

Ling 101, *People and their Language*, Fall 2006
Discussion Sections 1 (F 10.10-11.00, Machmer W-22) and 5 (F 1.25-2.15, Herter 209)
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1 Purpose of discussion section

The discussion component of this course is intended primarily as a time to:

- Prepare you for the homework assignments
- Review and discuss the homeworks after you have turned them in
- Further discuss the readings and lectures and address any questions or issues stemming from the material therein.

Discussion sections are designed in order to assist you in getting as much out of this course as possible, so I encourage you to take advantage of them! You are expected to:

1. Come to discussion *prepared*. Attend lectures regularly, and remain up to date on reading assignments. Read carefully and thoughtfully, keeping in mind strategies for improving effective reading; (we'll discuss this a bit more below.) Try to spend some time thinking about questions or issues you would like to raise regarding the material to be discussed that week.
 - Note that you are welcome—and encouraged!—to email questions to me *before* the discussion, so we can discuss them during class.
2. Participate! We all have access to, and are intimately acquainted with, the data of interest in linguistics; we'll all learn more, and enjoy ourselves more, if we're willing to submit our own preconceptions and thoughts about language and language usage to collaborative consideration and analytical scrutiny.

Finally, please feel free to utilize my office hours!

2 A few notes on course policy

Syllabus. Be sure to have a copy of the course *syllabus*. It was distributed at the lecture in Wednesday. It is also reprinted at the beginning of the coursepack (required for this course), which can be downloaded on the course website at: <http://courses.umass.edu/ling101s/>. You should *read* through the entire syllabus *now*, if you have not done so already. A few points which are particularly important to be aware of:

- *Attendance Policy* (see Syllabus p.8) Missing up to FOUR lectures and up to TWO discussions will not be penalized and will *not require* excuses of any manner. You should budget ahead of time for days you already know you have to miss. If you must miss more than four lectures or more than two sections, and have a good reason (you become seriously ill, etc.), you need to set up a meeting to talk to John at the *end* of the semester.
- *Homework Submission*
 1. Turn your homework in and turn it in on time. The five homework assignments comprise a total of 30% of your final grade.
 2. Late homework (see Syllabus p.9) will be accepted for up to one week following the due date (the Friday after the Friday on which it was due), but it is in your best interests to turn it in on time if at all possible, since late homeworks will be penalized by point deductions (2 points deducted if submitted by Monday, 3 points if by Wednesday, and 5 points if by Friday)
 3. Homeworks should be submitted to me, in printed-out paper format, at the discussion section. Late homeworks should be put in my mailbox in the Linguistics Department Main office (South College 226; mailboxes are in alphabetical order immediately on the left when you open the door. If you can't find them, ask a secretary.)
 - *Email submissions* of homework will be an acceptable way of submitting homework on time *only* if extenuating circumstances prevent your attending the discussion.

Course Pack.

- Lecture notes. Be sure to bring your course pack to every lecture and fill in the lecture notes, which are intended to aid in effective note taking by pointing you to the major ideas and important points from the lectures, and will be a primary source of exam questions.
- Study notes. Also included in the course pack (beginning p.95) are “Study Notes,” which are intended as a way of helping you pick out, make sense of, and remember the most important points from the readings. A helpful way of engaging with the reading, they are also useful in exam preparation!

3 First reading assignment

You can try out using the study notes on p.95 for your **first reading assignment**:

Pinker, Chapter 1, pp.1-11, which you should read for this **Monday, 11 September**.

In this chapter, Pinker explores the biological character of our linguistic facility.

Addressing in particular the question of whether it is *learned* or *instinctual* behavior, he begins to present evidence in favor of the latter.

As you read, consider other methods for reading in such a way that you reinforce your understanding and remembering of the material.

If you have any questions about the reading, email me or make a note, and ask next week in section!

4 The first homework assignment

This homework will ask you to:

1. demonstrate your understanding of the distinction between instinctive (e.g. language) versus learned (e.g. writing) behaviors
2. demonstrate your ability to affectively *apply criteria* and demonstrate this ability in the form of a clearly structured, well-written essay.

(John will discuss (1) at length in the lecture next week. For now, we'll focus on the second, broader goal of this homework.)

Understanding criteria: *What is a criterion?*

Some standard definitions:

- A rule or principle for evaluating or testing something.
- A condition or a rule which enable a choice, therefore upon which a decision or judgment can be based.¹

In linguistics, as in other sciences, we need to establish ways of helping us identify and distinguish among *classes* of phenomenon; *criteria* are one valuable means for doing this.

For instance, Pluto was recently demoted from planetary status. This decision was based on the International Astronomical Union's definition of planet, which states that a planet must meet the following three conditions, or criteria:

1. The object orbits around the sun.
2. It is large enough for its gravity to pull it into a round shape.
3. It has cleared the neighborhood around its orbit.

Pluto was excluded based on its failure to meet the third criteria, since it is located amongst other icy bodies in the Kuiper belt (a ring of debris).

(The fact that this definition is widely protested, some scientists having signed a formal petition to protest the decision, is indicative of the often nonrigid nature of scientific criteria, a characteristic which you might encounter in thinking about the homework.)

¹According to Wikipedia, the source of this definition, that there also exists an Indie rock band called Criteria.

An example to consider: How do we determine whether milk is spoiled? I am in charge of making sure the refrigerator in the linguistics department in South College is clean and tidy, and that no one leaves old or unlabeled food inside. I rarely use the refrigerator, so I didn't know, the first time I cleaned it out, the last time it had been cleaned, nor how long the items inside had been there. What are some criteria I might have used to determine whether the milk was spoiled or not?

Essay structure and organization: A brief review

Remember: You will be graded on the *form* as well as the substance of your essays!

Structure. Essays have a **beginning** (introduction), **middle** (body; the main content of the essay), and **end**(conclusion). The content of the essay should be divided into paragraphs. The introduction and conclusion will generally comprise a paragraph each, with the number of paragraphs between varying according to how many points you make and how you choose to organize them.

- **Beginning:** Clearly and concisely raise the question, issue, or problem to be discussed in the essay. Briefly overview what the discussion or methodology used to address it in the body of the essay will be. Also briefly preview what the conclusion will be.
- **Middle:** This is where you address the way in which you will address the question (perhaps begin by stating this.) Then proceed to explain the distinct points or arguments, each of which will probably comprise a paragraph of its own.
- **End:** Summarize the points from the main section and state the conclusion you have reached on the basis of these arguments.

Pay attention to style. Paragraphs consist of complete sentences. Avoid fragments (incomplete sentences) as well as run-on sentences (multiple clauses illicitly joined). Also avoid overly long sentences. If you are trying to fit too many ideas into a single sentence, it probably would be better to divide it into multiple, shorter sentences. Aim to achieve a clear flow of ideas, with smooth, logical transitions between sentences and paragraphs. Use clear, concise prose.

Edit. Try to allow time for adequate revision. The homework essays require some thought; don't plan to sit down the night before to write a single (final) draft. Write an initial draft and then read it to check clarity; perhaps consider giving the essay to a classmate to read and give feedback.

Proofread. Finally, be sure to proofread, so as to avoid small mistakes such as misspellings, incorrect punctuation, and so forth.

5 In class exercise: practice essay

Using either one of the additional suggestions I've listed below or a topic of your own choosing, formulate a question whose answer could be determined by using relevant criteria.(e.g.

Is the milk spoiled?) Think of a list of criteria relevant to making the appropriate classification. (e.g. Does it smell bad? Has the date on the carton passed?) Then, make an outline of a sample essay, making sure to include:

- the question you are addressing
- the list of criteria relevant to reaching a decision
- an explanation of how each of the criteria will help you in your assessment
- a conclusion

Suggestions:

Selecting classes for your schedule each semester

Choosing a roommate

Determining whether two people who look alike are related

Determining whether two people with the same last name are related

College admissions process