

IS (International Scholars) 501: Introduction to Communications in Academia

Instructor: Ruth Mendel, J.D., M.A.
Class Time: Thursday, 12:00-2:00

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Class Location: 955, Weiser Hall

Welcome to IS 501: *Introduction to Communications in Academia!*

This course is intended to help visiting scholars improve academic and informal speaking and listening skills, pronunciation, and academic reading and writing skills. I place great emphasis on providing helpful and thorough individualized feedback to you on both writing and speaking. In addition, if anything I write or say is unclear, please ask me to explain it more.

Students will give two to three short presentations of one to two minutes. These mini presentations are purposefully designed to be extremely short in order to target very specific areas, minimize stress for students presenting, and not take up too much class time listening to many presentations. The class will address presentation skills and suggest strategies to improve comfort and competence presenting. There will also be small group in-class discussion of selected topics. There will be two brief (one page) writing assignments. The first will be a purposefully informal essay about yourself as a reader. The focus of the second one will be an NPR (National Public Radio) story that you will select yourself about your field or any topic of interest. In addition to writing about your NPR story, you will also discuss it in class with classmates and the class as a whole.

The class will be a blend of academic and more informal English. Topics discussed in academic writing include data commentary (how we talk about data), process descriptions, overviews, writing about causation, writing emails, and hedging. Topics in conversational English include phrasal verbs, changing direct speech to reported speech, communication skills in daily tasks, talking about travel, and humor. The aim throughout is to provide a class atmosphere that is stimulating, but also low-key and stress-free. I hope you will all view mistakes only as opportunities to learn.

Pronunciation issues will be addressed as they arise in presentations and class discussions, but only insofar as they affect audience comprehension. The goal is not to change anyone's accent, but to develop strategies for speaking clearly and intelligibly in

academic and professional settings. These may include, for example, recognizing which syllable of a word is stressed and using strategies for making long or unfamiliar technical terms easier for an audience to follow.

So that this class can be as concretely helpful to you as possible, I offer the following options as well for any work you are doing outside of this particular class:

- ❖ If you are giving a presentation this term in your department, I can meet with you individually if you want to practice it or practice it on zoom.
- ❖ If you are writing an article or report this term, I can work on a few pages of it with you and explain changes. (I can't read a full academic journal article, for instance, but I could read a section of it) .
- ❖ If you are writing an email to someone in your department and would like to double-check its tone or accuracy, I am happy to look at one or two emails.

Week 1: September 17

Introductions, Definitions and Questions

In-class

- Introduction to Course
- Introducing your Classmate
- Pair-Activity: Definitions: Defining a term in your field for classmate to explain
- Michigan questions
- Some Types of Questions: Rhetorical Questions, Clarification Questions, Tag Questions, Wh-questions and wh-embedding.

Assignments:

- ❖ Writing: *Describe yourself as a reader*: submit as email attachment by **September 22**

Week 2: September 24

Presentation Skills, Writing about Causation, Phrasal Verbs

In-class:

- Considerations in presentations (handout)
- Cause-effect writing: in-class writing
- Phrasal Verbs

Assignments:

- ❖ Prepare presentation on your specific research or field of study. (1-2 minutes)
Presentations to be given: **October 1**

Introductory Comments on Second Week Topics:

Cause-effect Writing:

Discussing and writing about causation is fundamental. All of you likely know basic ways of describing a pattern of causation: X caused Y; Y is a result of X. It is useful to acquire and be able to use and understand a wider range of vocabulary regarding causation, such as, for example, how X can be attributed to Y. (Students sometimes misunderstand the causation direction with this term). We will also discuss ways to qualify claims of causation to make them more accurate: Y may be partially/ largely/ potentially/ due to Y.

Phrasal Verbs

While one can manage within the academic world without an extensive knowledge of phrasal verbs, phrasal verbs are ubiquitous in conversational English.

They do not exist in many languages and are impossible to understand only by knowing the words themselves. You all learned “put” “take” and “get” at an elementary level, yet that will not help you understand “put off” and “put up with” “take in” and “take off”, or “get by” and “get over”, and many more. We will discuss linguistic aspects of phrasal verbs and there will be small group conversation questions using phrasal verbs, such as: *when and to what extent do you go along with others in order to get along with others?*

Week 3 : October 1

- Individual presentations on research field
- *What if.....* (what to ask or answer in specific contexts)

Assignments: No assignment

Week 4: October 8

Data Commentary, Reading to Inform Writing

In-class:

- Introduction to Data Commentary and Data Commentary Activity
- Reading to inform writing: *Primary Sources : Happiness is...*

Assignments:

- ❖ Presentation: Explaining Visual Information (data or other visual content)
 - Select a graph or illustration to explain to the class (about 1 minute)
 - Practice and record presentation a couple of times before class
 - Presentations to be given **October 15**

Introductory Comments on Fourth Week Topics:

Data Commentary

Data Commentary refers to the language used to discuss data, not the numbers themselves. Almost all of you work extensively with data and will present graphs and other figures. We will discuss in this class both linguistic and stylistic aspects in data commentary. For the first, you will expand relevant vocabulary beyond “increase” and “decrease”, learn adjectives and adverbs to describe the increase or decrease more precisely, and practice numerical comparisons: was the percentage in 2010 *roughly double that of* 2000? By 2026, had the percentage *more than tripled*? The stylistic aspect is, perhaps, even more important. Students often begin discussing a graph without providing sufficient orientation to it; you are familiar with the graph, but your audience may need a few minutes to “take it in” (a phrasal verb). Another problem area is that students sometimes discuss a data commentary in full detail without highlighting the most salient points about it. In our class exercise, you will practice writing just one sentence that captures the most important point of the graph.

Reading to Inform Writing

Often, these two spheres remain separate: you may both read many academic journal articles and write research articles and lab reports. Yet I believe that the reading you do can, with focused attention, help to improve your writing. In the in-class exercise, you will read a very short passage from the magazine *Atlantic Monthly* that is full of data commentary. You will note all the different instances of data commentary – the different verbs and qualifiers used, and – the fun part – discuss in small groups the topic of the article.

Week 5: October 15

In-class:

- Data Commentary Presentations
- Linguistic Focus: comma-splice error, “this+summary word”, article usage, hedging

Assignments: No new assignments

Comments on Linguistic Focus:

I’ll choose two topics depending on what I have seen in the class thus far. “comma-splice error” can be quite common and, unlike other mistakes in punctuation use, will often stand out as incorrect. “This +Summary Word” is the term used in a textbook on academic writing for graduate students and involves clarity in writing by substituting a noun for “it” when “it” or “they” can be confusing. This definition will be less confusing when I explain it in class! I do think it would be good to have a less clumsy term, but I haven’t come up with one. Article usage doesn’t refer to academic research, but rather the terms “the” and “a”, which can be the hardest of all for a non-native speaker, depending on whether the speaker’s native language uses articles or not. “Hedging” refers to way we qualify claims to make them less absolute.

Week 6: October 22

In-class : TBD (To be Determined)

Assignments: No new assignments

Comments:

I will give the class a list of topics toward the beginning of class to rank in interest and teach one or two highest ranking ones. Possible topics include what I call “academic idioms” (not “it’s raining cats and dogs” but phrases like “slippery slope”, and “not seeing the forest for the trees”), writing emails, changing direct speech to reported speech, and ‘process descriptions’ -- vocabulary and syntax to make descriptions of processes read more smoothly and accurately.

We, language teachers, are usually taught that language teaching should be tailored to the needs of the individual. Syllabi, by their nature, undercut this to some degree: how can you tailor the teaching if you have already determined all that it will be? I do have a syllabus, but I always leave one class and one part of another class open for you to select its content or for me to adjust content based on what I have learned about class levels.

Week 7: October 29

In-class:

- Reading to Inform Writing: Selected Excerpts from Journal Articles
- NPR Assignment: Explanation of the Assignment (Handout)

Assignment:

- ❖ Select an NPR story. Send your paper on it to me by **November 3**, including:
 - A summary of the story
 - Your reaction to the story
 - A list of any new vocabulary you learned
 - Citation and title of the story

Comments on NPR (National Public Radio):

I use NPR stories quite a bit with private students and as a unit in classes I teach. I recommend selecting NPR stories to listen to beyond the class assignment here. The website is npr.org. Through NPR stories, you can expand knowledge of both more advanced vocabulary and also more conversational vocabulary and idioms. Students have found NPR stories on a wide range of stories. There will be discussion in class about the best ways to use NPR for language improvement. For purposes of this class, it’s a useful way to share ideas about a wide range of topics and learn new vocabulary as well.

Week 8 : November 5

In-class:

- Discussion and/or Presentation of NPR (National Public Radio)stories
- Reading to Inform Writing, Cont’d

Assignments: No new assignments

Week 9: November 12

In-class:

- Pattern of Errors in Second Language Writing: Handout
- Small Group Activity TBA

Comments: I have a handout I've written based on the mistakes I most commonly hear at this advanced level of English. Depending on the needs of this particular class, I'll add or delete certain items.

Assignments: No new assignments

Week 10 : November 19

In-class:

- Catch-up and Class questions
- Adverbs Game
- Music and Lyrics!

I generally have the last class I teach have a lighter spirit, a different way to learn and enjoy English together.

In terms of the music selection, it has changed over the years from a collection of songs involving places in the United States, to a song from the musical *Hamilton* (and an NPR story about *Hamilton*.) When I first started bringing in the song from *Hamilton*, it was a relatively recent musical. Now it is more than a decade old. Perhaps it is time for a new selection, but this song does have a great range of vocabulary and a far more sophisticated rhyme scheme than most songs.

The Adverbs game is based on a game my brother and his friends played in high school – it is adapted here for language learning as I will explain. You will learn a wide range of adjectives and adverbs, a category of vocabulary that is often less familiar, but most of all - in keeping with the tone of this last class it's fun and different from other activities.

Ruth Mendel