

WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Cultural Differences and Rhetorical Style

Problem: Without realizing it, we often assume that writing strategies from our native language will apply universally. However, there isn't one natural, universal, or superior standard for writing. Different cultures often have very different rhetorical styles for organization, voice, reader/writer responsibility, and citations. This means that reading and writing in a second language present challenges beyond simply using the right words and the correct grammar.

- Tips:*
- **Talk to your professor** to make sure you understand the organization and voice patterns that she or he expects.
 - **Read examples** of the type of writing you are being asked to produce. As you read, you may want to **outline the structure** and model your organization after this outline. Ask yourself: How does this organization differ from the way I would address the topic in my native language? Where is the main idea presented? What sort of evidence is used to support the argument? Is the voice more formal or informal, more prosaic or poetic? Does the writer try to make things clear for the reader or does he or she expect the reader to do the work?

Planning and Time Management

Problem: Silva (1993) found that people writing in a second language tend to do less planning and thus have more problems with content and organization than when they write in their native languages.

- Tips:*
- **Plan before you write.** Listing, outlining, and other visual brainstorming exercises (diagrams, mapping, clustering, etc.) can help you to organize your thoughts and effectively communicate the point you want to make.
 - **Writing in a second language will take more time than in your first language.** Accept this and plan for it.

Grammar and Vocabulary

Problem: As we write, grammar and vocabulary are our most obvious challenges, because foreign grammar does not come naturally to us, and it is difficult to find the appropriate words without sounding repetitive. For this reason, we run into another problem: we often focus *too* much on details and ignore the bigger ideas that we are trying to communicate.

- Tips: Drafting*
- **Don't translate!** Sentence constructions from your native language will be very awkward if you translate them word for word into another language. Work in the foreign language as much as possible during the writing process to keep your mind in the mode of that language.
 - **Put away your grammar book and dictionary** until you complete your first draft. Looking up every other word or grammar rule will slow down your process and decrease your writing momentum.

- Tips: Revision*
- **After** completing your first draft, use your dictionary, thesaurus, and grammar book to **edit your mistakes** and clarify your ideas.
 - Read back through and **make a list of the words and phrases you overuse.** Then try some **vocabulary exercises** to find synonyms for repetitive words. **Seek out transition and connector words** that will vary your phrasing and help your writing flow more smoothly.
 - **Ask for feedback** from native speakers when appropriate and allowed.
 - Keep a **running list of mistakes that your professor corrects**, and use this as a checklist when you revise each paper to avoid repeating the same errors.
 - Finally, **don't stress too much about grammar and vocabulary**, and focus instead on **communication**, the most important reason we write.