



ESL-L2: Writing in US Contexts

For ESL (English as a second language) or L2 (second language) students, what does ‘fluency’ in English require?

The ability of ESL-L2 students to produce essays in English that are grammatically, syntactically, and rhetorically indistinguishable from those written by NS (Native English Speakers).

- What does the scholarship say?
 - Haugen (1986): writers who are isolated for years from first language (L1) culture produce texts in their L2 which carry noticeable L1 features;
 - Most ESL-L2 students maintain strong associations with members of their L1 rhetorical communities;
 - The distinct viewpoints and experiences of these communities influence members’ thoughts, actions, and their patterns of communication (for many generations).

What does learning ‘Standard Written English’ mean?

The ability to pay attention to the linguistic conventions of SWE, and how to use SWE rhetorical conventions.

- What do these conventions emphasize?
 - In the US, SWE rhetorical conventions generally emphasize:
 - strong sentence-to-sentence connections
 - linear prose
 - deductive logical arrangement
 - US cultural experiences + sociopolitical contexts = language as a worldview

What are some of the main differences between essays written by NS and ESL-L2 students?

- Surface errors: grammar and mechanics
- Organization: how to connect ideas (paragraph to paragraph and within paragraphs)
- Presentation (and location) of an identifiable, analytic thesis or main point
- Levels of abstraction and concreteness
- Redundancy or repetition

How instructors read, respond, and evaluate student writing

- ✓ We ask instructors to be aware of any preconceived set of expectations: as readers, we come to a text (student texts included) with the sum of previous reading experiences.
- ✓ We ask instructors to be aware of “contrastive” rhetorics: ‘good’ writers or writing vs. ‘bad’. Students for whom English is not a first language and/or who are writing in US academic settings for the first time are in the process of learning to adapt to a linguistically heterogeneous college writing class.
- ✓ We remind instructors that all students can learn the ‘norms’ of SWE rhetorical conventions: we have to teach these conventions (start with syllabus; effective assignments; overall course design).

What helps students learn writing conventions, become stronger writers, and more confident writers?

- ✓ When instructors are specific in their comments and feedback on papers. Saying that a paper (or a part of a paper) lacks clarity, focus, or organization will not result in the student learning enough to make changes to their revision or to have a stronger next assignment.
- ✓ When instructors avoid ‘surface-level tunnel vision’ and students focus more on ‘global’ concerns vs. ‘local’ concerns: studies have shown that evaluative focus on sentence-level mechanics may result in long-term changes in student writing (Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986; Land and Evans, 1987; Land and Whitley, 2011).



STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS – responding to common writing concerns

Make sure to review and refer to “Appendix B: Glossary of Grammatical Terms” in the Turabian book (*Student’s Guide to Writing College Papers*) pp 253-257.

- Wordiness: break down a long, wordy, or confusing sentence by pointing out character subjects and action verbs.
 - Who did what? Find the action in the sentence; make that the verb.
 - Who performed the action? Make that the subject of the sentence.
 - SEE: CHAPTER 14 in the Turabian book
- Verb tense: if you are having trouble using the correct tense, ask:
 - When do you want this (action or subject) to happen in time?
 - Is this only now or is it ongoing?
 - Is this just in the past or is it continuing now?
 - SEE: CHAPTER 14 in the Turabian book
- Word Choice: international students often have a larger vocabulary than the average student graduating from a US high school (because of testing requirements).
 - If an instructor circles a word and comments “word choice,” ask them to provide you with some alternative words to use. Ask for suggestions about different words to use that might mean what you are trying to say (also ask this during a visit to the Writing Center).
 - SEE CHAPTER 14 in the Turabian book
- Article use: a, an, the, this, these, that, those
 - Ask which article to use if these are circled as “errors” in a paper.
- Introducing quotations and paraphrases: the “quotation sandwich” concept
 - SEE CHAPTER 9 in the Turabian book
- Interpreting evidence: don’t just drop in quotes
 - SEE CHAPTER 9 (pp 97-98) in the Turabian book + WC RESOURCES
- Organization: group together the repeated subjects, ideas, or topics in your paper
 - SEE CHAPTER 7 (especially pp 79-82) in the Turabian book
- More strategies for paragraph organization, completeness, and coherence
 - SEE WRITING CENTER RESOURCES ON “PARAGRAPHS”

STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS: HOW TO “UNPACK” A WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Some of the most common types of writing assignments will ask you to:

- Summarize an argument
- Critique a text
- Assess or evaluate a text
- Analyze or interpret a text
- Define a concept
- Explain an event, idea, or phenomenon
- Take a stand on an issue, or recommend a course of action

The first step in responding to an assignment is to identify and understand which of the above (may be a combination of two of the above) the professor is asking you to “do” in the assignment. If you do not know or cannot clearly identify the type of writing assignment, visit your professor during office hours and ask them to clarify which type of assignment you will be writing.