

Exploring English: Psychology, History, and Peculiarities

Summer 2026

Mondays 1:00-2:30 on Zoom

Instructor: Gail Knapp gail.knapp1@gmail.com

Humans are social creatures, and that requires communication. Most of us learned English painlessly when we were young and have taken it for granted. This unique course will explore its history, impact, and increasing use as an international language. Have you ever wondered why non-English speakers struggle with English? English is a Germanic language, yet it is filled with words from French, Spanish, and Latin. What pronoun should you use if you don't know the person's sex? How are dictionaries written? How is American English different from the UK version? As a living language, English is constantly evolving. What current word usages make you cringe? Have you ever wondered how those learning English as a second language deal with such questions? For example, consider this perfectly correct sentence: "She thought it would be tough to plough through the rough terrain caused by the drought, although she thought that her cough was problem enough."

Topics for this Summer Class:

Class 1- June 1: The Joy of Language: Communication in very general terms, including animals. Why is English so important that it is the most studied second language in the world? The dictionary and lexicographers.

Class 2- June 8: Etymology Extravaganza – Where and how did language evolve? Why is English, a Germanic language, so filled with French and other Romance language words? Language changes. How does that influence what we see as standard English? And does it matter anyway?

Class 3- June 15: Linguistic Oddities – Particularly English spelling. Why don't other languages have spelling bees? What about grammar, including making plurals? Folk etymologies are fun but usually wrong. Ghost words, alphabets, acronyms, eggcorns, malapropisms, and is it healthy to curse?

June 19- No Classes: All OLLI Classes are canceled for Juneteenth.

Class 4- June 22: What is the need for punctuation? It has happened that someone has died over a comma. Yes, really. Let's look at the history of punctuation and the lack of it.

Class 5- June 29: Dialects and Accents in the U.S.A. – It is a big country. The media has helped create a more universal American language, but regional differences remain. Let's look at AAE, generic brand names, the alphabet soup of abbreviations and acronyms, and some quirks involving mistakes in speech.

Class 6- July 6: American Sign Language- Guest speaker Mary Phillips will show us how the deaf can communicate with sign language and how it compares to spoken English

Class 7- July 13: Other English Variations—We will examine other countries where English is the national language and compare them to ours. We will emphasize the U.K., Canada, Australia, and India.

Class 8- July 20: Psychology and Culture—Communication is essential for human life. Pop culture and literary lunacy—including literature, media, TV, movies, and comedians. How our speech and writing styles may reveal interesting things about our personalities. And things we didn't have time to talk about in earlier classes.

Class 9- July 27: We will end the semester with a series of classes about topics of interest to the participants. We need to do some of the above topics quite quickly, but these last weeks will be a more in depth discussion and information about any of the topics that are selected by the members of the class.

PowerPoints will be provided to all participants in PDF format.:

Bio for Gail Knapp, Ph.D., J.D. PRP—

Gail retired after teaching psychology for almost 40 years in a Michigan community college. During that time, she served as vice president of the faculty association for seven years, making her the chair of the college's academic decision-making body. She was the author of two psychology textbook Instructor Manuals, and the advisor and Michigan state coordinator for the Phi Theta Kappa honor society for twelve years. While her family still includes one dog and three cats, she no longer breeds and shows Brussels Griffons and Great Pyrenees dogs and has retired as a dog show judge after many years in the ring.

She moved to Las Vegas to escape the snow and ice, and because she had fallen in love with the city during a regular summer visit to an annual conference on using science and evidence to study the truth of claims. That interest sparked the creation of the Perception v. Reality Course for OLLI, now called "Gray Matters: Critical Thinking for Seniors," offered in Fall and Spring as Parts I and II.

Her belief in active learning comes from her academic work, including earning degrees in psychology: a B.A. from Stony Brook, an M.A. from Hofstra University in New York, and a Ph.D. from Michigan State University. She also earned a J.D. from Cooley Law School at age 62. She claims this behavior proves she believes in lifelong learning! She has had fun learning about English to prepare for this class. This interest mainly came from a long-ago job teaching English as a second language at the International Institute in Flint, Michigan. One thing she learned from that experience was that being a native speaker was not sufficient knowledge to teach. Preparing for this class was an excellent opportunity to expand her academic horizons.

Twenty-three years ago, she passed the examinations to become a professionally registered parliamentarian and occasionally serves clients by helping them with procedures at their meetings or with their bylaws. She has been president of the Nevada State Association of Parliamentarians, vice-chair of its Commission on Credentialing for five years, and held many other parliamentary offices. She also chaired the national committee that developed educational materials for individuals seeking to become registered parliamentarians. She often teaches an online course about basic parliamentary procedure sponsored by our local Las Vegas Unit.

Gail demonstrated her love of lifelong learning by studying for a law degree on the weekends and passing the Michigan Bar at age 62. She has been married to Lynn for 47 years and has an adult daughter and one granddaughter living in Michigan. She has taught Scientific Skepticism, Topics in Psychology, and Parliamentary Procedure courses for OLLI every semester for the past 14 years; has served as a mentor; and has served as chair of the curriculum committee for one year after several years as a member. She served five years on the OLLI Steering Council as the secretary. She was overwhelmed to be awarded an honorary life membership in the UNLV OLLI several years ago.