The Informational Interview

Outreach Made with Context

A WORKSHOP FOR HUMANITIES & INTERDISCIPLINARY MAJORS

Course context: Upper-level seminar within the major (e.g., gender studies, English, history, philosophy). Best for weeks 11–14 of the semester, after students have built out their LinkedIn Skills section in lesson 2 and have spent the term following and engaging with their target contacts.

Class length: 75 minutes

Prerequisite: Students completed lessons 1 and 2. They arrive with a LinkedIn profile, a Skills section (15–20 skills drawn from real job postings), 5–10 professionals they've been following and engaging with, and a short list of 3 contacts they've been considering for informational interviews.

THIS LESSON IS STEP 3 OF A 3-PART CAREER READINESS ARC

1 **COMPLETED** — LinkedIn as networking infrastructure: identify 5–10 target professionals to follow and engage with

2 **COMPLETED** — Translating academic skills into professional language: build out the LinkedIn Skills section

3 **TODAY** — The informational interview: 3 outreach requests, made with context

Before you teach this — constraints on free LinkedIn accounts:

Free LinkedIn accounts limit outreach in two ways that directly shape this assignment. First, a free account can attach a personalized note to only a small number of connection requests per month (currently around 3, capped at roughly 200 characters each). Second, a free account **cannot send a direct message to someone the student isn't already connected with** — following a person is not enough to message them. So for any contact a student only follows, the entire outreach has to fit inside a 200-character connection-request note, not the longer message most people picture. These limits change periodically and have tended to get more restrictive, so confirm the current numbers before you teach this (see Faculty Prep, Step 2). Section 6 and the student worksheet build in the workaround.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, students will:

- Distinguish an informational interview from a job request, and explain why the first is easier to grant and more useful to a student
- Understand what "context" means in outreach and why context-rich requests get answered more often than generic ones
- Draft a personalized outreach message to at least one real contact using a structured template
- Prepare 3–4 substantive questions that draw on the skills vocabulary built in lesson 2
- Leave with a concrete plan to send 3 outreach requests within a defined window

Faculty Prep (60–90 minutes)

Step 1: Send one informational interview request yourself, or recall a recent one. The exercise lands differently when it comes from someone who has done it, including the part where you waited days for a reply or got no reply at all. You don't need to share the results with students, but having a real message in mind helps you teach the difference between an outreach note that works and one that gets ignored.

Step 2: Check LinkedIn's current free-account limits, and assume your students are on free accounts. As of this writing, a free account can send personalized connection-request notes to only about 3 people per month, each note capped near 200 characters, and cannot message anyone it isn't already connected to. Verify these numbers before class—LinkedIn revises them without notice and the trend has been toward tighter limits. If the constraint has changed, update the prepared example and the student worksheet to match. The practical upshot for planning: most students will be sending short connection-request notes, not long messages, and email is often the better channel when a student can find an address. This constraint shapes sections 3, 4, and 6, so it's worth understanding before you teach.

Step 3: Collect 2–3 real outreach messages to use as examples. Anonymize them. Aim for a range: one strong message that could only have been written to its specific recipient, and one weak message that reads like a mass send. Students learn the principle faster by comparing a good and a bad version than by hearing the rule stated. If you don't have real ones on hand, the prepared example below gives you a before-and-after pair you can use directly.

Step 4: Prepare one outreach message to walk through as a class. Pick a plausible contact—an alum in a field your students care about, or a professional whose work connects to the seminar—and draft the message live during class so students see the thinking, not just the finished product. Concrete is better than generic. Draft both forms: the full message (for email or an existing connection) and the 200-character version (for a connection-request note).

Step 5: Decide the assignment parameters before class. How many requests (the arc assumes 3), by when (2 weeks works well), and what counts as complete. The key decision: complete should mean *sent*, not *answered*. Students control whether they send a careful, personalized message. They do not control whether a stranger replies. Grading on replies punishes students for a variable they can't move and teaches the wrong lesson about outreach. Note that the free-account cap of roughly 3 connection-request notes per month lines up with the 3-request assignment—but only if students don't spend those notes elsewhere first, so tell them to reserve them for this or possibly send connection requests in advance to people whose posts they've engaged with.

Step 6: Prepare a fallback for students whose 3 contacts fell through. Some students will arrive with their lesson-1 contacts no longer reachable, or will realize the people they followed aren't a fit. Have a backup path ready: the alumni database, your own network, the career center's contacts, or a LinkedIn search using the skills vocabulary from lesson 2. No student should leave unable to start because their original list didn't hold.

Class Plan

1 Reframe: what an informational interview actually is — 8 MIN

Most students hesitate to reach out because they're carrying a misunderstanding about what they're asking for. They imagine they're asking a stranger for a job, or for a large favor, and they feel they have nothing to offer in return. Both assumptions make the request feel like an imposition, so they don't send it.

The reframe: an informational interview is a request for 20–30 minutes of someone's perspective on their work and their field. It is not a job application. The person isn't being asked to hire, refer, or evaluate anyone. They're being asked to talk about their own experience, which most people are willing to do, especially for a student who has done some homework. The ask is small and bounded, and that's exactly why it works.

Name the difference in plain terms. "Can you help me find a job?" puts the burden on the other person and invites a no. "I'd value 20 minutes to learn how you moved into program management" is a request they can respond to in one sitting. The second request is easier to grant, and it produces something more useful than a job lead: it produces understanding of how a field actually operates, in the words of someone inside it.

Close the reframe by connecting it to the two lessons before this one. Lesson 1 built the network—these are people students have been following and engaging with, not cold outreach to strangers. Lesson 2 built the vocabulary—students can now describe their own developing skills in language that travels. This lesson puts those two things into a conversation.

2 What "context" means and why it works 12 MIN

The single thing that separates outreach that gets answered from outreach that gets ignored is context. A message with context could only have been written to this one person. A message without it could have been sent to a thousand people, and it reads that way.

Context has three layers, and a strong message includes all three:

Context about them. Something specific about the recipient's work, path, or something they posted. This is what lesson 1's following-and-engaging was building toward. "I read your post on transitioning from teaching into instructional design" shows the message wasn't copied and pasted to several people.

Context about you. A concrete detail about your own direction, described in the skills vocabulary from lesson 2. Not "I'm a student interested in your field," but "I've been building research and stakeholder-communication skills through my thesis work, and I'm trying to understand how those show up in program roles." This gives the recipient something to respond to.

Context about the ask. Bounded and clear. Twenty minutes, a call or coffee, to learn—not a job, not an open-ended commitment.

Why it works comes down to response rate. A generic message signals mass outreach, and mass outreach gets deleted. A message that demonstrates the sender knows who they're writing to and can say something specific about their own direction signals genuine interest and respect for the recipient's time. People respond to being seen. The context is the evidence that they have been.

3 Modeling a strong outreach message 12 MIN

Project the outreach template (in the student handout) and fill it in live using your prepared example. A good outreach message has five parts and stays short—four to six sentences. Longer messages get skimmed or skipped.

The five parts: an opening line that establishes the connection or context (how you found them, what you noticed); one sentence on who you are and what you're working toward, in skills vocabulary; the specific, bounded ask; an easy out that makes saying no comfortable; and a warm close.

Show the difference with a before-and-after. The weak version and the strong version make the same request, but only one will get a reply.

WEAK VERSION	WHY IT FAILS
"Hi, I'm a college student interested in working in your field. I'd love to pick your brain about how to get a job in this area. Would you be able to give me some advice? Thanks so much, any help is appreciated."	Generic—could go to anyone. "Pick your brain" is a worn phrase that signals a large, vague ask. No context about the recipient, nothing specific about the sender, and the request ("get a job," "some advice") has no boundaries.

STRONG VERSION	WHY IT WORKS
"Hi Dana—I've been following your work since your post on moving from classroom teaching into instructional design, which is a path I'm trying to understand. I'm a senior finishing a gender studies thesis, and I've been building research, synthesis, and stakeholder-communication skills that I think point toward program and learning design. Would you be open to a 20-minute call in the next few weeks so I could learn how you made that move? Completely understand if your schedule doesn't allow it. Either way, thank you for the work you share here."	Opens with specific context about Dana. Describes the sender in concrete skills language from lesson 2. The ask is bounded (20 minutes, a call, to learn). It offers an easy out. It closes warmly without groveling.

Point out what changed. Both messages are polite. Both are brief. The strong one simply proves, in every line, that it was written to one particular person by one particular sender who knows what they're trying to figure out.

The 200-character version, and why students need it. The strong example above runs well over 500 characters. That's fine for email or for a contact a student is already connected with. But on a free LinkedIn account, a student cannot message someone they only follow—and most of their contacts are people they follow, not connections. The only way in is a connection request, and the personalized note on it is capped near 200 characters. So students have to write a compressed version that keeps all three layers of context inside one tight line. Model it live next to the full version:

> *"Hi Dana—your move from teaching into instructional design is a path I'm trying to understand. I'm a senior finishing a gender studies thesis, building toward learning design. Open to a 20-min call?"* *(197 characters)*

It loses nuance, but it keeps context about the recipient, a concrete line about the sender, and a bounded ask. Teach students to write both: the full message for email or existing connections, the compressed note for connection requests. Remind them the free account allows only about 3 of these personalized notes per month, so the note has to be good the first time—and these limits shift, usually tighter, so they should check the current cap when they sit down to send.

4 Workshop: draft your outreach 20 MIN

Distribute the outreach worksheet (below). Students draft a real message to one of their 3 contacts, using the five-part structure and the three layers of context.

Individual drafting (12 min): Each student writes a complete message to one specific person on their list. Push them to name the context about the recipient first—if they can't find anything specific to say about the person, that's a signal to go back to LinkedIn and read before they write.

Peer exchange (8 min): Students swap drafts with a partner and check three things: Could this message only have been sent to this one person? Is the ask bounded and clear? Is there an easy out? The partner marks any line that could have appeared in a mass message.

Circulate and watch for the common failure modes:

- **Too long.** Over-explaining the sender's whole story. Cut it to the one sentence that matters.
- **The "pick your brain" ask.** Vague and overused. Replace with a bounded request to learn one specific thing.
- **Excessive apology.** "So sorry to bother you, I know you're really busy, this is probably annoying..." undermines the sender. One easy out is enough; a pile of apologies reads as low confidence.
- **Asking for a job.** Redirect to asking for a conversation. The job ask comes later, if at all, and not in a first message.
- **No context about the recipient.** The most common and most fatal. Send them back to read something the person wrote.

5 Prepare your questions 12 MIN

This is where lesson 2 pays off again. The wrap-up of that lesson distinguished the generic question from the better one. The generic question—"What does a day in your life look like?"—is fine, but it positions the student as someone looking for a general orientation. The better question shows the contact what the student brings and makes the conversation more useful for both people.

Students draft 3–4 questions for their interview. A strong set mixes four kinds:

- **A path question:** how the person got into their role. People answer this easily and it surfaces the non-obvious moves.
- **A field question:** what the work actually involves, or what's changing in it, that an outsider wouldn't know.
- **A bridge question:** the lesson-2 move, framed around the student's own developing skills. "I've been building [skill] through [specific work]. What does that capability look like in your role, and how did it develop for you over time?" This makes the contact think and shows the student isn't starting from zero.
- **A referral question:** "Is there anyone else you'd suggest I talk to?" This is how informational interviews compound. One good conversation often produces one or two more contacts.

Provide the question bank in the handout so students who freeze have a starting point to adapt rather than invent.

6 Logistics, follow-up, and etiquette

6 MIN

Cover the practical mechanics quickly:

- **Where to send, and the free-account limits that govern it.** Spell this out for students; most won't know it. On a free LinkedIn account, a student cannot message anyone they only follow—messaging requires an existing connection. And they can attach a personalized note to only about 3 connection requests per month, each capped near 200 characters. So the realistic paths, in order of preference: (1) if the student has the person's email, use it—no limits and room for the full message; (2) if they're already connected, message directly; (3) otherwise, send a connection request and treat the 200-character note as the outreach itself. Because the monthly note quota is small, a generic note wastes one of the few they get—spend them on the strongest version. Confirm the current limits with students in class, since LinkedIn changes them and they've trended tighter.
- **Timing expectations.** Replies are not immediate, and silence is not rejection. One polite follow-up about a week later is appropriate. After that, let it go and move on.
- **During the interview.** Be on time, respect the time limit they agreed to, take notes, and do not ask for a job. The conversation is the goal, not a stepping stone they're being watched performing.
- **After the interview.** A thank-you note within 24 hours. If the contact offered a referral, follow up on it and report back—closing that loop is what turns a single conversation into a relationship.

7 The assignment and wrap-up

5 MIN

State the assignment clearly. Send 3 outreach requests within the next 2 weeks. Complete means sent—personalized, with context, following the structure from today. It does not mean answered, because students can't control replies. The deliverable is copies of the 3 messages plus a short reflection.

Close the arc. Lesson 1 built the network. Lesson 2 built the vocabulary to describe what students can do. Lesson 3 puts both into conversation with real people in the fields students are trying to enter. The skills compound, and so do the relationships—each conversation can open the door to the next one. Students who finish this arc leave the seminar with infrastructure most graduates don't build until years later, if at all.

Reflection *(optional — for written assignment or end-of-class discussion)*

- Which of your three messages was hardest to write, and what made it hard?
- Where did you feel the urge to be generic, or to over-apologize? What did you do instead?
- If you were on the receiving end of your own message, would you reply? What would make you more or less likely to?

Articles for Faculty (and optional student reading)

HUMANITIES-TO-PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATION

Career Exploration Is a Humanities Research Project (Inside Higher Ed) — frames the job search, including informational interviews, as a form of qualitative research. The most directly useful piece for showing students that the skills they already have are the right tools for the conversations this lesson assigns. Carried over from lesson 2 because it bridges both.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW PRACTICE

Advice for Making the Most of Informational Interviews (Inside Higher Ed) — practical guidance on preparing for and conducting the conversation, including how to develop a standard set of questions you tailor to each person. Good to assign alongside the question-prep section.

Tip for Effective Informational Interviews (Inside Higher Ed) — a short piece noting how closely informational interviewing resembles the interview-based research methods many humanities and social-science students already know. Useful for reducing the anxiety students feel about the format.

CAREER-EXPLORATION RESOURCE COLLECTIONS

Career Exploration for Humanities and Social Science Students (Columbia GSAS) — a structured resource set on identifying and contacting people in fields of interest. Useful as a fallback source of contacts for students whose lesson-1 list didn't hold.

Career Exploration Tools and Resources (University of Pittsburgh, Humanities Engage) — a practical toolkit aimed specifically at humanities students, including guidance on using LinkedIn and informational interviews together.

> *Faculty note: verify each link before assigning; URLs and titles shift over time. The NACE Career Readiness competency framework referenced in lesson 2 remains a useful second vocabulary source here as well.*

From Contact to Conversation

The goal of this exercise is to write one real outreach message to one real person on your contact list—a message that could only be sent to them.

> **Know your LinkedIn limits before you send.** On a free account you can't message someone you only follow—you have to be connected first. And you get a personalized note on only about 3 connection requests per month, each capped near 200 characters. So: use email if you have it (best—no limits, room for the full message); if you're already connected, message directly; otherwise your connection-request note *is* your outreach, and it has to fit in roughly 200 characters. Since these are so limited, make each one count. LinkedIn changes these limits and they've been getting tighter, so check the current numbers when you sit down to send.

STEP 1

Choose your person.

Pick one of the 3 contacts you've been building toward this semester. Before you write anything, find one specific thing about their work or path you can refer to—a post they wrote, a role they hold, a move they made.

Person to interview:

One specific thing I can refer to:

STEP 2

Build your message from the five parts.

PART	YOUR DRAFT
Opening / context about them (how you found them, what you noticed)	
Who you are + what you're working toward (one sentence, skills vocabulary from lesson 2)	
The ask (bounded: 20 minutes, a call or coffee, to learn)	
The easy out (one line that makes "no" comfortable)	
Warm close	

CONTINUED →

From Contact to Conversation *(continued)*

STEP 2, CONTINUED

Now write the 200-character version. If you're not connected to this person and don't have their email, your outreach has to compress the five parts into one tight line that still keeps all three layers of context—about them, about you, the ask.

My connection-note version (≤200 characters):

STEP 3

Check it.

Could this message only be sent to this one person? Is the ask bounded? Is there exactly one easy out and no pile of apologies? Trade with a partner and have them mark any line that could appear in a mass message.

Notes from my partner:

STUDENT HANDOUT · QUESTION BANK

For Your Informational Interviews

Pick or adapt 3–4. Aim for a mix of path, field, bridge, and referral.

PATH QUESTIONS

→ How did you move into this role? What were the steps that aren't obvious from the outside?

→ Was there a decision or turn in your path that mattered more than it seemed at the time?

FIELD QUESTIONS

→ What does the work actually involve day to day that someone outside the field wouldn't expect?

→ What's changing in this field right now that you're paying attention to?

BRIDGE QUESTIONS (use your own skills)

→ I've been building ______ through ______. What does that capability look like in your role, and how did it develop for you over time?

→ Which of the skills I'm developing now would matter most in work like yours?

REFERRAL QUESTION

→ Is there anyone else you'd suggest I talk to as I learn about this field?

STUDENT HANDOUT · OUTREACH TRACKER

Send 3 requests within 2 weeks.

"Complete" means *sent*, not *answered*.

#	PERSON	SENT (DATE)	FOLLOWED UP (DATE)	REPLY?	NEXT STEP
1					
2					
3					