

ESL AT BARD

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

This document has been put together for ESL students who would like some tips and advice on how to get most out of their time at Bard. It can be very challenging to get used to a new culture and a new language. This guide is here to help you!

SOCIAL SKILLS

1. What are good conversational topics for casual conversation?

Classes

Bard students talk a lot about the classes they take, want to take and wish they had not taken. They discuss the way the professor teaches, what they thought of the reading and how difficult they thought the homework was. If students like a professor or a class, they recommend that class to other students. Having such conversations is a good way to figure out which classes you may want to take while you are at Bard and which professors would be good to get to know.

How to Start:

When class finishes, it is often easy to start a conversation with your classmates, even if you do not know them yet. You can ask them how they liked it and talk about their expectations of the rest of the class.

Useful Phrases:

"What did you think of the professor?"

"Wasn't he/she super cool/scary/weird/funny?"

"Did you like today's class?"

"Are you excited about this class?"

Weekend Activities

On Monday, students often ask each other how their weekend was. They share stories about the concert they went to, a movie they watched, or how they spent really long working on a paper. On Friday, students talk a lot about what they plan to do during the weekend. They may be attending an event, meeting up with friends in Tivoli, or planning to head to Two Boots for pizza. Having such conversations is a good way to figure out what you may want to do during the weekend.

How to Start:

If you know somebody a little bit (you know their name, you have spoken a little bit before) and you run into them, you can ask them how they are doing and how their weekend was or what their plans for the weekend are.

Useful Phrases:

"Hey, how are you? Did you have a good weekend?"

"Hey, how was your weekend?"

"Hey how is it going? Do you have any plans for this weekend?"

"Hey, what's up? What are you doing this weekend?"

Music/Movies/TV_

Bard students often talk about bands that they like or movies they have seen as well TV shows that they enjoy. These conversations are often more difficult to keep up, as the artists or shows may not sound familiar. However, if somebody mentions a movie, band or tv-show, you can ask them to tell you a little bit about it. Maybe it sounds exciting and you want to watch an episode to see what they are talking about. Remember that watching TV in English and listening to English music will improve your skills.

Useful phrases:

"I haven't heard of that tv show/movie before. What is it about?"

"I don't know that band. What kind of music do they play?" "Can you show me their music?"

Differences with Home

During their Freshman year, many Bard students may talk about their high schools and how Bard is different from what they are used to. It may be difficult for you to relate to their high school experience, but remember that does not mean that your life before Bard is not interesting. You can tell them how your high school experience must have been very different from theirs, and why. Even though many students may not directly ask what life is like where you're from, they are likely to be interested in hearing your stories.

Useful phrases:

"It sounds like your high school experience/home town is really different from mine. For me, it was more like..."

2. How do I improve my understanding in conversation?

Do not be afraid to tell the person that you are talking to that it is sometimes difficult for you to understand him or her. Not everybody at Bard knows what it is like to be living in a country where you have to speak a language that is not your first. It is helpful for them if you tell them that it is easier to understand people when they speak a little bit slower. Just like you want to understand them, they would like to be understood.

With practice, your understanding will improve rapidly. At Bard, you are building your English skills everyday. While it may not always feel like you are improving quickly, you'll soon notice how much progress you're making.

Useful phrases:

"Sorry, I did not understand the last thing you said."

"Sorry, what's that?"

"Sorry, could you repeat that please?"

"Sorry, would you mind speaking a little bit slower? It's hard for me to understand."

At Bard, students also use a lot of slang that may be difficult to understand right away. Here are some frequently used expressions, so that you may understand what they mean:

"What's up?" = Hey!/How are you/What are you doing?
(Note: In response to what's up, students often respond:
"Not much.")

"To hang out w/ someone" = To spend time with somebody
(For example: Do you want to hang out later?)

"All-nighter" = A night where you did not go to sleep, typically to study
(For example: I pulled an all-nighter)

"Word." = True.
(For example: "This professor is so boring." "Word.")

"Psyched" = Excited
(For example: "I'm so psyched for this class")

"Dope" = Cool/Awesome
(For example: "This party was pretty dope")

"

"

3. How does small talk work?

After you have met somebody, you may see them again and have a short, friendly, conversation. This is called small talk. Here is an example of how a small talk conversation may go:

*"Hey, Emily, right?"
"Yeah! How are you?"
"I'm doing well, thank you! How are you?"
"I'm good, on my way to class."
"Alright, have fun!"
"Thanks, I'll see you later!"*

or:

*"Hey, What's up!"
"Not much, how are you?"
"Not bad, did you have a good weekend?"*

"Yeah – I went hiking, it was really cool!"
"Oh, that sounds awesome. Well, I'm headed to Kline. Have a good one!"
"Thanks, you too!"

HOMWORK SKILLS

1. I have difficulty with the readings. How do I speed up my reading?

There can be various reasons for why a reading takes you long to get through. Maybe the text has a lot of words that you do not know, maybe it has long complicated sentences, maybe it is about a topic that you do not know so much about, and maybe the text is not well written. Although you can never change the text, there are several things that you can do to make your reading go more easily.

a) Know your reading purpose

The way you read a book or a text depends very much on your *reasons* for reading it. This is why it is so important to know your reading purpose. Your reading purpose will help you choose your reading speed. If your professor gives you something to read and doesn't tell you what you need to find out from the text or what you will do after the reading, ask her (or him)!

b) Choose your reading speed

ESL students often take a long time to do their work because they read everything slowly and carefully. But sometimes, you may just want to know if there is a specific piece of information in the text. In this case, you can skim the text.

Skimming - this is reading a text quickly to find out what information it contains. You should skim when, for example, you want to check if a text has the information you need to answer some questions or write a project. It is often enough to look at the first (and last) sentences in each paragraph.

c) Get background information - Find something out about the topic you have to read. The more background information you have, the easier it will be to understand the text. You can get this background information in your own language. You can sometimes get background information from the text itself. Many writers include a conclusion or summary; if you read this first, it may give you a good start.

d) Look for the main points.

Often, each paragraph has a topic sentence. A topic sentence is a sentence, usually the first one in a paragraph, that contains the main idea of the paragraph. If you concentrate on understanding the topic sentence, this will give you the paper's main points.

e) Do not look up every word that you don't know

A common mistake of ESL students is to look up each unknown word in the texts they are given to read. Occasionally this is necessary - for example, when reading examination questions. But it takes a long time and can be very boring. Often, it can be more helpful to only look up those that are frequently used in the text.

f) Understand transition words

Many writers organize their writing with *transition words*. These are words that connect different parts of the writing and help writers structure their thoughts. If you learn some transition words, you will find it easier to understand the text.

Some transition words are: also, therefore, except, unless, however, instead, (al)though, furthermore, moreover, nevertheless, on the other hand, as a result, despite, in conclusion.

CLASSROOM SKILLS

1. How do I take good notes during lectures?

Some professors at Bard will have very structured lectures. They may write important parts on the board and repeat things you really need to know. Whenever a professor stresses a certain point in such a way, it is a good idea to write it down. Make short forms for yourself so that you can note information down quickly and concisely.

2. I have ideas but I find it difficult to express them. How can I participate better in classroom discussion?

You can always have a conversation with your professor after class, during office hours, or via email. Make use of this and let your professor know that you find it difficult to participate, even though you have things to say. He/she may then suggest alternative forms of class contribution. Maybe you'll be encouraged to submit an email response after each class to submit your thoughts on the discussion.

If there is something you'd like to say but you do not quite have the words, try anyways. Bard's professors are often good at figuring out what their students are trying to say, even if they do not quite know how to formulate it yet. They will appreciate your effort.

3. How can I improve my listening skills?

Your listening skills will come with practice. If you find it hard to understand everything your professor says, you can also record the lecture. Make sure to ask the professor at the beginning of the class if that is okay. Most of the professors will say yes, and you will be able to listen again if there was something that you missed the first time.

TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS

As an ESL student, you may have to spend more time to complete your homework than your classmates do. If you also want to participate in clubs, sports and hang out with friends, you may find that you run out of time for eating, sleeping and other things. Here are some tips on time-management:

1. Make a Plan

Use a planner and think ahead. How much time do you think you'll need for your assignments? When do you plan to take out that time?

2. Prioritize

If you find yourself with too much to do and too little time, take a moment to figure out which of your homeworks is most important. Do those first.

3. Ask for Help

If you have a certain homework that is taking you very long, do not hesitate to ask for help. Of course, it is good for you to do as much work independently as you can. But if you feel that you are not making much more progress, do not put more time into it before you get help from your

professor, classmates or the learning commons.

4. Get Sleep

Although all students tend to sleep less when school becomes busy, you have to be careful to get enough sleep. Without enough sleep, you will not be productive. Paying attention in class, participating, and understanding what your professor or the text is saying is easier if you are well rested.

NOTE: The Learning Commons offers workshop on Time Management that are open to all Bard Students. Keep an eye out for emails and notices if you'd like to attend one!