



# Linguistics

## What it's about:

As a linguistics major, you learn what makes human languages special: how they are spoken, written, and understood. You'll also examine many of the world's languages—how they are related and how they have changed over time—as well as methods of analyzing languages for their characteristic and distinctive properties.

## Is this for you?

*You might like this major if you also like:* learning new languages; traveling; exploring other cultures; your own heritage culture; crossword puzzles and word games like Scrabble; figuring out where people come from by their accent; word origins.

*Consider this major if you are good at:* active listening; attention to detail; creativity; critical reading/thinking; organizing; research ...*or have...* initiative; patience; verbal skills.

## Recommended high school prep:

English 4, math 3, lab science 3, social studies 3, and a foreign language 4. It may be helpful to divide your foreign language studies between two languages. If possible, take a year of computer programming.

## Did you know...

...that there are more than 5,000 languages spoken in the world today and that many of them are threatened with extinction before the end of this century? Linguists are leading the efforts to document these languages and to help their speakers preserve them, in written and oral form, for future generations.

...that linguistic training is excellent preparation for employment in high-tech industry, particularly when combined with training in computer science or information science? Linguistics also prepares you for further study in any area in which knowledge of how language works is useful.

## Typical courses in this major:

Introduction to linguistics  
Phonetics  
Phonology  
Syntax  
Semantics  
Morphology  
Dialectology  
Languages of the world  
Language and mind  
Language and society  
Historical linguistics  
Writing systems  
Structure of a particular language

## Concentrations:

*In college:* a language or group of languages, e.g., Germanic languages (such as English, German, Flemish); Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian); Semitic languages; or East Asian languages. However, few undergraduate linguistics programs are large enough to support concentrations.

*If you go on to grad school:* phonetics/phonology; morphology/syntax; semantics; typology; psycholinguistics; sociolinguistics; computational linguistics; historical linguistics; structure of a language or group of languages.

## What the study of this major is like:

Linguistics focuses on the similarities among the world's languages, as well as on the unique characteristics of individual languages, in order to understand those traits and the people who speak the languages. The major usually begins with an introductory course, followed by courses in phonetics and phonology (the study of speech sounds), morphology (the structure and function of words), syntax (the way words combine to form phrases or sentences), and semantics (meaning and use of words).

A major in linguistics may consist solely of such core courses. More often, however, the major also includes the study of specific languages, or families of languages, and the communities or societies that speak them. You use comparative and historical studies of both well-known and little known languages and dialects. In addition, you may explore how children acquire language; how people produce and comprehend written, spoken, and signed language; how language disorders are diagnosed and treated; how languages can be taught most effectively; how the use of particular languages and dialects has been fostered (or discouraged) by government policy; and how computers can be programmed to recognize and produce language.

Most students find linguistics intellectually challenging—in a word, hard. In introductory courses, you will most likely be given samples from languages you don't know and be asked to describe the languages. Once you get the hang of it, you will probably enjoy such exercises and be ready for the next stage of training, in which you'll explore linguistic theories and their explanation of observed data. At first, this approach may be frustrating, because you won't understand how the theories work. But once you feel comfortable doing a linguistic experiment, you might begin a project for an advanced course or an undergraduate thesis. You may, in fact, find yourself working on cutting-edge studies while still an undergraduate.

There are two major approaches to the study of human language: formal and functional. Formal study emphasizes the structure of languages and requires good data-handling and reasoning skills. Functional study emphasizes the use of language and may involve laboratory or field research and statistics. Most linguistics programs stress one or the other of these approaches. A few (mostly larger) departments combine them successfully.

Other majors you might like:

**Native American studies**

**Anthropology**

**Classics**

**Speech/rhetorical studies**

**Communications**

**Computer science**

Foreign language teacher education

Language interpretation/translation

**Philosophy**

**Psychology**

**Communication disorders**

**American Sign Language (ASL)**

Questions to ask colleges:

Is the major offered by a linguistics department, by another department that includes linguistics, or as an interdisciplinary program? Are courses in the core areas of linguistics (phonology, syntax, semantics) regularly offered?

Is there a strong study-abroad program that enables students to learn a language or strengthen skills in one they already know?

Can students do independent research with a faculty member in linguistics, work in a linguistics lab, or do an industry internship (for example, in computational linguistics) as part of the undergraduate degree?

Career options and trends:

High school language teacher\*; college professor\*; translator; consultant.

The linguistics major can also prepare you for jobs in international business, government service, public relations, software design, marketing, publishing, advertising, English as a second language (ESL) teaching and research, health-related professions (speech pathology and language disorders), industrial research and development (speech recognition, text analysis and interpretation, electronic dictionary preparation, artificial intelligence, and speech synthesis), and law. Some of these fields require graduate study.

Linguists are playing a prominent role in high-tech industry, primarily in information retrieval and analysis and in speech technology. The recent bursting of the high-tech bubble has restricted career opportunities in these areas, but the ongoing need for improved speech, language, and information technologies should expand career opportunities in the near future. Good language teachers are always needed in the United States and overseas (especially English teachers), as are speech and language therapists, for children and adults.

**Insider's viewpoint:**

"I volunteered as a conversation partner for foreign students, which was fun and provided some insight into how people learn foreign languages. Anything that puts you in contact with native speakers of as many languages as possible is great, because for linguistics classes you very often need native informants to provide data."

—Andrea, senior, University of Washington

**For more info:**

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