

Education Tips

How to Use VOA Learning English for Speaking and Writing Activities

This printable guide is useful for classroom learning and also works great for English language practice groups.

Here at VOA Learning English, we love to help teachers and learners. Our aim is to make learning more interactive, learner-centered and fun.

In today's Education Tips, we offer speaking and writing activities for beginning, intermediate and advanced English learners.

As a teacher who uses the VOA Learning English website, you know about our quizzes, downloadable lesson plans, and other materials. But, there are other creative and less obvious ways to use our programs in your classroom.

Let's start with a speaking activity for beginners.

Speaking Activities

Beginner Activity 1: Using Photo Prompts

Every day, VOA Learning English posts fascinating photos from around the world. We call it the [Day in Photos](#). You can find photos of all kinds of things, such as a fireworks display in Mexico City or a fisherman sitting in his boat on the Egyptian Nile River Delta.

Here's a speaking activity that will inspire even the shyest beginning speakers to talk to their classmates.

Before starting this activity, you'll want to hide the photo descriptions. To do this, simply right-click an image and then choose "open image in new tab."

With students sitting (or standing, if preferred) in pairs, show the image on the screen or print photos to hand out to students. Have one student *describe* what she sees in the image. Then, have the other student *imagine* what the people or animals in the photo are thinking or saying.

This activity gives learners the chance not just to practice speaking but to use their imaginations.

For example, take a look at this photo of a man and three dogs:



In this speaking activity, Student A describes the photo. They might say: "I see a man on the left. He is eating a sandwich or some kind of food. He has white hair and glasses. He is wearing a green coat. There are three dogs on the right. I think maybe the dogs want his food."

Student B imagines what the people or animals in the photo are thinking. They might say, "The old man is thinking, 'I like you, my friends, but I always share my food with you. Not today! I'm hungry today. I'm sorry.' And, the dogs are thinking, 'It's not true. He never shares with us. When he turns away, we will take his food!'"

Beginner Activity 2: I Live at...

Another speaking activity for beginners uses the lesson from the [Let's Learn English](#) video series.

In [Lesson 3](#), students learn to say their address in English. Give students the [activity sheet](#) and have them ask three classmates for their address. Have several students demonstrate after the practice activity by asking and answering the questions shown on the sheet.

Let's Learn English

VOA Learning English

LESSON 3

It is time to practice your English!

Talk to three friends or people you do not know. In English, ask them these questions. Write their answers below.

- What is your name?
- How do you spell your name?
- Where do you live?
- What is your address?
- What is your phone number?

NAME: Sarah

ADDRESS: 247 Oak St.
 Washington, DC. 20002

PHONE NUMBER: 202-555-1477

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE NUMBER: _____

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE NUMBER: _____

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE NUMBER: _____

**Hello! I am Sarah.
That is S-A-R-A-H.
I live at 247 Oak St.
in Washington, DC.
The zip code is 20002.
My phone number is
202-555-1477.
Nice to meet you!**

Beginner Activity 3: Do You Have a....?

Another speaking activity for beginners can be based on [Lesson 4](#) of Let's Learn English. The Speaking Practice video teaches how to say the names of some common objects and ask questions about them. For example, "Do you have a bag?" and "Yes, I have a bag." Students can say the names of objects in the classroom and ask a partner if they have one of the objects.

Beginner Activity 4: Make a Map

After watching the Let's Learn English [Lesson 6](#) video, "Where is the Gym?" students can make their own map of their school, apartment building, house, or neighborhood. Then, they can take turns asking and answering questions about their map and their partner's map. They can do this activity in pairs or small groups.

Intermediate Activity: Using Video Prompts

Note: Many of the advanced speaking activities listed below can also work well for intermediate students.

Our video series are also a great tool for getting students talking. For example, [Learning English TV](#) features two-minute videos on topics from science to politics to health.

For intermediate learners, you can use pair work to have students summarize what they learn watching the videos. You can play two different videos so both students get the chance to summarize something different.

Play the first video and have Student A take notes. Then, play the second video and have Student B take notes. If there is time, play both videos again while all students simply watch. After you replay both videos, allow each student to verbally summarize the video they took notes on.

Then, if there is a time, the whole class can discuss what the students learned from the videos.

Advanced Activity 1: Using Video Prompts

Advanced speakers can also get started talking by watching [Learning English TV](#).

For this level, have students do the activity exactly as they did in the intermediate activity. But, ask students to come up with *three questions* on additional things they'd like to learn about the topic.

Advanced Activity 2: Summarizing and Voicing Opinions

For advanced speakers, you can also use our video series [America's Presidents](#) to spark discussion on debatable topics. Students can work in pairs to summarize what they learned in the video. Then, they can get into groups to express their opinions on what they learned about that president.

For example, John Adams, America's second president, made policies about immigrants that became controversial during his time.

Advanced Activity 3: Jigsaw Summaries and Voicing Opinions

Reports from our [Health & Lifestyle](#), [Science in the News](#), [America](#), [World](#) and other sections of our website are also perfect for getting students to express opinions.

For this activity, choose a report. Put students into groups of three. Assign each group to read a different section of the report. For instance, assign Group 1 the first section of the report. In their groups, students then read their section and summarize the main ideas. Then, move students into different groups so that none of their former group members are the same. In their new groups, students summarize their story sections then express their opinions on the topic. We call this

method (giving each group one part of a reading to focus on) a "jigsaw." Then, elicit opinions from students to share with the class.

Advanced Activity 4: Class Debates

Another option is to have students individually read an article on a debatable topic (politics, health, science, et cetera, as mentioned above). Then, have a class debate on the topic. Put students into two or three teams. Give them time and debate instructions to prepare their arguments. The [guidelines](#) from BusyTeacher.org are a great way to ensure a successful, respectful class debate.

Advanced Activity 5: Practicing Idioms

Our [English in a Minute](#) and [English at the Movies](#) videos are also great for sparking lively conversation among advanced English learners.

These short series explore an idiom, or common expression. For example, in one English at the Movies episode, the expression "fresh start" is explored.

A young man and his mother move to a new place, and the mother says, "Fresh start."

Students can use the context of the movie clip and its explanation – based on the multiple choice quiz in the video – to develop their understanding of the expression.

One fun activity is to have students create two- or three-person dialogues using the new idioms. They can act out or voice the dialogues in their groups, then move around and share them with other groups. Or, they can share the dialogues with the whole class.

Writing Activities

Beginner Activity 1: Using Photo Prompts

You can use the [Day in Photos](#) series for writing, too.

Before doing this activity, choose a photo or a few photos to display on the screen, without the descriptions.

Tell students they will write a story about the person or people in the photo. If the students need help using their imaginations, provide a list of questions on the board or a shared screen, such as: *What is their name? Why are they doing in the photo and why? What are they thinking in the photo? What kind of house does the person live in and where? What do they usually eat? What activities do they enjoy? What do they want to do in the future?*



Beginner Activity 2: Responding to Let's Learn English

Another great way to get beginning learners writing is our [Let's Learn English](#) series. Each lesson asks learners to write a response to the topic of the lesson. For example, Lesson 25 shows the main character, Anna,

learning about a new video game. Learners are asked to write an answer to this question: *What games do you like to play?*

Intermediate Activity: Using Video Prompts

Use our videos to also get your intermediate learners excited about writing. [News Words](#) is a series featuring short videos about popular words in the news.

For this intermediate writing activity, choose a video that features a word relevant to most of your students.

For example, the video News Words: Sacred talks about two uses of the word: one is in reference to something that deserves great respect, and the other is about religious or holy topics. Many students may be able to relate to the idea of something being sacred.

For this activity, students watch the video and then write a paragraph about the importance of the word for them. They sit in pairs or small groups and share their writing with one another.

Have the pairs read their paragraphs to one another. They can also use a checklist to help improve one another's writing skills. Have each student complete the checklist after reading one classmate's writing. They should sign it and return it to the student, then the student hands it in along with their writing for the teacher to review. The checklist can include questions like: *Is the main point clear? Did the details support the main point? Is the punctuation correct? Are the sentences complete? Do the students use the word correctly in their sentences? Do they use the news word as the same part of speech as the video example?*

Advanced Activity: Practicing Idioms

The series [Words and Their Stories](#) explores common expressions in American English. Each story contains many idioms, or expressions, usually with a mysterious or exciting storyline.

For example, "Mystery at the Ice **Castle Inn**" tells the story of four strangers stuck at a faraway inn on a mountain during an ice storm. All the idioms in the story are related to ice, snow or cold.

Words and Their Stories is good for advanced writing activities because students get to practice using *many* idioms.

For this activity, students work in pairs or small groups, depending on class size. Play the audio as the students view the text on a shared screen. Students then discuss the idioms in the story to make sure they fully understand the meanings. Together, they then write sentences for each idiom. They can also use a checklist of questions to help improve one another's writing skills: *Is the punctuation correct? Are the sentences complete? Do the students use the idioms correctly in their sentences?*

After they've finished, you can ask for examples from each group.

Tips on Giving Feedback

Before doing any of the activities, decide on your method of feedback.

Speaking:

A good feedback method for speaking activities is for you to monitor students as they speak. Take notes on some of the phrases you hear, whether they are correct or incorrect.

After the activity, write the phrases on the board or shared screen. Then, ask students whether the grammar is correct.

If students agree that the phrase is already correct, have the class simply repeat the phrase aloud. If it's incorrect, ask for corrections. You can have volunteers make the corrections on the board.

This method enables you to reinforce correct language and provide feedback on incorrect language in a student-centered way, and in a way that doesn't embarrass individual students for making mistakes.

Writing Feedback

For giving writing feedback, we recommend that you also keep things interactive. Put a checklist of questions on the board and then have students correct each other's writing based on the questions.

The checklist can include questions *such as: Is the main point clear? Did the details support the main point? Is the punctuation correct? Are the sentences complete Does the writer use correct grammar? You can also go around and monitor to make sure they are giving accurate corrections.*

You can also walk around and monitor to make sure students are giving one another accurate corrections.

We want to learn about how you are using our website to learn or teach English. Email us at learningenglish@voanews.com with "Teachers' Guide" in the subject line.