

Lesson 1: Introducing Corpora

Instructor Name	Devon Jancin
Lesson Date (hypothetical)	Week 1 “Introducing Culture and the Rhetorical Situation”
Subject Area	English composition and rhetoric, international section
Institutional Level	Mainstream college undergraduate (high proficiency level required)
Activity Topic(s)	Introducing Corpora
Instructional Group	CO150 International students

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will be introduced to what a corpus is and how this tool can help them in CO150
2. Students will complete a brief teacher-led tutorial of COCA
3. Students will run a basic search in COCA and interpret the concordance lines to inductively formulate correct patterns of usage and grammar

LEARNER BACKGROUND/PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Since this is the first week of class, it is assumed that nobody has any prior knowledge or experience with corpora. According to the syllabus, grammatical concerns should be lowest on the hierarchy of rhetorical concerns (see ‘Writing Center’ in references for more on the hierarchy). However, major grammatical, word choice, and sentence structure errors can make the author’s meaning unclear—distracting the audience, and confusing the development and focus of the writing. In some academic circles grammatical errors can even dramatically reduce the author’s credibility and assignment grade. Therefore, in an effort to best prepare CO150I students, grammar help should be taken into account during the revision process.

While there is need for grammatical help, it is also a big time constraint because the rhetorical hierarchy and fast pace of the class means that there is usually little time for grammatical help in class. Therefore, it is crucial for students to learn to self-correct their own papers, and for teachers to give them the tools to do so. Corpus-based activities can help students help themselves because corpora are valuable tools that can facilitate independent learning, provided enough guidance is given while students learn how to navigate the tools available to them (Flowerdew, 2009).

Therefore, part of a class period in Week 1 will be devoted to going through a brief tutorial

of what a corpus is, using COCA as an example. COCA's basic functions and how it can be useful in students' English language learning, specifically its use within the writing process, will be discussed. This activity will serve as the base for other corpus-based activities throughout the semester.

MATERIALS

1. Computers with online access for each students (class held in a computer lab with ability to project teacher's computer screen)
2. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>
3. Introduction to Corpora PowerPoint (see Appendix 1A)
4. Search comparison worksheet (see Appendix 1B)

ACTIVITY DEVELOPMENT

1. Introduce the idea of corpora using the PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix 1A for details on what I would say).
2. Once the PP is finished, I will have the students turn to their computers. *Everyone go to <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>. Watch how I find it on google so you can find it again on your own without having to memorize the address. Ok, so we click 'enter' and we are at the main page. What do you notice?* (Expected answers: There's a list of things COCA has like vocabulary and collocates; There's a Where Should I Start section that has some general facts about COCA; The left hand side allows you to pick your genre; The search box is at the top left hand side where it says WORD(S).
3. *So, COCA has a lot going on as we can see. For this class, we want to keep this simple, so we are just focusing on the academic genre and the basic search. If you really want to learn more about COCA you can email me with specific questions.*
4. Model how to search in our target genre. Type the word 'research' for the first search. Point out various features: *How many results did we get?* (Expected result: Freq. 84,271) *These lines are called concordance lines. What information do they have?* (The year they were produced, the genre and subgenre, the search word bolded and underlined.) *Are concordance lines complete sentences?* (Not usually.)
5. Model how to gather more information from the search by clicking the concordance line and seeing the expanded context.
6. Hit the back button to view the list of results. *Take a minute to look through this. How is this word used?* (As a noun and verb.)
7. *Now I want us to do another search. Many of you use the word 'researches' in English. Let's*

search for this. (Teacher think aloud) Compare ‘researches’ to ‘research’, emphasizing that 1.) The frequency (144) of ‘researches’ is much less. 2.) When it is used, it’s primarily in the 3rd person singular verb form (Expected question: There are some concordance lines that use it as the plural form of the noun). *Hmm, what could be a reason for this? Does it depend on the subgenre?* (No.) *Let’s click on a few of them to see more context.* Draw their attention to the source information at the top. Who does it say the author is? Is this person a native English speaker? (No.)

CLOSURE

(In-class discussion of implications for learning) *So, what can COCA tell us to help our vocabulary learning?* (Expected answers: It can give a frequency of use of words that can tell you how common a word is for American English academic writing. ‘Research’ is much more common than ‘researches’. The people who use the pluralized noun form of ‘research’ do not seem to be native English speakers. We should not make the same mistake in our essays!)

Explain and have students begin homework assignment, walking around checking for understanding.

For homework: *Using your homework worksheet (Appendix 1B), you are going to run a few searches in COCA by yourself to get familiar with this well-known corpus. We will use COCA again later on in the semester too. Be thinking about how this might be able to help your English learning.*