

Recognizing Cultural Influences on Writing

Here you can learn about

- **how your national and/or educational background could be influencing how you write.**

The information sheet is connected to Information Sheet 17a: How a German Background Might Influence Written Academic English. An associated worksheet is also available.

Writing Cultures

Many linguists agree that people learning to write academic English as a second language do not only need to learn the vocabulary and grammar. In addition, they also need direction in understanding how their previous education or cultural background affects their texts. Although a good understanding of what is expected in academic written English is gained from reading academic papers, specific instruction on how culture can affect writing could be beneficial.

An Example

Chinese texts often follow what is called a Ki-sho-ten-ketsu pattern, which is a classic structure in Chinese narratives. A text with this structure would start with KI (Begin one's argument) and continue on to SHO (Develop it). This development is then followed by TEN (Introduce a twist), tangentially related sub-themes, to Western readers often appearing unrelated. The reader is then left to weave all three elements into the KETSU, or conclusion. Here is an example of an argument based on this Chinese structure

- Introduction (*ki*): *There are two major ways of referring to ideas from other papers: direct quotes or paraphrasing.*
- Development (*shō*): *In a direct quote, you repeat in your text the exact wording from the original, generally in quotation marks. In paraphrasing, you use your words to rephrase what the original author wrote.*
- Twist (*ten*): *Walking up a hill is more strenuous than walking along a valley, but it makes you fitter.*
- Conclusion (*ketsu*): *Although using a direct quote is easier, your paper and your command of the English language will improve if you learn to paraphrase well.*

This structure can appear confusing to readers who are expecting a more Anglo-Saxon structure in an academic text with everything clearly related.

The structure can also appear in parts of texts, e.g., in paragraphs. Normally, a paragraph in an English text would be on one topic. Placing a TEN (twist) in a paragraph written in English can confuse the reader. See Information Sheet 10: Paragraphs.

Specific German/English Differences

Much research into specific German/English differences in texts stems from the last century, and it is not clear whether those results are pertinent today. Here are some of the factors that could be negatively affecting how German-speakers write in English.

- 1) Responsibility for text comprehension
- 2) Use of noun synonyms
- 3) Use of digressions
- 4) Use of meta-text
- 5) Structure of sentences
- 6) Length of paragraphs
- 7) Symmetry in a text (parallelism)

More detailed information on these factors is provided in Information Sheet 17a: How a German Background Might Influence Written Academic English

Useful Resources

Connor, U. 1996. *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second language writing*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Kassabgy, N., Ibrahim, Z. & Aydelott, S. (eds.) 2004. *Contrastive Rhetoric: Issues, Insights and Pedagogy*. Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press.

Or, for a less academic approach to writing good non-fiction English:

Zinsser, W. 2012. *On Writing Well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. 30th ed. New York. Collins.

Final Comments/Tips

- If your research work includes supervising Master or Bachelor students from other countries, consider how they might need time and support in adapting to expectations when writing in a second language.