and forget to cite them. Explain very clearly the consequences of what will happen if they get caught plagiarizing, for example, probation, failure, or even expulsion.

Students also should be aware how easy it is to get caught using information from the Internet. While many universities subscribe to sophisticated software which scans electronic documents, Google can be just as effective. Pretend that you wrote a paper and deliberately copy a sentence from a source online. Demonstrate to the students how you can type that one sentence using quotation marks in Google to find exactly where it came from.

### **2 USE MODELS**

Students need to see many models and examples of what you expect them to do and not do. An activity that works well is giving students a short original text and reading it out loud together. Spend a few minutes discussing the article so that you ensure comprehension. Have a word count at the bottom of the paragraph so students know how many words were in the paragraph. Prepare another short paragraph which changes some words and sentences from the original text but would still be considered plagiarism. Have them read it individually and circle any words/phrases which are used both in the original text and paraphrase, and add up the number of words repeated from the original text. If it is more than 15%, tell them that this is plagiarism and would receive a failing grade. It may work best for you to prepare these paragraphs so you can control how many words are copied from the original.

### **3 EXPLAIN STEPS FOR PARAPHRASING**

Next, show them an effective paraphrase of the text. Look at the paraphrase first and go through line by line to see how the author took the original sentences and transformed them into a paraphrase. Your ideal model should include the following ways of sentence transformation:

synonyms

starting sentences with phrases

combining sentences

putting information in a different order (while still maintaining original meaning)

deletion of extraneous details

By looking at the specific sentences, students will have a concrete example of how to convey the same meaning by using their own words.

The following are practical steps for writing a good paraphrase:

Read and reread the text until you have a good understanding of the main idea and the details.

Put the text away and write down what you remember without looking at the text

Compare the original with the paraphrase: Does it have the same meaning? Did you leave out any essential details? Do you use too many exact words?

Circle all of the words that are repeated in the original and your paraphrase. Are there any you could change?

If words are general and unnecessary to switch (for example: wall, or sit) then don't worry about switching them.

If there is a phrase that is either too difficult to translate or just really well-written as is, use quotation marks within your paraphrase. However, these should be

used sparingly.

Names do not have to be changed.

## 4 WRITE A PARAPHRASE AS A CLASS

Writing paraphrases together allows you to verbalize the thought process students need to transform the text. Start with individual sentences at first until students get the hang of it. An example dialogue between the teacher and the class could be as follows:

Teacher: The sentence is “The elephant is the only animal that cannot jump with all of its legs off the ground.”

What is the main idea of this sentence?/

Student: Elephants can't jump.

Teacher: Good. Now what are the words we cannot replace in this sentence?

Students: Elephant.

Teacher: Right. We could say “the largest mammal” but that would be unnecessary words. Let's keep elephant in our paraphrase. What about jump? Can we replace jump?

Student: Leap.

Teacher: Good! What about off the ground?

Student: We could say “in the air.”

Teacher: Excellent. Now, what about “only animal?”

Student: We can talk about other animals.

Teacher: Great. Now let's erase this sentence off the board and write our own paraphrase. It sounds like we've come up with: “Most animals can leap in the air except for the elephant.”

After students have practiced sentences, it may also be helpful to do a class paraphrase of a short paragraph as well.

Nursery rhymes work very well for this, especially if students are familiar with these nursery rhymes. For example, paraphrases of Humpty Dumpty may look something like this:

Original text: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put humpty back together again.

Paraphrase 1: While sitting on a wall one day, an egg had an accident which resulted in tragedy because no one in the kingdom could repair him.

Paraphrase 2: The kingdom mourned the loss of Humpty because he was broken beyond repair when he fell from the wall.

## 5 PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

After writing paraphrases as a class, allow them to work in pairs to paraphrase individual sentences and slowly work up to short paragraphs. Longer paragraphs are really unnecessary to paraphrase as summarizing would be a more effective and realistic skill for longer texts. Other good texts that work well for paraphrasing are nursery rhymes (especially ones they're familiar with), famous quotations, and statistics. These will prepare students well for encountering quotes and facts in academic articles.

## 6 GAMES

Another way to motivate students and practice paraphrasing is to play synonym games. Games like Taboo work well and encourage students to develop their vocabulary and expand their language to explain words in other ways. For advanced students, you can play a variation of Taboo with sentences. Each student is given a short sentence which they must get the class to guess. They must use synonyms and other phrases to get their team to recreate the original sentence.

**DIFFICULT AND FRUSTRATING TASK, BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE. LEARNING TO PARAPHRASE WILL HELP STUDENTS TO INCREASE THEIR READING COMPREHENSION AND BE BETTER READERS AND WRITERS WHILE PREPARING THEM FOR ACADEMIC SITUATIONS.**

**PARAPHRASING CAN BE A MOST**

# Can We Talk? Teaching Quotation to Your ESL Students

**LILY TOMLIN AS EDITH ANN ONCE SAID, "I LIKE A TEACHER WHO GIVES YOU SOMETHING TO TAKE HOME TO THINK ABOUT BESIDES HOMEWORK." BESIDES TAKING THIS AS GREAT TEACHING ADVICE, WE ARE REMINDED THAT TEACHING OUR STUDENTS HOW TO USE QUOTATIONS IN THEIR WRITING IS VERY IMPORTANT.**

If you have not spent some class time reviewing and using quotations with your students, the following activities may give you some ideas on how to approach the topic.

## HOW TO TEACH QUOTATIONS IN YOUR ESL CLASSROOM

### 1 IN QUOTES

Do your students know what a quotation is? Ask them. If they say it is someone's exact spoken words written down, they are correct. Then discuss with them how quotations come from dialogue. That dialogue is a conversation between people, and that at least two people participate in a dialogue. Let your students see examples of quotations. Try using both a comic strip and a newspaper article that quotes someone. How are the two quotations different? Encourage your students to notice that the newspaper quote uses quotation marks. Discuss with your students why they use quotation marks in the newspaper. Look for answers like it separates the quoted material from what the writer says and it shows it is the person's exact words.

### 2 HAVE A CHAT

With your students, brainstorm a list of topics they might want to have a conversation about. You can do this either as a class or in small groups or pairs. Then have students partner with one another to talk about whatever topic they chose. They should try to have a normal, back and forth

conversation. Stop the pairs after just a couple of minutes and ask them to think back about what they said. Then have them write down their words. For this activity, they should use speech bubbles like those on the comic strip or simply list the sentences as bullet points (no need for quotation marks), but they should not put their names on the paper. Give your class as much or as little time as you would like to record their conversations, and then collect all the papers. Now redistribute the papers to the class making sure that no pair gets their own papers. Let your students take turns reading the dialogue in front of the class and trying to guess whose conversation it was originally.

### 3 CAN I QUOTE YOU

The time has come for you to review with your students the proper way to quote someone in their writing. Reinforce that they should use quotation marks on either side of the quote. You can be sure students understand this by placing pages with large quotation marks on either side of a student's head while he or she is speaking. Then allow another student to speak while holding the quotes around his or her head. Also, make sure your students understand that they must use a comma before introducing a quotation.

For example, Alex said, "I hate potatoes, but I love French fries." If they are starting the sentence with the quote, they should end that quote with a comma rather than a period if the sentence continues after the quote. "I like potato chips best," Julie answered. The end of the sentence then finishes with a period. Your students should also know that it is okay to use an exclamation point or a question mark within the quote even if there are other words after the quotation.

Now that your students have dialogues from another pair and are clear about how to punctuate a quotation in their writing, ask each student to act

like a reporter, writing a short piece on the topic discussed in the dialogue. They can agree or disagree with the original dialogue or share additional information about the topic. It really does not matter what they write as long as they are correctly using quotations from the original dialogue.

For homework, have your students interview someone at home on a topic of their choosing and write another article using at least two quotations from that person. When students have handed in their work, compile both assignments into a class newspaper, and give each student a copy to read and take home to show the person that he or she interviewed.

Once students have practiced using quotations from their classmates, encourage them to use quotations in their own writing when it is effective.

**YOU MAY WANT TO SHOW THEM HOW TO USE A DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS SEARCHING FOR A QUOTE BY SPEAKER OR BY TOPIC. THE NEED TO USE QUOTATIONS IN ONE'S WRITING ONLY INCREASES WITH THE EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF YOUR STUDENTS. THE EARLIER YOUR STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THIS CONCEPT, THE MORE PREPARED THEY WILL BE FOR RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS IN THE FUTURE.**



# Excuse Me (or Please Move): Teaching Pragmatics in Conversation

TRADITIONALLY, ESL INSTRUCTION HAS FOCUSED ON TEACHING THE GRAMMAR OF THE LANGUAGE, WITH A LOT OF CONCENTRATION ON THE VERB TENSE SYSTEM.

Recently more attention has been given to vocabulary, often divided into categories like “colors” or “animals.” Less attention has been given to pragmatics, or the social use of language, using language in a way appropriate to the context and to get things done. For example, “Excuse me” in contemporary American English has taken on a function of getting someone who is blocking the way to move. More obscure but still necessary to know are familiar phrases and their contemporary usages, such as “May I help you?” which sometimes is not an offer of help at all but rather a request to be left alone (when said in a flat tone, while the speaker is obviously busy and is not a service person whose job is in fact to help the addressee).

## LANGUAGE TO TEACH

First in teaching pragmatics is deciding what to teach. Some obvious areas of instruction are language appropriate for greetings, opening and closing a conversation, and farewells. There are of course many other language functions (getting people to move, be quiet, go away, etc.), but this is a start.

## GREETINGS

How are you?

It’s remarkable, long after the witty observation that the definition of a person with poor social skills is one who, when asked “How are you?” actually tells you, people still do this. The joke highlights the pragmatic function of “How are you” as a greeting, not a real inquiry into one’s health (unless coming from one’s doctor). And the appropriate answer (unless to one’s doctor) is “fine.” Teaching students this function is important because of the

wide-spread use of the greeting.

## OPENING AND CLOSING A CONVERSATION

### 1 OPENINGS

Do you have a moment?

Can we talk?

With phrases such as these, the speaker establishes a need to impose on the listener’s time to talk.

### 2 CLOSINGS

I won’t keep you/I’ll let you go.

I know you must be busy.

Wow, I didn’t realize how late it’s gotten.

All of these phrases are important to recognize for what they are: the speaker’s desire to end the conversation and move on. Missing this cue—and sometimes even native speakers will—can result in annoyance in the speaker.

### 3 FAREWELLS

It’s remarkable, but native English speakers rarely end a conversation with “goodbye.” Rather, they’ll often use one of the following:

I’ll let you go.

I won’t keep you.

I’m sorry, but I’ve got a bunch work to do and have to go.

## HOW TO TEACH PRAGMATICS

Once some language has been decided upon for instruction, an actual method of instruction should be settled on.

### 1 AWARENESS RAISING

First, students do need to be made consciously aware of pragmatics—the fact that native speakers violate its rules demonstrates that it is not easily or consciously learned. Awareness of this issue can be achieved by first directly introducing the topic and naming it as pragmatics, the way people use language out in the “real world” as opposed to in books. Most students are aware of this dichotomy: my daughter, who is studying Spanish as a second language, a useful language to know in our home state of California, has nevertheless questioned the value of Spanish class because of the way the language is taught: “When am I ever going to have to say ‘what color is your oven’ in Spanish?” she asked, and she is right in that this is language, although highlighting colors and appliances, of limited use. Student motivation to learn can be increased by introducing pragmatics as the study of useful, “real life” language and by discussing typical examples and why they are used: What does the receptionist say to you in the doctor’s office when the doctor is running late? Often it is “to make yourself comfortable,” and she says that because “sit down and be quiet,” which is what she wants you to do, is too direct and rude (at least for the setting, a doctor’s office).

### 2 AUTHENTIC EXAMPLES

Discussing authentic examples like the one above is one method of teaching pragmatics. Another is to actually see examples in action, perhaps from well chosen clips of TV shows. Often the dialogue is very realistic, depending on the program, and there is the added advantage of hearing correct intonation. The instructor can choose a clip from a favorite program and play about 5 minutes of it, asking students to note the language used for greetings, for introducing a topic and closing it, for farewells. Ask about why the characters made those particular

language choices: Why “What’s up, Dog?” rather than “How are you?”) Play the clip again as necessary.

### 3 “HOMEWORK” ASSIGNMENTS

Give students a brief homework assignment for extended practice. Have them go to Starbucks or the student union or a similar public place and just observe the language use going on. Note the way people greet each other, take leave of each other, and so forth. Write the examples down if they are hard to remember (students might want to be discrete about that, as people can become nervous if they think they are being In some way recorded or documented.) Bring the examples back to class for discussion.

### 4 IMPROVISATION

After students have learned some social language, it’s time to practice a specific with a kind of exercise drawn from the world of dramatic arts helps here—that of improvisation, when actors are given a general sense of their character and the situation and must from there develop the dialogue and plot impromptu. The same can be done in ESL class: “Elena, you’re the boss, and Jakob, you’re e the worker, and you need to go into her office to ask her a question about your work. What is a polite way to do that?” This is, after all, how language use happens in real life—I’m in a specific situation like needing my boss’s signature on some papers, which means interrupting him, and I have to think of the most appropriate language for the situation. After they’ve rehearsed their sketches, student volunteers may perform for the class.

**IN CONCLUSION, PRAGMATICS IS A LESS-EXPLORED BUT IMPORTANT PART OF LANGUAGE LEARNING. IT IS AS FULLY IMPORTANT AS STUDYING THE GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY OF A LANGUAGE BECAUSE IT DEMONSTRATES HOW LANGUAGE IS ACTUALLY USED IN SPECIFIC SITUATIONS AND THE APPROPRIATE WAY TO USE IT TO ACCOMPLISH SPECIFIC TASKS.**