

Handbook for Linguistics Teaching Assistants

This is based on a guide prepared by Wendell Kimper, John McCarthy, and Kathryn Pruitt for the fall of 2008.

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This handbook gives a general overview of what to expect and what is expected of you as a TA or TO in the Linguistics Department. The department's professional development blog (<http://blogs.umass.edu/linguist/professional-development/ling-201-materials-and-guidance/>) includes more information as well as materials you can use in your course.

1. Responsibilities of TAs and TOs

The following is a summary of the responsibilities of each type of teaching job. If you are a TA, you will be meeting regularly with the faculty member who will give you information about all the details, such as how to grade, when to have office hours, what topics to cover in discussion sections, etc. If you are a TO, you will be planning these things on your own, but you should feel free to talk to the TA/TO Advisor at any time.

Linguistics 101 TAs:

- run a weekly discussion section (each TA has 2 sections, with about 30 students in each). TAs meet regularly with the faculty member, who instructs them on what should be covered in each section.
- grade student essays
- hold office hours
- assign final grades for class participation

Linguistics 101 fulfills the Social and Behavioral (SB) or US Diversity (U) GenEd requirements. It covers topics that may not be familiar to TAs, such as animal communication, language and gender, literacy, evolution of language, nonstandard dialects, etc. TAs are not generally required to attend all lectures, but TAs will need to work out a schedule so that there are some TAs at every lecture.

Linguistics 201 TAs:

- run a weekly discussion section (each TA has 2 sections, with about 30 students in each)
- grade student assignments
- hold office hours

Linguistics 201 TOs:

- conduct 3 class sessions per week for 1 class. Class has about 30 students.
- choose curriculum and assignments
- prepare classes
- do all grading
- hold office hours
- communicate with Disabilities Services and Athletic Dept., as needed (see Section)

2. Your teaching materials

There is no shame in using a textbook. However, most TOs seem to prefer picking and choosing among existing materials rather than using a textbook. Whatever you do, **DO NOT RE-INVENT THE ENTIRE COURSE ON YOUR OWN!** Luckily, there are now enough materials available from past classes that you shouldn't have to invent much even if you're not using a textbook. If you're a TA, the faculty member will give you any materials you might need for your section. If you're a TO, you will find most of the materials you need at <http://blogs.umass.edu/linguist/professional-development/ling-201-materials-and-guidance/>. This website includes links to assignments, tests, handouts, sample syllabuses and information on the SB, U and R2 requirements. You can download zip files of several complete curricula.

2.1 Syllabus

TAs don't need to create a complete syllabus, but it is a good idea to hand out an organized-looking sheet in the first discussion that includes

- your contact information
- url of course website and your website if you have one
- policy about attendance
- expectations (about deadlines, consulting websites, participating in discussion, etc.)

If you are a TO, your syllabus should minimally include the above and

- course goals
- schedule of topics
- grading policy
- academic honesty policy (see Section)

The professional development blog/website contains several excellent example syllabuses. Just copy them. Bear in mind that students won't read more than maybe 2 pages. (Ling. 101 has a long syllabus, but also has a first-week quiz on its content.)

2.2 Assignments, tests and handouts

2.2.1 Assignments

It's good to have a quite regular schedule of assignments. Due dates should be planned out in advance, and communicated with students at the beginning of the term. You can put off deciding exactly what the assignments will be, but you should give students a clear schedule of assignments and your policy about late assignments at the beginning of the term. TAs will not be creating assignments or constructing the schedule, but they should make due dates and policies clear.

Good assignments have the following properties:

- They have clear instructions.
- They use terminology and methods that have been discussed in class.
- They include some parts that all students can succeed at.
- Where creative answers are called for, they allow for multiple possible answers.
- They ask a series of specific questions.

NOT: Are [p] and [b] separate phonemes or allophones in Language X?

BETTER:

- A. Look at the instances of [p] and [b] in the following words of Language X.
 What is the phonological environment for [p]?
 What is the phonological environment for [b]?
- B. Are there environments in which one phoneme occurs and the other does not?
 Explain.
- C. Are [p] and [b] separate phonemes in Language X?

Assignments should be graded and returned quickly. If you will take more than a few days to return assignments, you should let students know when they will be graded. Copious comments are not as helpful as focused comments that indicate how the student can improve. Ling. 101 TAs will get specific information from the faculty member about grading essays.

If you are discussing the answers to an assignment in class, take steps to make sure students aren't doing the assignment as you discuss. Some ways of doing this include collecting the papers before discussing, telling students that they can take notes on the assignment if they use some other color pen, explaining early on that they must answer every questions, and give credit for attempts that are incorrect, calling on every student to put part of the answer on the board.

If you give the students material to read at home, make it clear exactly when they should have the reading done. It's a very good idea to also give them an assignment based on the reading.

2.2.2 Tests

You should have tests. They give students some scheduled times for going over course material at home, and they give you an idea of what has and has not been absorbed. Ling. 101 has 3 tests that are given in discussion section, but are graded automatically. The Ling. 101 final exam is online, but in general you should avoid online tests. Let students know at the beginning when the tests will be. You can give pop quizzes, but just let them know at the beginning of the term that you will be doing this.

Give the students regular warnings of the passage of time during a test, particularly if the room lacks a functioning clock. Be gentle in ending the test if students are still working. Don't rip the papers from their hands. It's OK to let a few students continue working while you go ahead with the class, since you won't be talking about material on the test. If any student seems to have a lot of difficulty completing tests in the allotted time, try to make arrangements to let them have sufficient time. Some students arrange in advance to take tests at the Disability Services office, but those who do not may make reasonable arrangements with you or the faculty member.

Students should not have anything on their desks when they take a test except pencils, the test, and the answer sheet. No electronics allowed. Exception: students whose native language is not English are allowed to use a translation dictionary (paper or electronic). Students needing auditory isolation can wear their headphones with the device disconnected.

2.2.3 Handouts

You can find sample handouts on the professional development blog/site. Here are some useful comments from two former TAs:

A. *Should you use handouts? (by former TA Katherine Pruitt)*

Many TAs like having a handout for each discussion section, and I suspect this urge derives from the ubiquity of handouts in our field. Although you'll have to see for yourself whether you get along better with or without a handout, here are some things to keep in mind:

- A handout is not required; students probably don't get handouts in their other courses, and they certainly don't expect them for every class.
- Although linguists think of handouts as souvenirs from talks they've attended, students will not think of your handouts this way. In fact, they probably won't look at them ever again. For this reason, if you do make a handout, don't bother putting things on it that you don't plan to go over in class.
- A handout in front of a student can encourage passiveness. Without the handout, they may be more likely to be actively listening to what you say and to be writing things down for themselves. (For some students it won't matter... they don't even bring writing implements to class. But you can't reach everyone.)
- A handout can be time-consuming to construct. I find I spend a lot more time preparing for a discussion when making a handout, with only a negligible difference in the quality of that discussion section (surprising, but true). Instead of spending your time formatting a handout, consider using it instead to think of a useful group activity students could do that week, or a strategy for helping students improve their writing.

Situations which might warrant a handout:

- A handout can be really useful when you are planning to have students answer questions, e.g., in group work. And I have used handouts for beginning-of-class “quizzes” where students take five minutes to see if they can answer a few questions that test their retention of important concepts from lecture or a reading, for example. (I still call it a handout because the students keep it for themselves rather than turning it in. We discuss it as a class after the five-minute quiz time.)
- Anything that would benefit from visual presentation is a candidate for presentation via handout. (And given different learning styles, almost everything could fall into this category). However, also consider whether the blackboard and/or the overhead might do the trick (more on these below). If you have a diagram that you’re filling in, for example, you might want to put a blank version of the diagram on a handout to distribute, and fill out yours on an overhead.

If you want to use a handout, check out some of the examples from previous TAs in the back of this handbook and/or Wendell’s handout advice. And finally, if you do use handouts, make them just one part of your repertoire for a given class. Thus, regardless of whether there’s a handout, make use of the blackboard and/or overhead projector for displaying information.

B. *If you use them, what should they be like? (by former TA Wendell Kimper)*

- Only use a handout when there's good reason to. In addition to the many reasons why you probably don't need a handout all the time, students are more likely to pay attention to the handout if receiving one is a rarity rather than the status quo.
- The obvious: your handout should be formatted well. It doesn't have to be a masterpiece of graphic design, but it should look clean and polished. Just like your attire, a properly-formatted handout shows the students that you respect them enough to bother.
 - Avoid: inconsistent font face/size, erratic indentation or line breaks, obvious errors (occasional typos are inevitable, but too many and you look bad), etc. Good things: plenty of white space, appropriate font size, sparing but effective use of boldface and italics.
 - Headers and/or Footers: include the class, your name/email/office hours, and the date. A prominent title related to the purpose of the handout is also useful. Students are even less likely to look at a handout again if they can't immediately identify what it's for.
- The purpose of a handout is not to convey information or content (that's your purpose). But a handout can be useful for *structuring* that information, and as such can be used to encourage note-taking. The students will probably not read their notes later, but the act of writing things down in a structured way will help some students learn.
- Additionally, handouts can include small amounts of content you want them to be able to reference, like tips for writing essays. Use this kind of content very carefully -

-- what is the minimal amount you want them to be able to reference later (even if they probably won't)? How can you get them to write down for themselves as much of what you want to convey as possible?

- Handout should be interactive. Include questions and spaces for answering them, diagrams with blank spaces to be filled in, sample outlines with blank lines for section headings, or instructions and space for doing a class activity. Interactive handouts are useful because they give the students a framework in which to take notes, and they give you some amount of control over those notes.
 - Clearly structure the blank spaces: lines, boxes, whatever it takes. Make sure it's abundantly clear that the students are supposed to write something there, and make sure you leave enough space for them to actually write (remember that many of your students' handwriting will be typical of adolescent girls' --- big and round and loopy).
 - In discussion, give students suggestions about what to write and where. The less structure they have to figure out on their own, the more likely they are to take notes. Some of them still won't, and that's fine.
- Avoid putting visuals on handouts unless they are interactive. Those are better for overheads or projectors, because you want the students to be looking up at you instead of down at their desks. Interactive visuals should be done both in handouts (what they write down) and on the overhead (what you write down).
- Remember that a handout is just one tool, and use it only when it's the right one. If you make a handout because you think you're supposed to or because you don't know what else to do, it probably won't be very effective.

2.3 Course website

It is a good idea to maintain a website for your discussion sections. This is useful for posting summaries of what you did in class on a given day and is essential for posting any handouts (and/or overheads, etc.) that you used so that students who missed class can catch up. It's also possible to use your website to post homework help or responses to FAQs you get via email, etc. As a TO, you can have a "Course OIT" account. This allows you to use the various web-functions that OIT has for courses. You can have various types of course website:

- If you're a TA, the course will have a website. The faculty member can tell you how to connect a site for your section to the main site and tell you about technical details.
- Put materials on UDrive: This doesn't have interactive features, but it's good if all you want to do is post readings, materials and links.
- and grade recording, but some people find it less cumbersome than MOODLE.
- Blog: This is another way to set up your own site. Its features are similar to those of the Course Oit type site, but it looks more like a running blog than like a fixed site.

- MOODLE: This is a complete "Learning Management System," for which the university has a license. It has tools for discussion forums, auto-graded quizzes, posting assignments, files, video, sending email, linking to other sites, etc.
- Web hosting: You can get space to build your own website using Dreamweaver or some such. We do not recommend using your time to do this.

You can find a full description of these types of course sites at:
<http://www.oit.umass.edu/support/instructional-technologies/post-course-content-online>.

You will have to educate students about what is posted on your website and how often you expect them to be consulting it. Make sure they know where to look for last-minute announcements, extra materials, etc.

If you have a blog, or if you're posting in a MOODLE forum, you can set it up so that only you can post, or you can choose to allow students to post public replies. The latter could be useful for answering common questions and getting students to interact with the thing, but you may also want to rule this out in order to maintain control of the posts. If you do allow students to post, warn them that it's not the appropriate place to inquire about their grade, ask for an extension, etc.

3. Class policies

3.1 Communicating with Students

Do try to learn and use students' names. You may never learn all of them, but showing that you're trying goes a long way. There are some suggestions about how to do this in Section .

The best way to ensure open lines of communication is to make it clear at the beginning of the term how students can get in touch with you and how you intend to get information to them. You need to hold office hours, but you also need to make sure that students know they can make an appointment to meet with you at other times. Let them know the best way to get in touch with you and also let them know how you will contact them if there are special announcements (email? announcement on course website?). Through SPIRE, you can request a class email list. (After logging on to SPIRE, click on Main Menu..Faculty Home...class email.)

NOTE: If you need to email a subset of your students about something, use the BCC field rather than the TO field for the addresses. This prevents them from seeing the other addressees of the message. That's important because of the federal privacy law FERPA, particularly if the message is "You're failing. Come see me!".

3.2 Grading

International students sometimes find that grading in American Universities is less rigorous than they are used to. For undergraduates in Humanities courses, a grade of B generally means average/adequate work, A means very good work, and C means sub-par work. Students generally get Ds or Fs only if they failed to hand things in and often missed class. If you're a TA, the faculty member will explain the grading criteria to you. If you're a TO and are unsure at all about grading, you can ask either an experienced TO or the TA/TO advisor.

You should make your grading criteria clear at the beginning of the course. How many assignments and tests? How many points for each? Will you drop the lowest grade? Are any points given for extra credit? If you're a TA, this information will be on the prof's syllabus. If you're a TO, you should put it on your syllabus.

Any student has the right to question a grade and request that you go over a test or assignment with him/her. Unless it's just a quick question, this discussion should take place in your office — not in a moment captured immediately before or after class. If you're a TA, you may use your discretion about changing essay grades, although it's usually best to limit such changes to special cases. If you're a TO, generally you won't change a grade based on a complaint, but occasionally you may discover that a question was ambiguous or you made a mistake in grading. You also have the option of offering a student the chance to rewrite the essay or redo an assignment. This is appropriate for a student who is sincerely trying to do better and seems to have learned something from meeting with you. You and the student should agree on a deadline for the revision.

Grading pointers from former TA Kathryn Pruitt:

- You may want to read over some of the assignments to get a sense for the range of performance before beginning to grade in earnest. Sometimes you can catch this way whether everyone made the same mistake in understanding and keep this in mind when making comments.
- Try not to grade students' assignments in the same order each time (don't go alphabetically, for example). Your grading at the top of the pile may differ you're your grading at the bottom of the pile, but as long as this randomly distributed (i.e., Aaron Aaronson's assignment isn't always graded first) you shouldn't have to worry about it having an overall biasing effect.
- Don't wait till the last minute to do your grading. You just can't grade 80 essays in one sitting, so you're better off not putting yourself in that position. I find essay grading to be somewhat emotionally trying — it's easy to take it personally if your students espouse a gut reaction to a sensitive issue despite your careful efforts to get them to appreciate the complexity of the topic. So, start your grading early for your sake; you don't want find yourself reaching a boiling point only halfway through

the stack the night before they're supposed to be graded. Give yourself enough time to walk away and pick it up again tomorrow.

- Don't fret over a point or two. In the grand scheme these decisions aren't going to determine a letter grade.
- Don't lose sight of the big picture. It's really easy to get bogged down in terrible writing and to feel like an essay isn't even gradable. But try not to feel this way. Instead, assign points as best you can, and in your comments focus on the one or two biggest problems with the essay that will help them improve for future assignments.

3.3 Deadlines and late assignments

You should definitely have clear deadlines and a strict policy about late assignments. Your syllabus should make clear that you generally cannot accept late assignments, but that you are willing to accommodate special circumstances. This should include a policy about points taken off for assignments handed in late without prior arrangement. (Otherwise you'll be dealing with students who get behind because they don't do assignments at all if they can't do them on time.) You can be as lenient as you want about allowing exceptions and/or exempting students from late penalties, but you need a policy that will allow you to discuss homework in class the day it's due, and to keep your own paperwork organized.

3.4 Class attendance and classroom decorum

You should explain your attendance policy at the beginning of the term. Like the deadline policy, it's a good idea to have a very strict policy and a willingness to be flexible about special circumstances. For example, you might state that students are expected to attend all classes, and that attendance is the main factor in the "class participation" part of their grade, however, students may miss up to x classes "no questions asked" (1 if it's discussion section, maybe 3 or so if it's a TO-taught 201) before there is any effect on participation grade.

You should take attendance in every class. At the beginning, you can call names as a way to learn the students' names, and later you can pass a sheet around for them to sign. It's not necessary to keep a precise roster of attendance stats. The class participation grade can be full points if they were "generally there" and points off if they weren't.

You should start class on time. Get there a minute or two early, and make it clear to students that you will be starting on time and that you will be careful to finish right on time. Tell students that if they need to leave early on a particular day, they should speak to you at the beginning of class and explain why.

Explain your policy about electronics in the classroom. Some students genuinely do take notes on their tablet or laptop, but you might want to let them know that they should clear that with you in advance.

Be alert to incivility between students. Students shouldn't laugh at, disparage, or insult other students. Students should take turns talking. Discourage interruptions, particularly men interrupting women. If you need to introduce a raise-your-hand-to-talk policy, do so. Try not to let one or two students dominate.

Of course, you may find that getting *any* students to talk is the hardest part. That's one reason why it's a good idea to make class participation a significant part of the final grade. That said, you need to make sure there's no penalty for being shy. Have at least some activities that allow the quieter students to be heard, and make it clear that a good grade for class participation is based on engagement, not loquacity. A student should be able to get full points for class participation by attending regularly and cooperating in activities even if they really don't like to talk in class. You'll find some tips about how to get students to participate in Section 4.

3.5 Students with Disabilities

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), students with disabilities have a right to "reasonable accommodations" in their classes. At UMass, the Disability Services office decides what those accommodations are, and they inform us in writing of what we are required to do for each student. This comes to us as a form delivered by the student. The syllabus tells students to bring the form to me, but they often bring it to the TA, in which case it should be passed along to me.

These are some typical accommodations and how we deal with them:

Extra time on tests and/or quiet place to take tests. Students take the tests at Disability Services rather than in the discussion section. The professor/TO emails the test to D'Ann Kelty at Disability Services several days before it takes place. Students make an appointment with her to take the test, untimed, up to or on the test date. D'Ann Kelty's office will mail tests back to you via University mail, or you can pick them up at her office in Whitmore.

Extra time on homework assignments. With these students, we waive the grade penalty for being late. If you're a TO with a student who has this accommodation, you can work out with them what deadline is appropriate.

Notes. Some students get note-takers for the class. This is usually a classmate who volunteers and gets some academic credit through Disability Services. This doesn't come up often in 201, but if it does you can contact Disability Services and let them

know that you need a note-taker. TAs should refer these students to the faculty member who will take care of making the request.

Each student has a choice of whether or not to use the accommodations recommended by Disability Services. Some students treat the accommodations as a back-up, in case the course turns out to be harder than they expected. (It never does.) When evaluating students' performance, you are legally required to ignore their choice in this matter as well as the fact that they have (or have not) received accommodations.

On the other hand, you may encounter students who have a problem but have not requested accommodations through Disabilities Services. Perhaps their non-native English makes it impossible for them to write extensive prose, or perhaps they get particularly anxious in tests, to an extent that it affects their grade. You should do your best to give them a reasonable chance to learn and show what they've learned.

3.6 Dealing with problems

If one of your students is having a problem that goes beyond Linguistics, there are resources on campus that you can refer them to. Here's a quick overview:

The *Vice Chancellor for Student Services* has a good resources page, including info on student legal services, veterans' services and family resources:

<http://www.umass.edu/studentlife/resources>

The *Ombuds Office* offers mediation and advice about disputes involving, for example, academic dishonesty, grading policies, ethical concerns, discrimination and interpersonal conflicts.

<http://www.umass.edu/ombuds/>

The *Center for Counseling and Psychological Health* has counselors, support groups and resource lists, as well as a suicide prevention hotline:

<http://www.umass.edu/counseling/>

The *Center for Women and Community* has counseling, training, support groups and a 24-hour assistance line.

<http://www.umass.edu/ewc/>

Your syllabus should state what students can do if they're having a problem with you. If you're a TA, they can contact the faculty member. If you're a TO, they can contact the faculty TA/TO advisor or the Department Head.

3.7 Academic honesty

TAs who encounter any sort of academic dishonesty should contact the faculty member immediately. The University has very specific policies that must be followed. Students have the right to appeal any penalty, and if the procedures have not been followed the penalty may be voided.

TOs who encounter academic dishonesty should contact the TA Advisor. We will lead you through the appropriate steps and make sure you're keeping the appropriate records. Even if you want to deal with the incident yourself, you should consult with us so we can back you up in case of an appeal.

Your course syllabus (if you're a TO) must include a statement about your academic honesty policy. It should give the link to the University's policy, specify the penalty and say what will be impermissible in your course. You can find examples of such statements in the syllabuses on the linguist professional development blog. Here's the statement found in the Ling. 101 syllabus:

"Academic Honesty

You are assumed to be familiar with the University's academic honesty policies in:

http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/code_conduct/acad_honest.htm

The academic honesty guidelines specific to this course are as follows:

- *Collaboration on essay and problem set assignments is prohibited. Collaboration includes working together on an assignment, copying someone else's work, or permitting someone else to copy your work. Persons who collaborate, in this sense, on a homework assignment will receive a zero grade for that assignment. Warning: The penalty is the same regardless of whether your work is copied, you copy someone else's work or you work on your essay together with someone. We use software to detect when two students have submitted similar essays, including essays submitted in a previous term.*
- *Cheating on a test includes copying another's work, permitting your work to be copied, disclosing a test's contents to someone who has not yet taken the test, use of notes or books, use of electronic devices such as cell phones or PDAs, possession of cheat sheets, or talking to others during the test. The penalty for cheating on a test is a zero for that test. Exception: If you are not a native speaker of English, you can use a paper or electronic translation dictionary. You must show this to your TA before the test and get his/her permission to use it. It must not contain notes or any other course content.*
- *Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of another person's work. To avoid a charge of academic dishonesty by plagiarism, your homework assignments must properly cite sources that you used. (a) Any concept or fact that you get from a*

published source or the Internet needs to be acknowledged with a nearby citation in the text or a footnote. (b) Direct quotations longer than three words must be surrounded by quotation marks and include a citation of the source and page number where the quoted text occurs. (But remember that in your essays direct quotation is usually forbidden.) The penalty for plagiarism on a homework assignment is a grade of zero for that assignment.

If you commit any of these offenses, in addition to the specified grade penalty, an informal report will be made to the University's Academic Honesty Board. If you commit more than one of these offenses, or if your offense is unusually serious, you will receive an F for the course and a formal report will be made to the academic honesty board. You have the right to appeal any charge of academic dishonesty, as explained on the website given above. If you have questions about the academic honesty policy, talk to your TA or me."

4. Teaching tips

4.1 Organization (Written by Katherine Pruitt)

4.1.1 Keeping organized

Teaching requires the juggling of time, energy, and paper. Do not underestimate the difficulty of the paper-juggling part. Your duties will be a great deal easier than your predecessors in this regard because the homework essays are being submitted electronically. However, there will still be various times when students give you things you need to keep track of. An example is extra credit receipts (from participating in experiments). These miniscule pieces of paper are really easy to lose, and students will try to give them to you when you are busy doing eight other things. You should work out a system for being organized and keeping track of such things (e.g., put everything you receive a designated folder with secure edges). And if you are sure you'll lose something if the student gives it to you at that moment, tell them to wait.

4.1.2 Keeping track of student communication

I find it a challenge to keep track of student communication when they catch me before or after class with a complaint/ concern/ request/ etc. I think I'll remember, and then occasionally the next week (or worse, the end of the semester), it turns out I've forgotten the encounter and whatever I've told them. The best advice is usually to just tell them to email you with their question. This way you have a written record of what they asked and what you told them. A lot of the time such queries will come in the form of email anyway, and though it's inherently easier to keep track of, it can be hard to deal with if you don't keep your email organized. Put all your 101 correspondence in a subfolder of your inbox so that you have it all in one place when you need to review it. (Don't bother

with sub-subfolders or any other sorting system; the volume of email and the need to consult it later aren't sufficient to justify the extra effort.)

Sometimes whatever they ask before or after class seems easy enough to deal with in person at that moment, but keep in mind that students often treat what you say in these impromptu "meetings" as official, so you should keep track of them. I recommend writing down in the same place each time: who you talked to, what they asked, and what you told them. This doesn't have to be very formal, but it will save you the trouble and embarrassment of a student complaining that you took points off for a late assignment when you told them you wouldn't. ("But you said...!"). (This may also apply to office hours, by the way – it's probably a good idea to keep a brief written record of just about any in-person discussion you have with a student.)

If a student's request seems complicated or is a question about a grade, tell them to come to your office hours or set up an appointment at another time. Don't try to deal with complex requests or questions about grades in the moments before and after class, and don't waste your time writing long complicated email replies for something that could be cleared up in five minutes during your office hours.

4.1.3 Learning students' names

You should make every effort to learn your students names. This can seem like a daunting task, but there are some things you can do to make it easier.

- Through SPIRE, instructors now have access to photo-rosters. You have to take a short quiz to demonstrate that you will be using this personal information ethically, but this is easy. You can then access each of your students' likenesses and study them in your spare time. (This may be more useful after you've seen them once or twice in person, but do whatever works for you.) The link to the security quiz and information about this tool are here:
http://www.oit.umass.edu/spire/for_instructors/class_information/photo_roster.html.
- I find an old-fashioned approach works very well too... You should be calling roll at least at the first few meetings, and you can try to use this as a chance to learn a few students' names at a time. Sometimes I write down one thing memorable about students that I don't know yet. I end up learning the names of the students with giant hair or funky glasses first, but you have to start somewhere. (I once wrote "BoSox cap" as someone's identifying feature, which turns out to be about the least helpful thing you could write.)
- If you're writing down descriptions of students, then calling the roll will be a bit time-consuming, but in the first class meeting or two you can probably spare this time. (Many freshmen will be late to the first discussion section meeting because of difficulty finding the classroom.) However, stick to one or two words for a student, and if nothing about a given student jumps out at you just move on and save them for the next round of name-learning. This should go without saying, but try not to be obvious that you're doing this, and *don't under any circumstances let anyone else, esp. other students, see what you've written.*

- Another thing I like to do is use group work time during the first few class meetings to learn names. You should walk from group to group during group work, and as you go around you can check your memory of students' names, and ask the ones you don't remember. (Since you have more time in this situation you can also fill in your list of distinguishing characteristics or write other notes that help you remember.)
- In the end, I have found that remembering names is easier than I thought it would be, but it did take a bit of work to be thorough. The trick is always the handful of students who never talk and don't particularly stand out to you. However, you should try to learn everyone's names within the first few weeks – it's better to have to ask a student what their name is during this time than halfway through the semester.

4.2 Preparing for class

You'll need to think through what you will cover and organize it in some coherent way, but you should also think in advance about

- how you'll use the blackboard
- how activities will be organized (varied amounts of group work, lecturing, individual work, etc.)
- what you'll leave out if you find you don't have time
- what logistical information you need to convey and when you'll convey it

As you're preparing an outline of what content you'll cover, you should also plan at least a few questions. This kind of pre-planning will allow you to think of more effective questions than you might be able to come up with on your feet. It also allows you to give some thought to how you'll reach out to quieter students. Calling on specific students and having a few questions that everyone will answer can help keep the discussion from being dominated by a few students.

Good questions have the following properties:

- They allow for multiple possible answers.

NOT: Who can tell me the place of articulation for [t]?

BETTER: An alveolar phoneme is pronounced with the tongue at the alveolar ridge. Give me an example of an alveolar phoneme.

- They are specific, but not asking for single facts.

NOT: What did you think of the article on AAVE?

NOT: What is the meaning of uninflected 'be' in AAVE?

BETTER: Green's article contrasts these two sentences (She be drinking Diet Coke/She drinking Diet Coke). What does she say about the difference in meaning?

- They make it clear what kind of answer you want.

NOT: What's an alveolar stop?

BETTER: (Point to cross section of vocal tract on board, which has numbers at each place of articulation). Which of these is the place of articulation for [d]? What's this place called? Is [d] voiced or voiceless? Is [d] an oral stop, a nasal stop or a fricative?

- They allow students to convey their perceptions, not just their knowledge.

NOT: What does Green say about attitudes toward AAVE?

BETTER: What was something you found surprising in Green's article?

- They are part of an organized agenda, and correct answers are summarized and explained periodically

4.3 Classroom tips from previous TAs

1. Start the class right on time. If you allow more than a minute or so leeway, student will begin coming later. Try to get to the classroom early. If you're using AV equipment, make sure it's set up and operating correctly.

2. End the class right on time. Be a slave to the clock but not the agenda. They have very little time to get to the next class, and consistently ending on time will cut down on the paper-shuffling and backpack-stuffing noise in the last 5 minutes.

3. Speak up. All of the students, even those in the back of the room, need to hear you very clearly. This also helps to keep their attention. You don't need to shout, but you all need to speak more loudly. Be confident -- you're in charge and they're generally predisposed to accept your authority in the classroom.

4. When a student asks a question or makes a comment, repeat it for the whole class. Students, particularly those in the front, tend to direct their speech to you, and they're inaudible to everyone else. You need to repeat the student's statement or question loudly. Also, when answering a question from a student in the front, keep your voice up. Avoid the tendency to engage in a quiet dialog.

5. When you ask a question, wait long enough for an answer. It takes them a while to figure out what you are asking, and also what seems like a long silence to you is often just a few seconds.

6. Make transitions clear, and use them as an opportunity to gain or reclaim the students' attention. It is not easy to start class, but it is important to have a clear dividing line between the time when they don't need to pay attention to you and when they need to start paying attention to you. Speak up, announce the beginning, say what you're going to do.

- When you transition from one topic to the next, make the demarcation line clear. Have some bit of stage business for the transition -- erasing the board, writing a new topic on the board, etc.
- Getting their attention back after group activities is hard. Make them move their chairs back into normal position to signal that the group activity is over and normal classroom behavior has resumed.
- Be alert to drifting attention, people talking, newspaper-reading. Get their attention back by speaking up, asking for attention, or even flipping the lights off and on.

7. Don't discuss a handout until everybody has a copy. Check with the class: "Does everybody have a handout?"

8. With undergrads, don't bother putting anything on the handout unless you plan to go over it in some detail in class. Often, undergrads learn better from stuff written on the blackboard or an overhead slide. This allows you to point to things and explain them as you are pointing to them. You can even make an overhead of your handout (but use a bigger font for the overhead -- letters that are smaller than about 1/3 inch (1 cm.) won't make a big enough image when they are projected).

9. Use the blackboard or the overhead projector as well as your voice. You need to give them important stuff through multiple input channels.

10. Blackboard and overhead projector (by Katherine Pruitt)

These are two important and useful tools for presenting information visually and controlling the flow of the discussion. Here are some reasons to use them and tips for doing so successfully:

- Students will very often copy down whatever you write on the blackboard or overhead, and it requires their attention to you at the front of the room, unlike a handout (as you know from experience in linguistics talks in which you never make eye contact with the speaker).
- The blackboard can be used to slow the pace of the discussion. The time it takes you to write something on the board is time they can be absorbing information. But don't be laborious about writing every detail on the board or writing out really long examples -- plan ahead and consider using the overhead for such cases, since they can be made in advance.
- An overhead can often replace material that is too cumbersome to reproduce on the blackboard and thus would often otherwise end up in a handout. There are several advantages to the overhead: you get to point/draw/circle/add, etc. to the transparency, and it requires students' attention on you, making it more interactive. Plus they are really simple and quick to make, and require much less fiddling with formatting (just make sure you use a big font). Every classroom is equipped with an overhead projector and our dept office has transparencies you can print on. This requires only moderate expertise with the copier; ask Kathy to show you how. The

dept has some overhead pens available (they are “wet erase”), or you could buy your own for a few dollars.

- Another benefit of an overhead over a handout is the controlled release of information (without the need to write it all out on the blackboard). The students can't see what comes next, so if you stop and ask for their input, they won't have anywhere else to search for the answer (and they'll already be looking at you because you haven't been given something to stare at).
- I generally post a pdf of my overheads, or some equivalent, to my discussion website after class so students can have a copy if they really want to retain something from it and so absent students can see what we did in class.
- Obviously, it won't be a very interesting class if you stand at the overhead the whole time or write everything you say on the blackboard. Mix it up and include a couple of different modes of teaching in the same class period.

4.4 Diversity (JJM)

About half the content of this course [Ling. 101] deals with issues that fall under the heading of diversity, particularly the ways in which language is used by members of racial or ethnic minorities, immigrants, the poor, and the Deaf. The students in the course are also diverse; the UMass Amherst undergraduate population is almost 20% ALANA. (That breaks down to about 9% Asian, 5% African-American, and 4% Latino, with less than 1% Native American or Cape Verdean.)

UMass Amherst requires all undergraduates to take a designated US diversity general education course. Ling 101 is now under consideration for this designation. If the designation is granted during the current semester, then students taking the course now will get credit for having fulfilled that requirement. I will keep you and them apprised of this.

When you deal with diversity topics in the discussion section, the overall tone will have already been set by the lectures that week. The tone we're trying for is that language is the object of rational study and analysis, and such study shows us that no language or dialect is right or wrong, better or worse, more or less “correct” or “educated”. This view, unfortunately, is not widely held outside the community of linguists, and not all students will have internalized the message of the lectures.

Suppose you are in the following situation. You have been explaining negative concord in AAVE, and a student insists that *I didn't see nothing* is illogical and uneducated. The student who says this might be white or might be African-American. How should you respond?

Unemotionally. You should respond in the same way as you would respond to any student who is missing the point of a lesson, by re-explaining the material in a different way. You might also explain that human languages are full of stuff that has no counterpart in logic, like ambiguity or affective meaning.

What if you're discussing an inherently controversial topic with diversity implications, such as making English the official language of the United States? Again, try to maintain the discussion at the level of rational thought. If a student utters some generality like "Look at all the Spanish people who don't know English", lift the discussion up above the individual opinion and say something like "Why do some people think that Hispanics aren't learning English? Because they see Hispanics talking in Spanish with each other? Does that mean they don't know English?"

5. What (Not) To Wear (JJM)

How you dress can have a major impact on your relationship with your students. Here is John McCarthy's tale (written in 2011) of why he began wearing suits when he teaches.

Until about four years ago, I [JJM] wore the same kind of clothes teaching as I wore in college: sneakers, t-shirts and jeans, always clean but often faded and frayed (by the world, not by a designer). Then, at the instigation and with the assistance of Michael Becker, Kathryn Flack, and Matt Wolf, I started wearing real shoes, pressed pants, and shirts with collars. Before long, I bought some neckties and even started wearing suits on the days when I taught Ling 101.

This made a huge positive difference in my relationship with the students. They liked me better. They complimented me on what I was wearing, to my face, in the teaching evaluations, and on RateMyProfessors. My teaching evaluations got better, and I started getting nominated (by students) for the Distinguished Teaching Award. [This is maybe even more true for women –ps]

Why? I've discussed this with Alex Deschamps, a Women's Studies professor who also dresses quite well (and is occasionally challenged to explain why a Women's Studies professor has any business dressing well). We decided that students perceive our dressing well as a sign of respect for them. Our clothes convey the idea that we take our responsibilities seriously and that we see teaching as something special and important. Students don't want us to dress like them; they want us to dress better. [Also, you might already be aware that dressing like a slob is a bit of an aging hippie thing, and younger people tend to dress better than baby boomer profs -ps]

For TAs, there's another consideration as well: dressing better enhances your authority in the classroom. You are not one of their peers, so you should try not to look like one. You can't do anything about how old you look, and you probably don't want to change your hair, so clothing is the best device available for accentuating your difference.

Remarkably, there is actual research showing the positive effect that well-dressed TAs have on student performance; see Roach, K. David (1997) Effects of graduate teaching

assistant attire on student learning, misbehaviors, and ratings of instruction. Communication Quarterly 45(3), 125-141. (You can access this online through the library or at <http://zoology.wisc.edu/grad/attire.pdf>)

What should you do? On days when you are teaching, you should try to dress a bit better than the average student of your gender in the classroom. Very likely, the average student is wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. So you should wear: a shirt with buttons and/or a collar; khakis, chinos, or other slacks; and proper shoes. Alternatively, a tailored jacket will spruce up any outfit, even a t-shirt and jeans. A necktie, skirt, or nice blouse will do the same.

It would be nice if you also dressed like this on other occasions when you are like to encounter students (lectures, office hours), but that's less important than dressing well on the days when you have to stand in front of the class.

It's important (though difficult) to not be distracted by annoying things that students do in their writing that don't really matter – if they put alliterative titles on all their papers or write bogus introductory and concluding sentences you might be annoyed, but correcting these behaviors is hardly as important as instructing them on critical analysis and clear argumentation. (Go back and read some of your own undergrad essays – you've probably changed since then, and they will too.)

Appendix I: Tips for 101 TAs on teaching writing and grading essays

I.1 Teaching writing

I.1.1 Internet resources

Writing Center at UNC Chapel Hill

Extensive handouts on many topics. The one entitled “College Writing” is a good starting point. When students are having a problem in a particular area, give them the URL of the appropriate handout.

<http://www.unc.edu/epts./wcweb/handouts/index.html>

UMass Amherst Writing Program

The Junior Year Writing Program Sourcebook contains some useful material about teaching writing beginning at page 119. Peter Elbow's essay on page 135 explains about low-stakes writing exercises, which you will be using in your sections. (This so-called Sourcebook is addressed to faculty who will be teaching Junior Year Writing in their respective departments, so it isn't something you could usefully give to students.)

http://www.umass.edu/writingprogram/jy/jy_sourcebook3x.pdf

1.1.2 Tips for teaching writing (KP)

What to expect from your students' writing. It will be worse than you think. Although there will be a few students who write consistently high quality papers, there will be a lot more who consistently write papers with serious flaws. It will be tempting to try to fix everything about their writing, but it simply can't be done all at once, and not all flaws are equally important to us. In general, you should try to not spend too much time being exasperated about the quality of their writing coming in to your class. You're their teacher, and at least some aspects of good writing (and critical thinking) can be taught; you may have to start closer to the beginning that you'd imagine for a college course, but the resources in this handbook are meant to make teaching writing a little bit easier for you.

The arc of the essay assignments. We've designed the essay assignments with the intention of building up from relatively straightforward assignments in the beginning to more complicated ones requiring actual critical thinking later on. While you don't have to explicitly discuss this with the students, you should be aware of the progression so that you can focus your efforts on helping them develop writing and critical thinking skills incrementally as the semester progresses.

The first essay. The first assignment is geared toward working out some of the kinks in students' writing by giving them a relatively straightforward topic with a clear "answer." Students will have the option of re-writing this essay for a better grade, so this is also a chance to communicate directly with students about improvements they can make to increase their score. Your comments to them on the first iteration of this essay should be as explicit as possible (not the same thing as voluminous), and if you detect major problems from a student consider directing him or her to your office hours to correct the issue for the second iteration and subsequent assignments. Before the first essay is due you should make sure students understand that this is the only essay for which they'll have the opportunity for a rewrite (at least officially), and that we are letting them do this for their benefit in getting used to this kind of writing. Another upshot though is that you can grade honestly on the first go without feeling guilty (even when this means more harshly).

Helping them get better, general strategies.

- Many students just do not have experience writing the kind of essay that we're aiming for in this course – a brief, convincing demonstration of critical thinking and argumentation. They're much more likely to have done "personal response" type writing, which is probably the reason for many of the problems with their essays. It's okay to emphasize to your students that this is a different kind of writing. This lets you be explicit about its components and execution, and you can correct them by identifying aspects of their writing as inappropriate for this style rather than unequivocally wrong. (The first assignment includes some comments to the students about this very issue, and you should also emphasize it to them in class.)

- Before the first essay is due you should go over in class what you expect essays to look like (i.e., how should they be structured) – this is very important. Although you might feel silly being so explicit about something you think they should already know, you literally need to explain to them that you expect essays with an introduction, several body paragraphs, and a conclusion. You should also go over what you expect in each of these sections. Go over the grading rubric with them and discuss what is meant by each category. (Since the rubrics change over the course of the semester you should revisit them for each assignment to explain any new things.) Writing and the evaluation of writing can seem a bit mystical for students (common complaint is that the grading is arbitrary), and one of our goals is to take as much of the mysticism out of it as possible.
- You should supplement discussions of writing with some exercises in class. Students need to *see* what you deem to be good and bad writing and they need to be able to identify for themselves what sets the two apart. Students can practice writing in class for a participation grade (“low-stakes” writing); some ideas and resources are compiled in section 4.
- After an essay has been graded encourage students to apply comments from previous assignments toward doing well on subsequent ones. The impression should be that we’re building toward something – a competence in this style of writing. It will be easy for the students to view the essays as unrelated to one another, so you will probably have to be explicit about the fact that they can apply comments on their previous assignment(s) toward doing better on the next one.
- Relatedly, they should be paying attention to the grading rubric as well as your comments. Make a point of explaining and emphasizing the grading rubric in class before the assignment is due. After it has been graded, if they got a less than perfect score on a particular category encourage them to figure out how to improve for the next assignment and if they aren’t sure, they should come to your office hours where you’ll help them (the rubrics change a bit but they have access to all of them ahead of time). I was surprised to learn after guiding a few students in office hours that they weren’t really using the rubric as a formula for doing well on the assignment, even though that’s basically what it is. Going over the rubric for an assignment with the class before it’s due should help to orient them toward satisfying its requirements.

1.1.3 Low-stakes writing exercises (WK)

These suggestions are based on the specific course content, but you could always change the content to fit a different week of the course.

Exercise 1: Outlines

Discussion: how is a good essay organized?

- What are the crucial parts?
- What goes into the introduction?
- What goes into the body?
- What goes into the conclusion?

Topic: Start with a sample topic, and, as a class, review the basic arguments in favor of the thesis statement. Some ideas for topics:

- Do children learn language by imitation?
- Is the waggle dance an instinct?

The Task: In small groups, organize the points discussed as a class into an outline for an essay on the topic.

Review: As a class, go over the outlines the groups came up with (one way to do this is to have each group write their outline on the board). Discuss how to turn this outline into an essay.

Exercise 2: Introductions

Discussion: what does a good introduction look like?

- What not to do. Why is the following sample bad?

Since the dawn of time, linguists have wondered: Is there a critical period for learning a second language? Kids like Genie can't learn language because they've reached puberty, but adults often try to learn a second language. Anyone who has tried knows how hard it is, but no one can agree on whether or not there's really a critical period. There have been scientific studies looking at adults and children trying to learn a second language, to see whether or not it's harder after puberty.

- Why is the following sample good?

Some instinctual behaviors must be acquired during a *critical period*, or they will never be acquired at all. We know from cases like Genie that human language is one of these instincts – a child who does not acquire their first language before puberty will never successfully learn it. But is there also a critical period for learning a second language? Evidence from several scientific studies suggests there is, since adults are less successful than children at learning a second language.

- A good introduction:
 - a) explains the issues surrounding the topic
 - b) identifies the central question in the essay, and
 - c) clearly states the position the essay takes on that question.

Topic: Start with a sample topic, and as a class, and review the basic arguments in favor of the thesis statement. Some ideas for topics:

- Is brain size important for linguistic ability?
- Does the descent of the larynx provide an evolutionary advantage?
- Is the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis true?

The Task: Individually, write an introduction to a hypothetical essay on the topic.

Review: In small groups, discuss students' introductions and suggest improvements.

Exercise 3: Paragraphs

Discussion: what makes a good paragraph?

- Why is the following sample bad?

The dialect considered standard can change, because what makes a dialect standard is not whether or not they're correct. Features of certain dialects that some Americans think of as incorrect or illogical are also found in other languages, like double negatives in French. For example, in America the standard dialect before World War II was an r-dropping dialect, and that changed after the war. This proves that all dialects are equal. The prestigious dialect spoken by the Queen in England is still an r-dropping dialect.

- Why is the following sample good?

Before World War II, the dialect of prestige in America was an r-dropping dialect much like the one spoken by the upper class in Boston. After World War II, the standard dialect changed to the non-r-dropping dialect spoken in places like Ohio. If dialects earned their place as the standard dialect by being more correct or logical, we would not expect the standard to change because correctness does not change based on political pressures. The change in the level of prestige in these two dialects, then, provides evidence that dialects are equal.

- A good paragraph:
 - a) limits itself a single, coherent point,
 - b) begins by stating the evidence under consideration,
 - c) explains that evidence, and
 - d) connects that evidence to the main point of the essay.

3.1 Ordering Sentences

The Task: In small groups, put the following sentences in order so they make a coherent paragraph (it's ok to add connecting words to make it flow more smoothly). There are probably several ways to do this. There will be one sentence that does not fit.

- A) Expressive ability is an important feature of human language, so this provides further evidence that ASL and oral languages are equal.
- B) There are signs in ASL for "government", "paradox", and "verb".
- C) ASL builds words based on hand shape and orientation.
- D) It has been claimed that signed languages are just pantomimes, and not real languages.
- E) ASL can express abstract concepts and ideas.
- F) ASL has an unlimited capacity for expressing ideas, just like oral languages.
- G) If ASL were simply pantomime, we would expect to find only words like "book", "eat", or "cat", which can be easily mimicked.

Review: As a class, discuss the results of the group work in light of what makes a paragraph good. Suggestion: have transparencies of the sentences cut up (and a marker for connecting words) for easy display.

3.2 Writing

Topic: Start with a sample topic, and as a class, and review the basic arguments involved. Some ideas for topics:

- Are Native American languages “primitive”?
- Are some languages/dialects more “logical” than others?
- Are signed languages like ASL real languages?
- Is language change a sign of social degeneration?

The Task: Individually, write a paragraph presenting a single piece of evidence and arguing in favor of a conclusion on the topic.

Review: In small groups, discuss students’ introductions and suggest improvements.

Exercise 4: Reasoning

Discussion: what does good reasoning look like?

- Why is this sample bad?

On Martha’s Vineyard, speakers are much more likely to raise their diphthongs if they plan to stay on the island. The Brahman accent in Boston is a sign of membership in an elite group who dress and act alike. Many people who leave where they grew up try very hard to lose their accent if it is not very prestigious. This proves that the way we speak is affected by our social circumstances and how we see ourselves fitting into society.

- Why is this sample good?

A study of dialects on Martha’s Vineyard found that speakers were more likely to raise their diphthongs if they plan to stay on the island. If speaker’s attitudes towards society and group membership had no impact on their speech, we would expect factors age or geographical location to be responsible for the difference in dialects. Instead, the best predictor of diphthong raising is whether or not someone feels connected to the group of people who exhibit that particular feature. This provides evidence for the claim that our dialect is affected by how we see ourselves in society.

- Good reasoning:
 - a) is based on clearly presented evidence, and
 - b) explicitly connects that evidence to a conclusion (one way to do this is to compare that piece of evidence to what would be expected if the opposite conclusion were true).

Topic: Start with a sample topic. Some suggestions:

- Should teaching deaf students be treated as Special Education or as Bilingual Education?
- Should English be named the official language of the U.S.?
- Should groups be allowed to trademark reclaimed slurs (e.g. Dykes on Bikes)?
- Did President Clinton commit perjury when he claimed he did not have sex with Monica Lewinsky?

The Task: Individually, write a paragraph clearly connecting one piece of evidence on the topic to a conclusion.

Review: In small groups, discuss students' reasoning and make suggestions for improvement.

1.1.4 An example of a good essay similar to assignment on gorillas & ASL (JJM)

Suggested use: put it on an overhead slide in a bigger font. Read and discuss in class. (It's on the CD with the rest of this material.) This essay was written by John. There are good and bad essays by real students in the appendix, but you shouldn't use them in class because we didn't get the students' permission to do that.

Has a gorilla learned American Sign Language (ASL)? This question is important because, if the answer is positive, we will have proof that language is not unique to humans. If the answer is negative, then proponents of animal language learning will have to find their proof elsewhere. In this essay, I raise doubts about the evidence that the gorilla Koko has learned ASL, and I therefore conclude that Koko offers no support to those who would deny that language is a uniquely human trait.

What does it mean to *know* ASL or any other human language? All human languages have words and rules. Words are meaningful elements, and rules are principles for combining words to say new things. This is the criterion I will use to evaluate claims about Koko.

Koko has been taught ASL since 1972, when she was one year old. Koko now knows over 1000 words of ASL (Gorilla Foundation). Koko's vocabulary size is impressive, even if it is less than that of a two-year-old human. But does Koko also know the rules of ASL, and is she able to use these rules to create new phrases and sentences? There are good reasons to doubt this.

First, an ASL expert who worked with Koko for eight months concluded that she was not using the rules of ASL to form sentences (Lecture). Unlike a typical two-year-old child, most of Koko's utterances consist of individual words that are unconnected grammatically. Thus, while Koko may have a two-year-old's vocabulary, she does not have a two-year-old's knowledge of the rules of a human language.

Second, supposed evidence for Koko's creative use of ASL is an illusion (Pinker 1995, page 337). In the lecture, we saw a dialogue where Koko responded to the question "Koko, do you like to talk to people?" with the answer "Fine nipple." Koko's response seems like random signing rather than evidence of creative language use, but Koko's trainer, Penny Patterson, insists instead that Koko is using language in a remarkably creative way, by signing the word for "nipple" as a pun, because the spoken English word "nipple" supposedly rhymes with the word "people". It is simply not credible that Koko, who does not speak English at all or ASL very well, is trying to pull off a bilingual pun that even humans cannot figure out without an explanation.

Has Koko learned ASL? Despite 36 years of effort by a highly dedicated trainer/teacher, the answer is no. If Koko is a typical gorilla — and we have no reason to think that she is not — then gorillas are not capable of learning ASL. Furthermore, since ASL has all of the important properties of other human languages, including oral ones

(Perlmutter 1991), I conclude that gorillas are incapable of learning any human language. The gorilla experiments are no threat to the claim that language is unique to humans.

References

Gorilla Foundation. <http://www.koko.org>. Accessed 7/22/08.

Perlmutter, David (1991) The language of the deaf. *New York Review of Books* 36 (2), March 28.

Pinker, Steven (1995). *The Language Instinct*. New York: Harper Collins.

1.1.5 An example of a terrible essay in response to gorilla/ASL assignment (JJM)

Suggested use: put it on an overhead slide in a bigger font. Read and discuss in class. (It's on the CD with the rest of this material.) This essay was written by John. There are good and bad essays by real students in the appendix, but you shouldn't use them in class because we didn't get the students' permission to do that.

If my cat Brendan could talk to me, what would he say? I've always wondered about this and probably you've pondered about it too. People everywhere are rapt by the idea of talking with animals. (There was even a movie about it with Eddie Murphy.)

In class we heard about a chimp named Viki. Some people raised it like it was their own baby and it used to sit with them in the house and they tried to teach it to talk. It learned to say a few words like "cup" and "papa" but it was really hard to understand and then it died before they could teach it any more words. So that experiment was a failure because chimps can't learn how to talk because of the descent of the larynx. There was also a gorilla. A woman named Penny was teaching this gorilla sign language and she talked to it too and this gorilla even appeared on *Monster Garage*. It rhymed "people" with "nipple".

What does it mean to know a human language? Cognitive linguists, like other linguists, study language for its own sake they attempt to account for its systematicity, its structure, the functions it serves and how these functions are realised by the language system. However, an important reason behind why cognitive linguists study language stems from the assumption that language reflects patterns of thought. So, in my opinion, knowing a language must mean knowing about how these functions are realized by the language system.

Nim Chimpsky was a chimpanzee who was the subject of an unmitigated study of animal language acquisition (codenamed 6.001) at Columbia University, led by Herbert S. Terrace. Nim was a male chimpanzee who began the project at the age of one week. Like Viki, he was raised like a child in somebody's house and he went to a classroom to learn ASL. At the end of the project, he was returned to the Oklahoma Institute for Primate Studies.

Rico is a border collie who knew about 500 words. He can bring back any object you ask for. That's because border collies are really smart. Once we had a border collie that knew the names of me and my brothers and all of my cousins. We could say "chase

Billy” and he would chase my cousin Billy. Rico can learn new words without being told what they are. This is just like babies and it’s called fast mapping. And this is why animals can not learn to talk.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that animals cannot learn to speak a human language.

I.2 Grading Essays

I.2.1 Criterion-referenced grading explained (JJM)

You’ll be using a grading rubric (form) to grade the assignments. In our meetings, we’ll discuss the use of the rubrics, we’ll practice with them, and we’ll deal with issues that arise in each assignment.

The rubrics and this course are based on a *criterion-referenced grading system*. Criterion-referenced and norm-referenced are two different approaches to grading. In criterion-referenced grading, each student’s performance is assessed against specified learning goals. If all students reach those goals, all get a high grade. In norm-referenced grading, each student’s performance is assessed against the performance of all the other students. Some predetermined percentage of the students receive a high grade. Norm-referenced grading is often called “grading on the curve”, since it assumes that student performance follows the bell-shaped curve of the normal distribution and it assigns the best grades only to students at the right tail of the distribution.

This course uses criterion-referenced grading because it has explicit, realistic learning goals (in the syllabus and the grading rubrics, which the students see in advance), because criterion-referenced grading does not require tests and assignments that are excessively hard,¹ and because students themselves can more readily understand what is required to succeed in such a system.

In the past, some TAs in this course were bothered by criterion-referenced grading because it seemed unfair to them. They encountered situations where students X and Y both got As, because both have achieved the learning goals, but X’s work was clearly much better than Y’s work. If X and Y both got As, they felt, then our grades have failed to capture obvious differences in student performance.

Although this outcome is considered undesirable in norm-referenced grading systems, it is perfectly normal and fair in criterion-referenced grading. Criterion-referenced grading does not seek to capture all of the observable distinctions in student performance. Instead, it is content to capture the distinctions that are relevant to the previously stated learning goals.

¹ Properly implemented norm-referenced grading requires that tests and assignments be so difficult that even the best students can’t get perfect scores. Otherwise, you get ceiling effects, meaning that you’ve failed to capture some of the distinctions in the right tail of the normal distribution.

There is one respect in which we might need to take a lesson from norm-referenced grading: the goals we set might be too difficult. This can happen when new assignments are used for the first time. (Since all of the assignments have been recently revised, this could easily happen to us this semester.) Reports from the TAs are crucial to discovering situations like this. The situation is to modify the learning goals, typically by altering the grading rubric to better conform with what students have actually succeeded in doing.

I.2.2 Local and global views of an assignment (JJM)

By its nature, the grading rubric enforces a highly local view of the writing task — x points for paragraph structure, y points for use of evidence, etc. Although the grading rubric has many advantages in fairness, consistency, and ease of use, its localistic character means that it sometimes produces counterintuitive results. For instance, a single mistake in an essay might cause the student to lose lots of points in several different categories, so the punishment is disproportionate to the crime.

For this reason, after you've filled in the grading rubric, do a global check of whether the final sum makes sense. For instance, if you think that it looks like a B essay, but it is getting fewer than 24 points out of 30, tweak the numbers a bit to increase the total.

I.2.3 Grading Guidelines for Homework Assignments (JJM)

(This advice dates from Fall 2007, when students still submitted their assignments on paper, so some of it is irrelevant. But it might still be useful as overall guidance.)

Before you begin grading, read over a small sample of assignments to get a sense of what the typical essay is like. Later, when you know more about the students, you can just look at essays by the best, average, and poorest students to see the overall range of quality. This will help you when assigning points on the grading rubric.

When you begin grading in earnest, at first you'll probably want to read each essay twice, once for form and once for content. As you become more experienced in grading each assignment, you may find that a single reading is enough.

It's quickest to avoid writing on the assignments themselves. If you're going to deduct points for grammar etc., circle some mistakes but don't bother correcting them. (If there's a recurrent error, explain the correction in your comments on the rubric.) If you want to comment on a particular passage, put a circled number in the margin so you can refer to it in your comments.

Use the grading rubric for all feedback. Decide on how many points to deduct in each category. Any significant non-obvious deductions should be explained in your comments, ideally with suggestions for future improvement. Be nice and be helpful!

If you use a word processor for the rubric, you can easily copy comments from one student to the next. (The same problems tend to recur.) You can also go back and revise earlier point totals if you find that your grading standard changes as you process more essays. (But see the next paragraph.)

Try not to agonize a lot about how many points to assign. Bear this in mind: each homework is 8% of their final grade and each homework has 20 points, so one homework point is 0.4% of the course grade. *De minimis non curat lex*.

It's important (though difficult) to not be distracted by annoying things that students do in their writing that don't really matter – if they put alliterative titles on all their papers or write bogus introductory and concluding sentences you might be annoyed, but correcting these behaviors is hardly as important as instructing them on critical analysis and clear argumentation. (Go back and read some of your own undergrad essays – you've probably changed since then, and they will too.)

I.2.4 Suggested comments

The grading form (rubric) you will be using for the homework essays includes a box at the bottom for comments. (The box will hold 1000 characters, which is plenty.) Ideally, you will include one comment for each category where you have deducted points, plus an overall evaluation comment. These comments explain the grade to the student and they give the student suggestions and encouragement to do better.

Since the grading form divides the various writing problems into categories, it is possible to use prefabricated comments for many errors that you encounter. This is particularly true of comments on writing mechanics. (We'll develop appropriate prefabricated comments for the substantive parts of each assignment as we go along.) The comments below are suggestions. You may want to change them to fit your own pedagogical style, and you'll probably want to alter them somewhat after each assignment so it won't be apparent to students that you're recycling your comments. Suggested use: The CD includes these comments as a Word file. Keep that file open and cut-and-paste appropriate comments into the box on the grading form. Tweak as necessary. This will speed up your grading and avoid the need to compose similar comments repeatedly. (It's also helpful if you begin the comment with the capital letter of the corresponding row in the grading form.)

Global evaluation

26-30	Excellent work (equivalent to A or A-)
23-25	Good work (in the B- to B+ range). Read the other comments for advice

	about getting your work into the A range.
20-22	Your homework score is in the C range. Read the comments below for advice about pulling up your grade, and see me if you'd like additional help.
Below 20	Homework scores below 20 are in the D to F range. You should read the comments below and see me to discuss how to do better.

A. Grammar, word usage, punctuation, and spelling

A. Use the spelling checker in your word processor.

A. Proofread your work carefully before submitting it.

A. Pay closer attention to word choice. See the advice here:
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/word_choice.html.

A. Avoid run-on sentences or sentence fragments. See the advice here:
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/fragments.html>.

B. Paragraph structure

B. Paragraph #x needs work. A good paragraph has one central idea and doesn't contain sentences that are not relevant to its main point. See the advice here:
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/paragraphs.html>.

B. Paragraph #x needs work. A good paragraph is well-structured and develops an argument in a logical order. See the advice here:
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/paragraphs.html>.

C. No direct quotations or close paraphrases; proper citation

C. Essays for this course should not contain direct quotations (see page 20 of course pack).

C. Paraphrase beginning with "x" is too close to the original wording. Use your own words. For advice about how to avoid this problem in the future, see page 20 of the course pack.

C. Please cite your sources (see pages 20 and 23-24 of the course pack).

D. Overall organization of the essay

D. A good introduction is needed. See page 23 in the course pack.

D. A good conclusion is needed. See page 23 in the course pack.

D. Evidence and arguments are not presented in an orderly, logical way. For advice, see <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/organization.html>.