

## Writing Across Borders Part 1 Transcript

It is August at Oregon State University and the international students in this classroom are busy preparing for fall term today they are learning how to write papers that will meet American expectations. For them completing an essay not only means operating in a language other than their native tongue it also means operating in a cultural and educational system quite different than what they're used to.

Jean Kaunda is familiar with the wide range of challenges that face international students as they write for American classrooms. Now finishing her PhD studies in public health she notes that some of her experiences were frustrating.

One of my first essays in one of my nutritional class was to write this critical essay about a school lunch program in one of the middle schools here in Corvallis. For me it was hard because we were supposed to write to criticize the way they serve the food to the children, whether it's nutritionally balanced, whether they follow the federal regulations. So for me it was so hard to criticize - I mean to write everything ok they don't follow this they are not supposed to do this they don't do this because back if I go back to my country where I come from Malawi before 1994 it was so hard for us to criticize anything related to government. It was so hard because if we do that where I mean most of the times people were arrested or something done to them by the government, so I didn't write it I mean critically the way my professor wanted it to be, so I got a bad grade on that one because I think it wasn't deep enough critically.

Question:

Choose the correct statement:

- a) In many countries, they have the same problems with the school lunch program, so they do not see anything wrong to criticize.
- b) They do not want to be critical of anything in their host country.
- c) In many countries, criticizing the government is not allowed. Students don't have the experience thinking this way.

Despite the challenges that students like Jean face, international students continue to come to the United States to study in large numbers. In 2004 for example, over 600,000 students from other countries were studying in American colleges nationwide that means that one in 20 students were from another country. At many schools that number was closer to 1 in 10, but while the presence of international students is changing American classrooms very little is done to prepare teachers.

[Music]

### Part 1: Examining Cultural Differences in Writing

Most scholars would agree that research into culture and writing began with the publication of Robert Kaplan's 1966 article *Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education*. In it, Kaplan introduced the idea of contrasts of rhetoric. The notion that people use different rhetorics when they write within different cultures. He went so far as to draw diagrams representing how people from different cultures write the article created a flurry of interest in research but it also drew criticism about oversimplification and that it might lead people to think ethnocentrically the consensus now is that while it's important not to make assumptions that all students from a particular country or

## Writing Across Borders Part 1 Transcript

region will all write alike, that it's just as important not to overlook culture either, By doing that it's easy to assume that American preferences in writing are natural or the most logical way to do things when they are in fact shaped by culture political values and educational practices as well as a 2,000 year rhetorical tradition dating back to Plato and Aristotle. For students from other cultures and rhetorical traditions the values and expectations of American writing are anything but natural.

### **Maho Isono (Japan, Anthropology)**

The Japanese traditional writing style is a little bit different from American writing style and the way I learned in my elementary school is Japanese essay is to be divided into four part which is *ki sho ten ketsu* and there's a very famous Japanese poem that teaches us how to write Japanese essays. And this is a way what I learned. The title is the daughter at String shops and *ki* part is there are two daughters at the string shop in Osaka and *sho* part is the oldest daughter is 16 years old and the youngest daughter is 14 years old and this is a *ten* part. Japanese Samurai will kill their enemy by arrows and the *ten* part is Japanese daughters at string shop will kill guys by their eyes so in *ten* part we suddenly start talking about totally different things from the thesis so leaders can surprise like what we are talking about it's totally different from the story about the Japanese no daughters but when you come to the conclusion you can see how this part is connected to the conclusion part so *ten* part takes very very important role in Japanese essays. This is a way we gets the attention from the reader.

### **Ana Sanchez (Ecuador, Business)**

What I have noticed is that Americans usually will introduce their main point or say exactly what they want to say right at the beginning. It's almost like organizing in the introduction the main point and then they develop their main point. Well in Ecuador what we like to do or we sometimes tend to do is that we don't present the main point at the beginning. We go around it and around it until we finally get to the point which is in the middle. It's kind of like this idea of circularity that we go around and round it until we get to it. A good example of this is if I want to talk about let's say that yesterday I went to a party and two guys who were fighting got in a fight this is how an Ecuadorian will tell the story. I will start by saying remember Pablo. Remember how Pablo used to be in love with Mary and remember Juan remember that he also liked Mary. Well yesterday when we went to the party they started drinking and you know. But and I will keep go on and give you all these details and maybe by the time I tell you yes Pablo and Juan got in a fight because of Mary you already have a complete idea of home or almost 95% of what I'm trying to tell you. In the case of an American if I meet somebody from for coffee and it's a good friend of mine as an American we sit down she will just go ahead and tell me yes and you know what happened yesterday Juan and Pablo got in a fight because of Mary.

Organizational preference is perhaps the most visible way culture influences writing

## Writing Across Borders Part 1 Transcript

that's why scholars like Kaplan focused on it. A culture influences writing in ways that go beyond organization. For example on the most global level it shapes reader expectations and helps define which writing practices are acceptable and which are not.

### **Khan Le (Vietnam, Pharmacy)**

In Vietnam you risk the chance of getting penalized if you go outside the classroom and put in extra information other than what's lectured in the class from the teachers. An example was when I was younger I was given a topic of writing about a typical meeting in the classroom and just describing a class meeting and so I was here in the classroom writing about the atmosphere of the class and I thought that wasn't enough so I looked out the windows and I started writing about the schoolyard, how peaceful it is during study hours and I started mentioning about the trees and the leaves falling and I got marked marked down for that because I wasn't supposed I wasn't supposed to write outside about outside the classroom. In the United States for example in my history of medicine class I didn't do very well as I thought I would on my paper on my first paper because I didn't go outside the classroom and finding information to put down on my papers so the main difference here is that extra information and the students own opinions are so valuable in essays.

### **Question: True or False**

When giving feedback to a paper that adds additional but unrelated information, the teacher would penalize the paper and say it is not coherent.

### **Pablo Zapata (Colombia, Engineering)**

Well if you know Americans are really direct sometimes there seem to be rude to me looking from a Columbian perspective. Let's see when I'm working on the street in Columbia in Bogota my city if I meet somebody on the street I stop and if he saw a man I shake his hand if he's a woman I kiss her. Here I mean people just pass and they don't say hello. Sometimes they ask me how are you doing and they don't wait for my response so I think that's kind of rude and that that I think that is reflected in the way Americans write papers they go straight to the point. They don't take the time to establish a relationship between the writer and the reader and I think that's important in my culture. What happened I have a personal example two weeks ago I wrote an email to my friends in Colombia and I asked them when was the birthday of one of our friends and I went straight to the point. I didn't say anything else and they reply their reply was you are so rude so unpolite you didn't ask us how we were doing you didn't say anything about you and they were right they were completely right.

### **Maho Isono**

In American writing it is very important for you to make everything very clear but in Japanese writing this is a bit different because readers are supposed to participate in the story much more than in American writing. It means that for example when Japanese in Japanese writings there are so many pronouns and there are so many

## Writing Across Borders Part 1 Transcript

pronouns but this is reader job readers job to understand what this she is and what this he is and what this it refers to and I tend to do that when I'm writing American like English essays and everyone asked asked me like who this he is and who this she is I don't understand, but for me, guess what? This is your job to understand it. But this is a very different part in American writing like you need like us author has responsibility for their writing but in Japanese writing readers have more responsibility to understand and participate in the story.

Question: Choose the correct statement

- a) In North America, the reader is responsible to decode the writer's message.
- b) In North America, it is the writer's responsibility to make the reader easily understand the message.
- c) In North America it is equally the writer's and the reader's job to decode the message.

Khan, Pablo and Maho illustrate just how much expectations can vary from culture to culture but preferences for style and word choice can have an equally dramatic impact on written communication particularly in an academic environment For international students the kind of voice style and tone that American instructors expect is often much different than what they've been taught or what feels natural.

### **Setenay Yener (Turkey, Theatre)**

In America I have noticed that the writing professors want short concrete understandable sentences. That's the way to write your composition, but in Turkish what what we do is we use long and elaborate sentences because we think that it's more poetic and it's it flows better that way, and you read it for the sake of getting some kind of a pleasure out of it not necessarily just to understand the point and also we pay attention to the fact that we need to have these essays look good so we have different punctuation punctuations that are just designed for visual pleasure like three dots when you write a sentence you end it with three dots it indicates that the thought goes on.

### **Deema Al-Qaissi (Jordan, Pharmacy)**

Actually exaggeration is acceptable in in the Arabic way. On the contrary sometimes it's acceptable or prefer to use exaggeration it helps the writer to write it helps him to express his feelings and describe whatever he wants to describe and to attract the reader to his writing and the reader would think that the writer is a good writer. And as an example of that that maybe like he has the money enough to fill the seat actually nobody has money to fill the seat but that's indicator that he is rich. Unfortunately American teachers want maybe won't see this point of writing and they would just take that the American Way is the only way. No there is a lot of ways in the in

## Writing Across Borders Part 1 Transcript

the world and it might detect points or it might affect the evaluation of the students that he doesn't know how to write.

Question:

Which of Kaplan's patterns of discourse would this style of writing represent. How would you describe the North American style of writing?

### Lily Xu (China, Engineering)

Well I've noticed that citation is a very big part of academic paper here in the United States. People are very aware of the copyright issues you know what the source is Where is it from? What picture is this magazine from? and very detailed aside everything but in China it's not just not a big thing at all I would just say for example in the article I don't remember who said this but this is you know roughly the sentence or just place a picture instead of an article without you know citing the source and the more I think about it I think you know a big part of the reason is because the culture differences because in China we're so used to sharing everything and we are you know we're a country with more than 5,000 years of Asian culture and also on top of that we're having Communism and you know the idea of that is everybody's supposed to be able to sharing everything so it's just very common and natural for people to think you know it's okay to share.

### Setenay Yener

When I first got here and started my college education and started taking writing lessons I was really surprised at all the formats and all the guidelines that I had to pay attention to because you had to do everything in a certain way like 12 font and double spacing and all these things that I had never learned before I have never used a computer before I came here and I was really surprised about that because there's all these guidelines that you have to follow and all these formats that you have to pay attention to but then again America we look up to the education system that they have in America because it's more free and it's more relaxed so I was surprised to find out that they can be just as strict as our country's.

Addressing cultural issues isn't an easy task it's difficult to determine when a student's cultural background is playing itself out in writing and even more difficult to decide how much to adapt teaching style to accommodate cultural differences however one thing is clear teachers cannot take for granted that all students particularly those from other countries

