



**VANDERBILT**  
English Language  
Center

English Language Center Immersion Guide:  
Build your Immersion Team  
(text-only version)

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**2023**

updated December 5, 2023

[vanderbilt.edu/elc/](http://vanderbilt.edu/elc/)

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## Build your Immersion Team

Resources in this section will help as you reach out to EL&IV and prospective Immersion mentors as well as while you network and apply for jobs and internships.

### Networking: Small Talk Culture and Strategies

In the U.S., as a component of networking, we engage in small talk regularly to build positive relationships, emphasizing trust and respect in academic and professional interactions.

#### *Find Opportunities to Start*

You can start many common interactions with small talk:

- before class starts while waiting in line
- at the beginning of a meeting or interview
- when ordering or paying for goods and/or services

#### *Choose Appropriate Topics*

- Mundane topics like the weather or traffic
- Work or studies
- Current location or event
- Sports
- TV, movies, music, and popular culture
- Interests and hobbies
- Food, restaurants, and other recommendations
- Past travel and travel plans
- Family (if not too personal, i.e. if the person has already mentioned their spouse or children)

**Important:** Unless the other person is a close friend, avoid topics such as politics, religion, sex, age, health problems, or personal finances.

#### *Keep the Conversation Going*

1. Don't just talk about yourself. Ask questions about the other person, too.
2. Try to avoid only using yes/no questions and instead, also ask questions that start with who, what, when, where, why, or how (open-ended questions).
3. In each of your responses, give one or two details that will help you and your conversation continue.
4. With someone you know, ask for an update on their life in general or a project you know they are doing.
5. Ask for advice or recommendations.
6. Connect through a common experience.
7. Allow the conversation to flow naturally into new topics.

#### *Clearly Exit the Conversation*

1. Offer a brief reason why you are leaving (for a longer conversation):
  - a. I have to run and do X.
  - b. It's getting late.
  - c. I'm going to get myself some more food/another drink.
2. Acknowledge that you enjoyed the conversation:

- a. It was so good to talk to you.
  - b. I hope we get to continue this conversation.
  - c. It was so nice/good to meet you. (ONLY if you didn't know this person before)
  - d. It was so nice/good to see you. (ONLY if you HAD MET this person before)
3. Say goodbye

### ***Example Conversation***

A: Hey, how was your weekend?

B: Pretty good! I went to a soccer game with my brother.

A: Really? Who was playing?

B: The Nashville SC and the New York Red Bulls. We're huge soccer fans!

A: Yeah? How was the game?

B: Very exciting – it was tied until the last few minutes when we won 2-1.

A: Haha, that's great! I can't say I'm a soccer fan, myself – I prefer basketball. B: Basketball, huh? Playing or watching?

A: Both – I've played basketball since I was a kid.

B: No kidding! You must be really good.

A: Well, I just play for fun. It's a great workout.

B: I bet. I could use more exercise myself, but I don't think I'm cut out for basketball. I was thinking of joining a martial arts class...

A: That sounds interesting! What kind of martial arts?

... and so on... small talk can continue as long as you and your conversation partner keep the conversation going.



**Want to  
Know More?  
Small Talk  
Practice**

If you would like to practice small talk, make an appointment for a [1-to-1 Speaking Consultation](#) at the ELC. We're happy to help!

### **The Language of Small Talk**

Need some language to kickstart your small talk? Mix and match these phrases to help you every step of the way.

#### ***Starting a Conversation***

You must be Michael's wife. I'm Robert.  
So, how do you know Michelle? (The party host)  
Have we met before?  
John mentioned that you're in the Engineering department. How do you like it?  
Nice weather, isn't it?  
Nice day to be outside, isn't it?  
We couldn't ask for a nicer day, could we?  
What's new?

Nice jacket. Can I ask you where you got it?  
Do you mind my asking where you bought your coffee?  
Did you hear about the fire on Broadway?  
How about those Titans? Do you think they're going to win this weekend?  
Looking forward to the weekend?  
How do you like the music?  
The bus must be running late today.  
I'll have to remember not to come here at lunchtime. (It's

<p>I haven't seen you in ages. Nice running into you here! Long time, no see. How have you been getting on? What have you been up to?</p>	<p>busy/crowded.) Do you come here often? How old's your baby? What's your dog's name? I noticed your Thai purse. I was in Thailand last summer.</p>
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### *Maintaining a Conversation*

<p>Really? That's awful/interesting/funny. Really? Me, too. I.. Did you? Are you? Lucky you! I'm so happy for you. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? No way! Tell me more! What a coincidence! I had a similar experience... Actually, that happened to me once, too... Repeat what the other person said:     Person A: I found \$200.     Person B: 200!</p>	<p>Yeah/Right/I know/That's true. Mmmm/Hmmm/Uh huh That's new to me. Well, as I was saying... Back to... That reminds me. .. Speaking of... Well, another way of looking at it is... Can't argue with that! That's a good one. You've got to be kidding me. That's a good question. Well to be honest with you,... To the best of my knowledge...</p>
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### *Ending a Conversation*

<p>Well, if you ever want to chat again, I'm usually here on Monday afternoons. It was great talking to you. I hope to see you again soon. Oh, the time has gotten away from me! Let's talk again soon. Gotta run! Good seeing you! I should get going. I'm sorry to cut you off, but I actually have to run. I'd love to hear more about it, but I have to be somewhere. Give me a call sometime!</p>	<p>I've really gotta get going. It was nice talking with you. Let me give you my number. Maybe we can connect again sometime.</p> <p><b>Giving the other person a way to politely end the conversation:</b> I'm not keeping you from something, am I? Am I holding you up? Let me know if you need to get going. I don't want to take up your time.</p>
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## Networking: Cultural Expectations for Office Hour Visits

### *What are office hours?*

They are an opportunity to...

- ask for clarification or extra explanations
- seek out help or extra resources
- get to know your professor
- demonstrate your ability to communicate clearly

### ***When can I go to office hours?***

Most professors will post their office hours for students outside their office, in the syllabus, or in the course management system. In addition, they may offer the opportunity to visit their office during the week and use an “open-door policy.”

#### ***Make a Plan***

**Read** the materials from class or the syllabus before attending an office hour. Use the resources from class or ask a classmate to seek clarification before asking the professor.

**Prepare** clear questions for your professor before attending office hours. Ask specific questions related to a specific reading or assignment.

**Bring** supporting materials with you and have quick access to the documents you want to talk about (e.g. class materials, a reading, an assignment sheet, an internship posting).

**Say:** make sure your requests are specific and show you have done your part to try to find the answer before asking for help. For example, “I brought the class handout. I tried to figure out this concept by myself, but I'm still unclear about this specific aspect here. Can you help me understand this specific part here?”

#### ***Example Office Hours Interaction***

1. Pre-Interaction (Knock on the office door when you're ready)
2. Greeting & Small Talk
  - a. “Hello Professor Smith. I hope you are well.”
  - b. “It sure is cold outside, but I’m glad it will be getting warmer next week.”
3. Explanation for Visit
  - a. “I am here to ask a few questions about the upcoming assignment.”
4. Asking questions, discussing, negotiating, and problem-solving
  - a. “I read through the assignment again. I am having trouble understanding the first paragraph of page two. I think the assignment is asking for us to write a personal reflection without additional research. Is that correct?”
5. Closing
  - a. “Thank you for clarifying this. I appreciate you helping me. I will see you in class tomorrow.”

#### ***Be Mindful of Others' Time***

- Be aware of your professor's expectations and time constraints (the meeting should be short especially if there are additional students waiting to meet with the professor).
- Ask specific questions and be reasonable about how much you are asking of your professor during your visit.
- Be cognizant of your professor's body language (e.g. professor packing their bag likely means they are getting ready to leave).
- Remember that other students might be waiting outside the office.

#### **Networking: Emailing Culture, Strategies, and Language**

Are you emailing a professor, staff member, or teaching assistant about your Immersion Vanderbilt ideas? Emailing culture in the U.S. and in college may differ from what you are used to. Read the ELC’s [Email Messages Guide and Brief Supplements](#) to help you decide:

- When to email or meet in person
- When unwritten cultural rules of emailing in the U.S. apply
- How to structure your emails

- How to create appropriate tone in your emails
- What language to use when emailing in academic settings

Remember, if you are struggling with a tricky email, you can always [book a 1-to-1 Writing Consultation](#) at the ELC for help reviewing it.

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## Tell your Immersion Story

The resources in this section will help you share your ideas, plans, and new knowledge as you move through the steps of Immersion Vanderbilt. The skills in this section apply to both written and spoken communication.

### Reading and Responding to Forms: How to Analyze a Prompt

This resource provides strategies for understanding and answering prompts (assignment instructions) so you can more accurately complete your responses to questions. This resource will be helpful when reading, understanding, and answering various questions asked in required Immersion Vanderbilt forms.

#### *Analyzing Prompts*

When breaking down a prompt, consider the following:

- **What is the purpose of each sentence?** For example, sentences could provide context, offer background information, or define a key concept.
- **What is the main thing the prompt is asking me to do?** Look for action verbs!
- **What other things is the prompt asking me to do?** If there are multiple questions, sometimes it is helpful to separate them into different lines so you can compare them “vertically.”
- **What evidence is the prompt asking me to include?** Pick out keywords and phrases to guide your thinking.
- **What parts of the prompt are not relevant?** You may not be required to answer every question asked. If so, pick the questions most relevant to you and your project!

#### *Example Immersion Prompt: The Experience Declaration Form*

Notice:

- This first sentence (underlined) provides context behind the prompt.
- The **bolded** action verb tells you the main task the prompt is asking you to complete.
- Notice that the prompt asks you to describe “**an** experience,” implying just one story. For this answer, we recommend using the STAR Method (described below).
- The follow-up questions (*italicized*) can help you think of details to include in your response, but you are not required to answer every question listed.

#### **Critical Thought**

Some experiences require us to engage in deeper thought and approach a goal or seek a solution using reasoning, intentional and conscientious decision making, and utilizing context to frame our decisions as we move through time. **Describe** an experience (internship, writing, group project, etc.) which required you to think critically about your next steps and to anticipate multiple outcomes that affected your choices. *Was that comfortable for you or did you have moments of uncertainty? Do you feel more comfortable now than you did prior to this experience making informed decisions with possibly uncertain outcomes?*





Want to  
Know More?  
The  
Experience  
Declaration  
Form

Not sure what the **Experience Declaration Form** is? [Visit the EL&IV website](#) to see a list of steps and forms.  
Not sure what "**critical thought**" refers to? It's one of the **5 Learning Goals** of Immersion Vanderbilt. [Click here for a breakdown.](#)

### *The S.T.A.R. Method*

Prompts that ask you to “describe an experience which...” or “think about a situation when...” are called situational or behavioral questions, and they are common in interviews and on Immersion Vanderbilt forms.

To respond to such prompts, it may be helpful to use the STAR method. The STAR method is a pattern commonly used to answer questions that ask you to describe an experience. STAR also works well for written responses to such questions. STAR stands for situation, task, action, and result.

**Situation:** Set the scene and give the necessary details of your example.

**Task:** Describe what your responsibility was in that situation.

**Action:** Explain exactly what steps you took to address it.

**Result:** Share what outcomes your actions achieved.”<sup>1</sup>

This method works best when you want your answer to focus on one story.

### *The F.I.T. Model*

Alternatively, you could employ the FIT Model in your answer. Like the STAR Method, the FIT Model can be used in spoken or written responses. FIT stands for favorite part, improvement desired, and transition made<sup>2</sup>.

**Favorite part:** What did you enjoy most about this experience?

**Improvement desired:** How did you want to grow?

**Transition made:** What change did you implement to seek that growth?

This model works best when you want your answer to highlight transitions or growth across multiple stories. For each story, you can repeat the FIT Model to show how you made decisions and developed your skills and interests over time.

For more information and an example of a FIT Model answer, [watch this short YouTube video](#) from the FIT Model’s creator.



Want to  
Know More?  
Interview  
Preparation

Both the S.T.A.R. Method and F.I.T. Model can be used for speaking or writing. The next time you are preparing for an interview, be sure to practice these models to help you describe your experiences and expertise. [Sign up for a 1-to-1 consultation](#) if you would like to get feedback as you prepare.

### *Need Help?*

**Content:** If you have questions about any Immersion Vanderbilt prompts or forms, don’t hesitate to [make an appointment with the EL&IV office.](#)

<sup>1</sup> How to Use the STAR Method to Answer Any Behavioral Interview Question. (2018, December 18). The Muse. <https://www.themuse.com/advice/star-interview-method>

<sup>2</sup> Dalton, S. (2018, January 22). Answering “Tell Me About Yourself” Effectively in Interviews: The FIT Model. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK1PxHdWHvk>  
[The Vanderbilt University English Language Center](#)

**Writing:** If you would like help reviewing the language, grammar, or structure in the prompts and/or in your prompt answers, [book a 1-to-1 Consultation](#) with the ELC.

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### Sample Immersion Plan Description: Full-Length

These sample immersion plan descriptions were written using the framework described in the main ELC [Immersion Guide](#). You can view the samples below to help you see how that framework can be implemented.

This full-length description (~100-150 words long) could be used in a grant proposal, as an interview answer, when presenting your idea to Immersion advisors, or in responses on required Immersion forms.

Notice the moves are marked in the sample passages below as follows:

*Italicized: Territory/Gap: What is your Immersion project about? Why is that subject important to you?*

**Bolded: Goals: What do you hope to accomplish during your immersive experience? In other words, what are your goals?**

Underlined: Means and Achievements: How will your immersive experience help you achieve your goal(s)? Details will help here. For example: Where will your immersive experience take place? Will you collaborate with other people or departments?

No Marking: Benefits: How can this Immersion experience be beneficial to you and/or others? How can your immersive experience connect to your future aspirations?

*As a communications major, I am interested in how artistic expression can be used as a way to communicate with others through symbols. **To explore this interest more deeply, I plan to pursue an Immersion Experience/Project where I create a portfolio of my own artwork.** I plan to take art classes at Vanderbilt and to showcase this portfolio at the Creative Expression Showcase during the spring, then write an accompanying essay exploring the connection between my artwork and what it communicates. This experience/project will give me a deeper understanding of the relationship between visual art and communication that I can apply to my future career as a marketing specialist.*

### Sample Immersion Plan Description: Mid-Length

To shorten this description, we simplified some details in the goals and achievements sections. This mid-length description (~50-75 words long) could be used in an email, cover letter, statement of purpose, or at networking events.

*Italicized: Territory/Gap*  
**Bolded: Goals**  
Underlined: Means and Achievements  
 No Marking: Benefits

*As a communications major, I am interested in how artistic expression can be used as a way to communicate with others through symbols. **I plan to pursue an Immersion Experience/Project where I create a portfolio of my own artwork** by taking art classes at Vanderbilt and showcase this portfolio at the Creative Expression Showcase. This experience/project will give me a deeper understanding of the relationship between art and communication that I can apply to my future career as a marketing specialist.*

### *Sample Immersion Plan Description: Short*

To shorten the description further, we cut the territory/gap and condensed the benefits section. Notice how the concepts we cut have been included in the list at the end to summarize them. This short description (~25-40 words long) could be used in an application form, resume/CV, or LinkedIn profile.

Italicized: Territory/Gap  
**Bolded: Goals**  
Underlined: Means and Achievements  
 No Marking: Benefits

**I plan to pursue an Immersion Experience/Project where I create a portfolio of my own artwork by taking art classes at Vanderbilt and showcase this portfolio at the Creative Expression Showcase, giving me a deeper understanding of the relationship between visual art, symbolism, and communication.**

### *Sample Immersion Plan Description: Bullet-Point Version*

To create this bullet-point version, we condensed the sections and changed the verb tense to the simple past. This short description (~25 words long) is written in the style of a resume/CV bullet point and can be used after you complete Immersion Vanderbilt.

Italicized: Territory/Gap  
**Bolded: Goals**  
Underlined: Means and Achievements  
 No Marking: Benefits

- **Created** and exhibited a **portfolio of original artwork** at the Vanderbilt Creative Expression Showcase which examined the relationship between visual art, symbolism, and marketing communication.

### *Final Tips*

- You don't need to know everything right now. Make an appointment with an Immersion mentor to help you.
- When deciding what to cut in your writing, make sure you include what is most important to you.
- Use your paragraph versions wherever you can: emailing professors, on Immersion forms, in cover letters, etc.
- You can apply these moves (structure) to your writing beyond Immersion, including at internships, jobs, and future research experiences.

### *Your Turn*

Follow these steps before making an appointment for a [1-to-1 Consultation at the ELC](#) to review your work.

1. **Explain your Ideas Aloud:** Sometimes it's easier to express ourselves verbally. Can you describe your Immersion ideas to a friend, roommate, or family member? It's a great warmup before trying to write.
2. **Write a Full-Length Version:** Try writing a full-length description (~100-150 words long) of your Immersion plans.

3. **Edit Shorter Versions:** Take a break and then try writing a mid-length (~50- 75 words) and then a short (~25-40 words) version of your Immersion plans. Do these versions help you find what ideas are most important to you?
4. **Return to the Full-length Version:** Now that you know what is important to you, return to the longest version. Have you emphasized those important elements? Can you polish this version more easily now?

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