

1 Who Are You?



WHAT'S UP?

By the time you pick up your first college textbook or write your first college essay, you will have likely traveled hundreds of miles by car or cramped into a **ridiculously** small seat in the economy section of an international flight. You are probably excited to finally arrive at your destination. You look around. There are features of your new home that may seem very familiar and features that may seem very strange. As you adapt to the time change and maybe a change in climate, you wonder to yourself what the experience in your new home will be like. You've studied English at school in your home country, but the English you hear around town and campus comes at you quickly and furiously. Mixed with the excitement of a new adventure is a trace of anxiety.

The College Experience for International Learners is your roadmap for this new exciting journey into university life in the United States. It serves as a companion on your expedition. The readings and activities provide you an opportunity to practice the kinds of English skills you will both experience and need on campus, from the most informal conversation to the most formal types of writing and presentation skills. Included in this guide are helpful strategies to enhance your proficiency as a U.S. college student while enhancing your understanding of some of the most interesting facets of American culture. Primarily through the use of a learn-by-doing methodology, you will engage in discovery-based learning and research.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Most every journey has both a starting point and an ending point. The starting point is right now. You are like the Olympic athlete at the starting line. You've prepared for this moment, and now you are ready for the starting gun.

But where do we want our journey to end? More to the point, what kinds of skills do we want you to gain as a result of having trekked through the learning experience we provide in this text? I have divided our goals into three very important areas:

- Critical thinking skills
- Communication skills
- Community skills

Critical Thinking Skills

On your educational journey in a U.S. university or college, you will learn how to:

- Locate, evaluate, and **synthesize** information on the culture of the United States, as well as other information needed in your coursework, and make appropriate decisions based on the information that you have gathered and interpreted
- Describe, reflect, and assess how your own cultural experiences shape your understanding of your new environment; discover your personal identity in relation to your own values and the values of the United States and among learners within the host university
- Apply theories from a variety of disciplines and synthesize those theories to create new knowledge



Communicating effectively with classmates and faculty will greatly improve your feeling of belonging.

Communicating Effectively

Your experience in an English-speaking environment will enable you to:

- Engage in increasingly fluent communication in English that is both relevant and spontaneous
- Understand and speak fluently and effectively by using both verbal and nonverbal communication skills
- Read actively, analytically, and critically at the college level
- Write effectively to develop ideas and to express positions in complex contexts
- Understand the structural differences between common-usage grammar and literacy grammar (grammar for academic purposes)
- Become increasingly proficient in the use of different registers of spoken English, from slang to formal usage

Responsibilities of Membership in a Community of Learners

Through your experience in a community of learners, you will:

- Identify potential consequences that your personal choices may have as you interact with the host environment and build relationships with those you trust
- Apply ethical decision making skills to a variety of ethical issues experienced by individuals, groups, and communities within the U.S. culture
- Compare and contrast the personal experiences of peers in the host culture, as well as international peers, with your own personal experiences both within and beyond the host culture
- Employ concepts of community membership within and beyond the campus community

FIRST THINGS FIRST!

Before you arrived in the United States, you may have taken the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL is used by almost every U.S. university to determine whether non-native English speakers have the English proficiency to handle the rigors of the U.S. university classroom.

During student orientation or sometime in the first week of class, you may be asked to write an essay or have a one-on-one conversation with the instructor. You may also be asked to take one of the many English proficiency/placement tests to determine your level of English or to place you in an appropriate class with other learners at your level.

Proficiency testing at the very beginning of an academic term is a normal process. It is designed to help you and your instructor better understand your strengths and challenges in English. In addition to an examination at the beginning of the term, the instructor will likely schedule additional tests during the term in order to evaluate your progress. You should expect regular exams in all of your courses. However, tests need not be **intimidating**. Understanding the strategies for tackling them will give you a **leg up** on success.

ACTIVITY 1 My Heritage

Here is a short writing exercise that will focus your attention on names, ethnicity, and heritage. It will also give you a chance to review sources for gathering information.

Write a short essay and answer the following questions. Do not worry about grammatical mistakes at this point.

What is your name?

Where is your family from?

Who named you and why?

What is your ethnicity?

What does your name mean?

Are you named after anyone?

Create a family tree. Try to trace your ancestors as far back as you can. Find out where your ancestors came from, when and where they were married, and when and where they died. Include any other interesting details, good or bad, about their lives.

Exchange your paper with a classmate. Read your peer's paper, asking questions for clarification. After everyone has finished working in pairs, you will introduce your partner to the class.

STEREOTYPES

Let's suppose there was a place somewhere far away, and in this place, there were many people with green eyes. The green-eyed people thought of themselves very highly. In their opinion, they were more intelligent and more attractive than those people with either blue eyes or brown eyes. They believed themselves to be so special that green-eyed professionals began to only hire other green-eyed people for the best and highest paying jobs. Green-eyed teenagers were admitted into the best colleges and received the best scholarships. But what made the land a very miserable place to live were the attitudes of the green-eyed people toward people with different colored eyes.



All cultures have stereotypes, but part of the purpose of education is to help you appreciate diversity.

Blue-eyed people were seen as having intelligence (book learning), but were *spacey* and lacked common sense. Because of this, they could only rise to lower or, at best, middle management positions. Brown-eyed people were feared by both green-eyes and blue-eyes. They were considered violent, uneducated, and lazy, not able to hold down a regular job. Brown-eyes were hired only for **menial** jobs like street sweeping and garbage collection. What is more, in that land, to call someone a “brownie” is considered the worst slur imaginable. In that place, a “greenie” is someone who is arrogant, someone who believes he or she is better than everyone else. In reality, there was no difference in intellect, physical ability, or in levels of violence between green-eyed people and their blue- and brown-eyed counterparts.

How did these attitudes evolve? Here is what likely happened. Someone with green eyes witnessed a violent act committed by someone who just happened to have brown eyes. That witness told someone else, who told someone else. The third person who was told the story said that she had witnessed someone with brown eyes being abusive or threatening. Other people with green eyes recalled that they remembered a cruel brown-eyed person.

They may have even remembered the person as being a menial laborer. And that’s how it started—attitudes created by just a few interactions with brown-eyed people led to the belief that all brown-eyed people are violent and uneducated; that is, some

green-eyed people began to **attribute** certain characteristics to brown-eyed people. That is known as a *stereotype*.

Here's a handy definition of stereotypes as given to us by two experts in intercultural communication, Gudykunst and Kim (2002): "Stereotypes are representations of another group that influence our feelings toward members of that group." Keep in mind that not all stereotypes are negative, as we will see later.

Practically every group carries stereotypes of other groups with them. I sometimes hear people say that they hate the New York Yankees (an American baseball team). Sometimes I ask them why they hate the Yankees even though they do not personally know a single individual who plays on the team. The answers range from, "They are always spending too much money getting the best players," to "Because I'm a Red Sox fan, and all Red Sox fans hate the Yankees," to "I don't know. I just do, and always have, and always will." Other people may say "I adore the Yankees." Their responses may be "Because my father was a fan," or "Because they're winners," or "Because of Derek Jeter."

These responses say a lot about stereotypes. First, stereotypes are often irrational—that is, they have no basis in fact. While the Yankees are, indeed, one of the wealthiest teams in Major League Baseball, they have not prevented other teams from "purchasing" quality players. Moreover, following this logic, if the Yankees spend the most on quality players, the team should win the World Series every year. In fact, as good as the New York Yankees are, they have only won the World Series once in the last 10 years (2009).

Second, stereotypes are self-perpetuating; that is, they take on a life of their own—when you say you hate the New York Yankees because they are a bunch of rich, **spoiled** players, there will be others who will agree with you. In fact, there are likely groups of like-minded people whose group identity is formed through their mutual hatred or adoration of the New York Yankees.

Finally, and most importantly, stereotypes are impersonal. That is, they are removed from actual people who are members of these **stigmatized** groups. For example, one of the stereotypes of Brazilians most commonly cited by students in my classes is that "they all are good dancers." While there are many Brazilians who can dance the samba with beauty and grace, not everyone in the culture is so gifted. Many of my Brazilian students admit they are terrible on the dance floor.

Did You Know?

EduPASS.org (2012) provides information about common stereotypes of Americans. Some of the most common stereotypes include:

- Lacking in understanding of other cultures
- Offensive
- Giving, especially to those in need in other countries and their own
- Arrogant
- Ignorant of their own politics as well as world politics
- Wealthy
- Disrespectful of those in authority
- Hypocritical

These examples may seem somewhat trivial. However, there are examples of stereotypes, especially with regard to ethnic and racial groups, that may have more serious consequences, especially if these stereotypes lead to negative attitudes or acts of

prejudice and/or violence. Regional stereotypes are common within the United States. In the South, people see those from the Northeast, especially from larger cities like New York and Boston, as rude.

This attribute was probably given to them because the pace of life in large cities tends to be fast and people communicate more directly. Californians are often thought to be radicals or extreme environmentalists (what some may call “tree-huggers”) and everyone is a movie or TV personality who lives in either Los Angeles or San Francisco. Midwesterners live on farms and are either German or Swedish. No matter where in the United States you might find yourself, natives of that region will usually have something to say about Americans from other places.

CULTURE SHOCK!

You arrive in the United States, excited about being in a new place. You had a pretty good idea what to expect from your host culture; you have studied English intensively in preparation for your trip; you enjoy watching American films and TV and listening to American music. You may even play basketball, or at least be a fan of the NBA. You are familiar with many famous cities in the United States: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago. You know the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the Rockies. And now you are here, and the first three or four weeks are filled with newness, getting to know local students at your university, attending classes, going to parties. But after the first month, you begin to feel yourself growing more anxious about your class assignments.



You will most likely experience some sort of culture shock, but remember that you can handle it.

You cannot understand your professors very well, or you find you have not done well on your first test or essay. The food in the university dining hall begins to be boring and tasteless. You miss your friends and family back home, and you become sad and exhausted. What you are experiencing is “culture shock,” a common condition among those who live in a new culture for an extended period of time.

According to Kalvero Oberg (1960),

culture shock is precipitated [caused] by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms, are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept.

There are a variety of symptoms of culture shock. According to Oberg (1960), the signs to watch out for are:

- Obsession with cleanliness
- Obsession over consumption of food and drink
- Fear of physical contact
- Feelings of helplessness
- Dependence on people of one's own nationality
- Fits of anger over minor frustrations
- Terrible longing to be back home

Sometimes, you may experience mild culture shock. For example, you may find yourself being frustrated over minor events, or you may complain about the food. Sometimes, though, culture shock can be so severe that you may find yourself unable to function in the host culture, in which case you may need to return home. In my experience, very few of my international students have suffered culture shock severe enough to end their stays early.

According to Levine and Adelman (1993), there are six stages of culture shock. They are briefly described here.

- **Stage 1.** During this stage, you are nervous about leaving for your new environment.
- **Stage 2.** Often called “the honeymoon stage,” this stage occurs within a few weeks up to six months, depending on the length of your stay. During this stage, you will find yourself willing to try new foods, learn new customs, and visit new places. You will be eager to visit places of cultural interest and to meet natives of that culture.
- **Stage 3:** Often called “the hostility stage,” this stage occurs within a month up to one year, depending on the length of your stay. In this stage, you will have difficulty adjusting to some of the behaviors and the customs of the host environment. You may find yourself having housing or roommate troubles or difficulties understanding customs relating to daily activities such as shopping or getting a haircut. Rather than mixing with locals, you band with people from your own country or with other internationals who share the same plight. Often difficulties experienced are seen as being purposeful acts on the part of the host country to inconvenience you.
- **Stage 4.** This stage provides you with some assurance about adjusting to the new environment. You can handle basic interactions and communication.
- **Stage 5.** This stage may be the most stressful in that you may feel more isolated and have more difficulty becoming acclimated to the new culture and environment.

- **Stage 6.** This is known as the acculturation stage. If you remain in a foreign culture long enough, you develop skills at adapting to the host culture's way of life, and you operate in the host culture without anxiety (although there may be moments of social anxiety), even enjoying the food, habits, and customs of the host culture.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

Dialects

One of the challenges you will likely face when you study at a U.S. university is trying to understand the many different forms of English spoken by students and teachers. Some of these forms, called *dialects*, may seem very strange, quite different from the English you studied in your home country or that you may have heard in movies and on TV. But with time, experience, and a keen ear, these dialects may not seem so odd.

Most varieties of American English originate somewhere on the East Coast, and blend the further west you go. Some of the most unique American dialects are found in mountain regions of the Southern Appalachians and along the eastern seaboard, especially dialects spoken on remote islands where access to the mainland is difficult.

I live in a region where the dialect is unique, and sometimes strong enough so that both native and non-native speakers of English have trouble understanding it. The dialect of the southern Appalachian mountains has often been described as a throw-back to an earlier time. Appalachian English takes its roots in the wave of settlers from Pennsylvania, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany who migrated down the spine of the Appalachian Mountains and settled in what is now West Virginia, North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, western Virginia, and northern Georgia. Their speech was different from those of English origin who settled in Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and the other colonies of New England.

One of the main reasons that this dialect is so unique is that the mountain regions in which these settlers put down roots were isolated. It took incredible effort to travel from the town of Charlotte, North Carolina, to one of the mountain villages. This isolation created a fierce spirit of independence within the mountain people. They chose, and still choose, to live their lives through their self-reliance, growing or raising the food they needed to eat, making the clothes they needed to wear, building the structures they needed to house themselves.

On your journey in the United States, at some time or another, you will find yourself involved in a conversation where people seem to be talking very fast. This is very common, but with a bit of experience and practice listening to native speakers carry on conversations, and entering conversations with native speakers, you will be surprised how quickly you will begin to understand the flow of normal conversation, no matter the dialect.

Ethnography

Every semester, I give my international students an ethnography assignment. An *ethnography* is the study of the values, behaviors, and speech of a particular community or culture. Because I teach at a university in the southern Appalachian mountains, students often find the culture and dialect interesting, something far different than the American

English they have experienced. Here is what one student remarked: “Another specific behavior in this unique culture is in the way of speaking English. People like to speak slowly.”

The Dos and Don'ts of Conversation

Americans are generally open and willing to engage strangers in conversation. Americans are curious when it comes to people they meet from other countries, contrary to the stereotypes that they are arrogant and know little about the world. So be prepared to be asked a lot of questions about your home country and its culture, and about your experience as a student in the United States. Since Americans are very mobile, there is a chance that the person with whom you are conversing has traveled to your country, or knows someone who has, and is willing to tell you about his or her adventures.

However open and friendly Americans are, there are topics which are off-limits in conversations. These include the obvious subjects like those related to sexuality or sexual preference. But there are others that are not so obvious. You should not ask someone how much money he or she makes, how old they are, or how much he or she weighs. You should not ask about a person's religion or politics, nor should you ask a woman who is overweight if she is pregnant. Refrain from discussing death or even the size of a person's clothing. Some of these topics may be taboo in your countries as well.

There are other questions that may be acceptable in some situations, but not in others. So you need to know the person before you ask about a person's family, including how many children he or she has. For many Americans, this is not an offensive question in the least. Some will even answer with pictures. But for some, questions about family are personal, and they may be reluctant to answer.

Aside from these topics, you will find many Americans to be open to revealing things about themselves.

Gathering Information: The Art of Research

Whether it is a topic assigned by your professor or a self-chosen topic, the craft of gathering information about that topic is a vitally important skill. How do you go about this? Your first tendency may be to begin by looking at online sources such as Wikipedia. But diving right onto the Internet actually misses an important step, and that is self-reflection.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection can be defined as the process of thinking about the topic, or better put, thinking through the topic. Self-reflection begins by asking yourself a simple question: What do I know about the topic, if anything?

Take a few moments to think through this question and write down your reflections. By reflecting about prior knowledge of a topic, you may begin to get an idea of where to search for information. Then, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can the topic be broken down into subtopics? If so, what are they?
- Has the instructor mentioned anything about the topic or the subtopics in class? If so, what information did the professor give, and did he or she mention any names of people who may be authorities on the topic?
- Does your textbook or your course materials mention the topic? If so, what does the textbook say?

Finding Sources

At the end of each chapter (or at the end of the textbook), there is a bibliography, often divided by chapters. Start there to gather appropriate resources. Then go to a general web source, such as Wikipedia. Read the article, but, at this point, you do not want to use the information as a resource. The information in the wiki is to simply inform you about the topic. After you have read the wiki, scan down to the bottom of the Web page and find the bibliography. Use these sources, as well as those you have gathered from your textbook, to begin your research.

Finally, contact your professor for a supplementary reading list or bibliography on the topic, if one has not already been provided. Remember, at this point, you are not asking for a list of the primary sources for the class. These have already been provided, and there is an expectation that you will consult these regularly.

Source Reliability

There is a great deal of information on the Web. Some of it is reliable—that is, the information is derived from primary sources through the careful examination of data. These sources often have extensive bibliographies, citing sources known to be reliable. However, alongside information that is reliable, there is much on the Web that is hearsay, uninformed opinion, and data for which there is little indication as to how it was gathered and analyzed. A quick rule of thumb is to look for citations/bibliography, and then follow the trail. If the citation looks suspect, do not use it. Here are some other clues for you to consider:

- Look at the website's URL. Who developed the site? Was it a well-known organization or university?
- Does that organization or university maintain control of what is uploaded to the site?
- Is the information on the Web site part of the resource materials of a university course?
- If you determine that the Web site is not connected to an organization or university, is there any indication (such as a bibliography) as to where the author obtained his or her information?

Academic Honesty and Dishonesty

You have gathered a number of reliable sources (books, articles, Web sites, etc.) and you are now ready to investigate the information they contain. The process of reading for research is one of the most important skills you can learn as a researcher! The goal of the process is very simple and straightforward: to prevent plagiarism. Plagiarism is borrowing the ideas and/or words from another person or persons without giving them credit for their ideas and words. Committing plagiarism is a very serious offense in American universities and can carry serious consequences, including a failing grade on the essay, a failing grade for the course, and/or expulsion from the university. Furthermore, if your work is published and it is discovered that you have plagiarized sections of your work, you can incur fines of tens of thousands of dollars and your future as a researcher will be irreparably damaged. Here are some suggestions to improve your skills as a researcher and protect you from plagiarism.

- If you do not already have a note-taking program downloaded on your computer, download one. Microsoft Office 2010 comes with a built-in program called One Note that is a very effective note-taking tool.
- Use an electronic notecard for each source. For each source, write a complete citation, using the citation style you will use in the paper.

- Before reading, scan the text. Look at the headings. If there is a summary at the beginning, read it. Look at the pictures, charts, and tables. Ask yourself, what is the main idea of what I am about to read?
- Read the text, and if necessary, reread it.
- When you have finished reading, write a short summary of what you read on your notecard. The summary should be no more than 50 words, and *must* be in your own words, written without referring to the text.
- Then, using the headings as note sections, summarize each section of the text, again using your own words.
- Collect all of your electronic notecards and arrange them in order of importance to the topic, with the most important ones first. If you are comparing and contrasting topics, organize your summaries by subtopics, with supporting arguments first, then arguments to the contrary next. Arrange these point by point, from the most important to the least important.

The Art of Summarizing

Some years ago, when I was in college, I took an English literature class with a very educated scholar. When test time came around, he would give each member of the class four or five 3" x 5" notecards, and then pass out a paper containing four or five essay questions. His rule was simple. You had to answer each essay in no more than 50 words, and he counted. Like his instructions, his philosophy was both simple and elegant: being able to succinctly state one's argument is the key to understanding.

Summarizing is one of the most important skills in effective presenting and writing. Although summarizing is simply putting someone else's ideas into your own words in just a few words, I call it an art because it takes time and practice to perfect it.

- Read a passage carefully.
- Jot down the main idea of what you read in no more than 20 words. If there is anything you did not understand, or an important point you missed, reread the passage.
- Open a note-taking program. At the top of the page, cite the source using an appropriate style. Be sure to use the same style for each summary.
- Mention the source and author at the beginning of the summary.
- State the author's main idea in no more than 10 or 20 words.
- State the author's supporting evidence.
- Use your own wording without distorting the author's main idea or evidence.
- Occasionally a statement in the original text may be striking or interesting. You may use it if you properly quote it.
- Don't include your own analysis.
- Remind the reader occasionally that you are summarizing another person's ideas by mentioning the source of the idea.