



## Academic Life: Student and Instructor Roles

In his article, “Getting the Most out of the U.S. Higher Education Experience: An Inside Perspective,” Edward Bodine (2005) states that “for international students, who may be used to a different institutional culture and social organization at their home universities, American campus life may seem to them strange, perplexing, and no doubt a little overwhelming, especially at the start of the school year.” For any new student, adjustment to life on campus can be both a frustrating and rewarding experience.

Unit 2 focuses on the daily lives of students and their instructors. It primarily concerns student-instructor behavior in the classroom and expectations instructors have of their students. It also deals with attitudes students have toward their instructors and class work.

By the end of the unit, you should be able to

- share cultural differences you have experienced in your classroom
- understand some common idiomatic expressions used by instructors and students
- design and conduct an interview to gather information to present to your class or group
- make a short presentation that summarizes information you have collected.

## The Student Experience

The student experience in a North American academic environment can be as varied as individual students. However, students everywhere deal with quite similar concerns when adjusting to a new academic environment. To get accustomed to a new environment, students often turn to other students and learn from their experiences. Task 1 presents an interview of a student giving advice to other students who will be studying in the United States.

### **Task 1**

In this interview, Apratim Sahay, an undergraduate student from India,<sup>1</sup> discusses his experiences during his first year at the University of Chicago and gives some advice to other Indians planning to study in the United States. As you read the interview, think about your own experiences in a different academic environment and how you would describe them. With your partner or group, discuss the questions that follow.

#### *What are classes really like?*

In one word: Fun. In two: Serious fun. Professors and students are genuinely interested in what they are doing. Most humanities and core classes are small (about 20) and discussion-oriented, which is a big change from the note-taking back in India. The classes here, especially in math and science, are going to take a lot out of you. New concepts will hit you at an extremely fast pace. All the groundwork they have been laying about this being a rigorous school, life of the mind blah-blah is for real. . . .

#### *What are the professors really like?*

All of them are incredibly smart. They are going to be some of the most frighteningly smart people you've ever met, the kinds with 3 Ph.D.s even in subjects they aren't teaching. They are going to continuously challenge you, at the same time they are extremely approachable (although intimidating) during office hours. Professors here are quite frankly a breed of their own, they are unique, and yes, crazy about their work . . . My physics prof is this goofy British guy who keeps doing weird stuff in class. He sat on a wheelchair today along with this fire extinguisher thing in this hand, then turned it on and went whizzing in the opposite direction! And we went on to derive the equations for rocket propulsion after that!

<sup>1</sup> University of Chicago Prospective Students Advisory Committee (PSAC)'s International Student Profiles, <http://psac.uchicago.edu/profiles/tim.html>.

*What do you do for fun?*

I play squash, table tennis (ping pong here), and tennis. The Ratner Athletic Center . . . [has] awesome workout facilities, and a huge Olympic-size swimming pool. For this quarter, I'm not involved with any clubs and other activities because I have enough on my plate right now. But getting involved with the SASA (South Asian Student Association) and the newspapers is on my list for later.

*What challenges have you faced here? Were there things that were difficult to adjust to?*

Food. Food. Food. American food tastes like nothing you've tasted before. Think McDonalds and Pizza Hut. Think burgers and fries and pizzas 24/7, each day, every meal. . . . Think salads . . . that yucky green stuff that your mom forced you to eat. . . . You know that 64 kgs that you are allowed to bring, load it with food, masalas, achar, whatever you can find. Learn cooking from your mom. . . . And come prepared to be homesick. I missed home like nothing ever, trust me there will be times when you will be literally dying to speak Hindi. . . .

*How cold is it really?*

It gets cold, really really cold. It's the kind of cold that will make you wish that you had never been born, or if you are a clearer thinker, wish you had never come here. -20C is what it's going to be like. It's going to be so cold that your nose hairs will freeze, the coffee in your hand will freeze, polar bears will die. . . . Actually don't even try to imagine the cold. It's impossible; we in India can't fathom it. . . . But people survive; you will too. . . .

1. Does it appear that Apratim is adjusting well to university life in Chicago? Why or why not?
2. What clues does Apratim give you about what type of school he attends? What kind of student do you think he is?
3. Apratim refers to his professor as *this goofy British guy who keeps doing weird stuff in class*. What's his opinion of this professor? How can you tell? What does *goofy* and *weird stuff* mean?
4. Give a couple of examples of how this student exaggerates to make a point.
5. This student uses a lot of interesting expressions. Explain the expressions in italics.
  - life of the mind *blah-blah* is for real
  - Think burgers and fries and pizzas 24/7
  - Think salads . . . that *yucky green stuff* your mom forced you to eat
  - I'm not involved with any clubs and other activities because *I have enough on my plate* right now.
  - The Ratner Athletic Center here has *awesome workout facilities*.
  - And don't even try to imagine the cold. . . . *We in India can't fathom it*.

### Task 2

Working in pairs or in a group, discuss how your answers to the interview questions would be similar or different from Apratim's. Relate some of your experiences adjusting to your current academic environment.

What are classes like?

What are your instructors like?

What do you do for fun?

What challenges have you faced here?

What was the most significant adjustment you had to make?

What advice would you give to a student from another country who is planning to study in a North American college or university? The following expressions using *would* are useful:

I would tell someone that they<sup>2</sup>. . . .

I would tell them to . . . .

It would be good to . . . .

My advice would be to . . . .

Notice how the word *would* is used in this hypothetical situation to convey advice.<sup>3</sup> The language for giving advice and suggestions is covered in more detail in Unit 4.



### DVD Task

Unit 2: Student Life  
Scenes 1–2

In these scenes, students are talking about some of the ways they have had to adjust to life at a U.S. university. In Scene 1, an international student is talking about some differences between the United States and his home country; in Scene 2, a new American student is talking about his first year living in a dormitory.

In these scenes, what active listening strategies does each of the listeners use to provide feedback to the speaker and keep the conversation going? What differences do you notice?

<sup>2</sup> In conversational English, instead of referring to someone as *he* or *she*, it is common to use the plural *they*.

<sup>3</sup> A subordinate *if* clause can precede the main clause in these hypothetical situations, such as, *If I were going to give some advice to new students, I would tell them that they should keep up with their homework.*

## Interviewing and Communicating What You Learn

Question-asking is a common feature of many interactions both in and out of the academic community. As someone new to an academic culture, being comfortable asking questions to get information can help you adjust more quickly to your surroundings. It can also help you establish and maintain friendships or participate in social interactions. Let's begin with an easy exercise that gives some practice asking questions.

### Task 3

This task has two parts. First, on a piece of paper, write four statements about yourself, one of which must be false. Do not indicate which statement is false. Then exchange papers with a classmate.

Second, read the statements your classmate has written. Take a moment and write at least four questions you will ask your classmate in order to find out more about him/her and to help you determine which statement is false. When you are ready, ask each other your questions. Ask more questions if you need to in order to decide which statement is false. Did you guess correctly?

In addition to asking questions in social interactions or in informal classroom situations such as in Task 3, you may have to ask questions in more formal, structured interviews as a means of gathering information for a course presentation or paper. To increase your confidence in conducting interviews, we will look at the steps of a simple structured interview. After learning about the interview process, you will have several opportunities to conduct your own interviews with other students, instructors, and service personnel in your own academic community.

We have divided the interview process into these five steps.

1. Choosing the focus of your interview and deciding what questions to ask.
2. Finding a suitable interviewee and requesting an interview.
3. Conducting the interview.
4. Choosing and summarizing relevant information you gathered from the interviewee.
5. Presenting the summary of the information you gathered to an audience.

Let's look at the steps in more detail.

### STEP 1: CHOOSING A FOCUS AND DECIDING WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK

Before coming up with questions, you need to decide what kind of information you want, and then determine your focus. If you have a clear focus, you should be able to get specific information in a relatively short amount of time. After you have decided a focus, come up with the specific questions you want to ask. Avoid asking broad questions such as *Tell me about your experiences here so far*. Instead request more specific information, such as *Tell me about your experience on your first day of classes* or *Was your first day of classes what you expected?* Asking very specific questions such as these can also lead to some interesting discussion.

### ***Preceding Interview Questions with a Statement***

Some interviewers make a statement before they ask a question. Look at these examples.

1. Some new students begin to get involved in activities and clubs when they first come to campus. What activities have you taken part in or what groups have you joined since you got here?
2. Some students have said that professors here are quite accessible to students. How would you characterize one or two of your professors?
3. New students sometimes have trouble organizing their time during their first semester. What strategies would you recommend?

### ***Asking Follow-Up Questions***

After you have prepared and organized a list of questions to ask your interviewee, you may worry that the interview will seem somewhat rigid or unnatural. One way to make it more natural is to ask follow-up questions based on the interviewee's answers to your initial questions. Follow-up questions allow you to delve further into the topic with the interviewee. Some follow-up questions can be prepared before the interview; others, however, are best formulated more spontaneously in response to the interviewee's answer to the initial question. These require concentration and quick thinking on the part of the interviewer. As the interview goes on, you may find yourself becoming less tied to your original questions as you modify your initial interview plan.

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#### ***Task 4***

Let's look at the sequence of question-response-follow-up question. In the following situations, what follow-up question would you ask given the interviewee's response? An example is provided for you.

##### Example

Question: Do you think it's easy to make friends on campus?

Response: I've been lucky because I met some nice people during my first semester on campus.

Follow-up question: That's great. Where did you meet them? In class?

1. Question: When you first became a university/college student, what was the hardest thing to get used to?

Response: My roommate stayed up later than me and wanted to keep the light on.

Follow-up question: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Question: Can you give me an idea of what one of your instructors is like?

Response: My art instructor seems rather informal. He wears blue jeans to class. We're supposed to call him by his first name.

Follow-up question: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Question: Do you just study or do you also have a job?

Response: I work and study.

Follow-up question: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Question: What was your first day of classes like?

Response: It was really embarrassing. I missed my first class because I got on the wrong bus.

Follow-up question: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **STEP 2: FINDING AN INTERVIEWEE AND REQUESTING AN INTERVIEW**

Finding an interviewee may be fairly easy if you decide to interview a classmate, roommate, or co-worker. However, if you decide to approach someone that you don't know, say, in one of your classes or in a café, what would you initially say to the person? How would you make a request for an interview?

##### **Task 5**

Look at this introduction. What purpose does each section serve?

	<b>Purpose</b>
Hi. My name is Adam.	
I'm a first-year student at the university	
and I'm doing an interview on campus life for one of my classes.	
Would you have a couple of minutes to answer some questions for me?	

### ***Making a Request***

Notice that the speaker used a simple request: *Would you have a couple of minutes to answer some questions for me?* The language of requests will be discussed in detail in Unit 3. For now, here are several other ways you could make a polite request for an interview.

1. I was wondering if you could answer a couple of questions for me about some experiences and impressions you had as a first-year student.
2. Could I ask you a few questions about your first semester on campus?
3. Would it be okay for me to ask you a few questions about being a student in the music school?

### **STEP 3: CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW**

#### ***Starting, Greetings, Thanks***

If you set up your interview at a separate time from the initial request, it is typical to start the interview with a greeting and to thank the person for agreeing to the interview. Look at these examples.

- Hi, I'm Erin.      Thanks for agreeing to the interview.  
Thanks for letting me interview you.  
Thanks for taking time for this interview today.

#### ***Ending the Interview***

It is important to be considerate of the interviewee's time, especially if you do not know the person you are interviewing. If the interviewee doesn't have much time or time is running out, one strategy is to select your most interesting questions and eliminate the others. You can also let your interviewee know that you are almost done. There are a number of ways to end an interview. What strategies did these speakers use?

1. Well, thanks for taking time to talk to me. It was interesting hearing about some of the experiences you had during your first semester. It sounds like you really like being a student. Good luck with your studies.
2. Well, I think those are all the questions I have. Thanks for the information. I really appreciate it. It was nice talking to you.
3. You said you had to leave for class at 1:00 so I guess we'll stop here. It's been really useful hearing about how you juggle work and studies. Thanks a lot for the interview.

#### **STEPS 4 AND 5: SUMMARIZING AND PRESENTING THE INFORMATION**

After conducting your interview, decide which information you would like to include for an informal presentation for your partner, group, or class. Prepare a summary, and decide on the organizational structure that best suits your information. For example, you may wish to narrate a story the interviewee told you using chronological order. Or you may want to group information by topic, for example information about school, work, or sports. You could also use enumeration to list points made by the person you interviewed (e.g., strategies the interviewee recommends for making friends or studying for exams). Finally, you could use comparison and contrast to discuss, for example, how your experiences differ from those of the interviewee.

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##### **Task 6**

Interview a student from one of your other classes to find out about his or her experiences as a first-semester undergraduate or graduate student. First, prepare a series of questions (including follow-ups) aimed at finding out about the interviewee's experiences and observations as a new student. Follow the steps outlined for conducting an interview. After you collect the information, prepare a presentation for your classmates.

## Students and Instructors in the Classroom

As a new student, you may find it challenging to adapt to the classroom environment. You may be confused about what is considered acceptable student behavior, what expectations instructors have of their students, and how to respond to your instructor's teaching style.

### Task 7

In small groups, use this questionnaire to discuss your classroom experiences so far. How does this differ from your prior academic experience?

Questions for Discussion	Observations: Current Academic Situation	Observations: Prior Academic Experience
1. What do students and instructors wear to class?		
2. What things—besides the typical notebooks, pens, and pencils—do students bring with them to class?		
3. What teaching style do instructors generally use?		
4. Do instructors usually come prepared for class?		
5. Do students generally come prepared for class?		
6. In class, how do students act toward their instructors? Do you think they show respect? Explain.		
7. What kind of homework assignments do the instructors give? How would you describe the workload?		
8. How do students interact with each other inside the class?		

1. What surprised you the most about the students' and instructors' behaviors?
2. What differences in classroom behavior have been the hardest for you to adjust to?

Share some of your group's findings with the class.

### Task 8

Interview any new international student to find out about his or her classroom experience. Use some of the questions for discussion in Task 7. If you like, include a few of your own questions.

Compile the information from your interview. Prepare an oral and/or written summary of your findings to share with a small group or the entire class.

## The Instructor Experience

Just as every student has unique experiences in the academic community, so do instructors. While you usually get to know your instructors in a specific context, that of the classroom, there are other aspects to their academic lives that you may not know much about. Learning more about the daily lives of instructors may help you gain some insights into their professional lives and also help you interact more successfully with them.

### Task 9

With your partner or group discuss this question: What are some job-related responsibilities or activities you think your instructors have outside of class?

Most students meet professors in class or for office hours. Some professors also meet their students more informally for coffee or invite them to their homes. But many students may not know exactly what their professors do all day, especially what kinds of non-teaching responsibilities they have.

### Task 10

This excerpt is from a series of presentations sponsored by the Career Planning and Placement Office at the University of Michigan. The presentation was given by a professor in electrical engineering and computer science. He is talking to a group of students who are considering an academic career. The professor works with ten Master's and PhD students. He is married and has three children. In this talk he describes his typical teaching and non-teaching days. This is his description of the non-teaching day. After reading it, answer the questions that follow. Sentence numbers have been added for ease of discussion.

(1) I decided potentially the best thing to do is to give you a snapshot of my daily life. Um what do I do during the day? . . . (2) I took yesterday as a representative day (Monday, twenty-second of February) this is what my day looked like. (3) Um at nine o'clock every Monday morning I have a research group meeting. (4) Uh, that's actually at central campus interestingly enough, not on North Campus. (5) That lasts till ten-thirty. (6) Right after that I rush to my office, answer e-mail, put out a few fires and and in this case I had a few minutes left and I wrote a bunch of reference letters that were pending, um and attempted to do that. (7) I had about forty-five minutes. (8) Got that done and then I had allocated myself an hour to finish editing this journal article that we've been working on and trying to put some finishing touches on it. (9) And sure enough at noon right before I had to go to my my lunch meeting I realized that I wasn't done and I had more stuff to do. (10) But there's no time left during the day.

(11) Probably the most enjoyable part of it (the day) was I had a lunch meeting, which I usually uh, almost every day of the week I have lunch meetings and often it's with my graduate students uh who are in my research group two or three of them at a time that

are working on a project. (12) Right after that I had a review of a defense talk by one of my graduate students who's going to do her defense in a couple of weeks. (13) After that I have about an hour that I have a T.A. (teaching assistant) meeting, as well as I do uh course preparation for my lecture on Tuesday.

(14) Um right after that there's a software seminar that we run every Monday and usually during this time of year we have faculty candidates come through. (15) I went and attended that. (16) The reason for that is because I had to have dinner with the faculty candidate (so) I had to attend the talk, at least. (17) Um I also serve on the search committee so it was important to do that. (18) Uh, I had fifteen twenty minutes right after that. (19) I answered a few phone calls and answered, uh, my email. (20) At five to six I had another research meeting with a couple of my graduate students, and then around six fifteen, I rushed and had dinner with our department head and uh our faculty candidate who was visiting. (21) My wife had just returned from out of town and I had forgotten to tell her, uh that I was having dinner with this faculty guy and uh I got on the phone and called her up and I said uh I think I mentioned this to you but I may have forgotten, and she said yep you sure did, and that was the end of that.

(22) Usually that's what my day looks like. (23) I have a bunch of Rs and Ws (in my schedule). (24) Late at night I tend to do a lot of reading, a lot of writing, some more reading some more writing. (25) But R also stands for relaxing and W also stands for watching television. (26) So it's a it's a combination of various things.

(Based on MICASE. Career Planning and Placement Workshop File ID: COL999MG053)

1. What's your reaction to this professor's account of his typical day? Does anything surprise you?
2. On his non-teaching day, what types of contact does he have with students? His colleagues?
3. In Sentence 1, what does the professor mean by a *snapshot* of his daily life?
4. In Sentence 6, the professor says, *I rush to my office, answer email, put out a few fires*. What's another way of saying *put out a few fires*?
5. In Sentence 6, the professor refers to a *bunch* of reference letters and in Sentence 9, he talks about having more *stuff* to do. What do *bunch* and *stuff* mean? Is this academic English? Check MICASE to see how common these expressions are.
6. In Sentence 6, the professor begins by using the present tense and ends by using the past tense. Why?
7. What does *Got that done* mean in Sentence 8? This is an example of ellipsis. What word has been eliminated, and why is it possible to eliminate it? (Further discussion of ellipsis can be found in Units 1 and 5.)

8. The professor uses the time expression *right after that* in Sentences 6, 12, and 14. Why does he use that particular expression?
9. What does the professor mean when he says faculty candidates *come through* in Sentence 14? Why do they *come through*? In Sentence 15, the professor says *I went and attended that*. What does *that* refer to?
10. In Sentence 21, the professor discusses a telephone call he makes to his wife. What's the purpose of the call? What does he say to her, and what is her response?
11. The professor discusses *Rs and Ws* in his schedule. What does it tell you about the professor's home life?
12. Finally, how does the professor organize his presentation?

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This description is just one example of a “typical” non-teaching day. For other instructors, this might not be typical at all. Task 11 gives you the opportunity to find out more about typical days of one of your instructors.



## DVD Task

*Unit 2: An Instructor's Day*  
*Scene 1*

In this scene, a professor and a teaching assistant (TA) from the same department are talking about the challenges of their jobs as instructors.

Watch the DVD, and then identify all the non-teaching responsibilities the instructor and the teaching assistant have. Do any of these surprise you? Discuss. What do you think are some of the advantages and disadvantages of being a teaching assistant?

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### **Task 11**

Interview one of your instructors from another class to find out how a typical day unfolds. Before the interview, be sure to prepare a few focused questions to ask. After the interview, reflect on what you learned. In what ways was this instructor's day similar to and different from the professor's in Task 10? Present what you learn to a small group of your classmates.

## Instructor Expectations Regarding Email from Students

On his non-teaching days, the engineering professor you read about in Task 10 spends time both in the morning and afternoon answering his email. Some messages may be from colleagues and administrators. Others may be personal. But a portion of the email is likely from students. Instructors may have specific expectations of how email correspondence is to be used in their course. If so, they usually make these expectations known in the class syllabus or verbally during class.

### **Task 12**

In these excerpts from six different classroom sessions, the instructors bring up the topic of email and their expectations about when students should email them. With your partner, read the first three questions, and look for the answers as you read the excerpts. Then continue with the questions on page 37.

1. In what circumstances do these instructors suggest students email them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What alternatives to email does the instructor suggest in Excerpt 1?
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What limitations do professors place on emailing in Excerpts 3 and 4? Explain.