

Student "Rules" for Writing in Other Cultures

I have worked with international students for many years. The American rhetorical style is often very difficult for them because Americans approach the written word differently than the rest of the world. These are direct quotations from some of my foreign students expressing their frustrations. I think these insights might help Americans understand foreign student's struggles and frustrations and could aid these students venture into American rhetorical style.

Kathy Mapes
Director Academic Support Center
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

- Costa Rica--"Our culture is not used to going directly to the point. We go around it. We want the reader to make a little effort to understand the main point. We like long sentences."
- Mexico--"OK if that's what you want, I'll cut out all the interesting stuff. Gee, you Americans are boring."
- Russia--"We don't have a strict sentence order like in English."
- Spain-- "The introduction is very long and you can talk sometimes about situations that don't have any relation to your topic. You don't have to document ideas from books."
- Turkey--"Students never use pens in my country; only teachers do."
- Guatemala--"We use long sentences and say the ideas in different words. Don't worry about footnotes. That is not important in my country."
- El Salvador--"Put something beautiful in a description, some metaphors and similes. Don't tell directly what you are going to talk about, but while people are reading your composition, they can do a good guess about the topic."
- China--"Don't be too obvious with your ideas. You don't want your reader to think that you think he's stupid."
- Peru--"Put some flowers in your essays. Use lots of metaphors."
- Egypt--" If you think of or find information not related with your topic, at least mention it in your essay and that you did not develop it because it is not part of your work."
- Japan--"My opinion is not important at all. I don't want to be different."
- China--"I must not insult your intelligence by telling you directly what you could figure out by yourself."
- Algeria--"Punctuation is not important."
- Indonesia--"In my language we don't have to worry about past tense, present tense, and future tense."
- Guatemala--"Don't worry about footnotes. That's not important in my country."
- Vietnam--"Make sure you have strong evidence in your paper, and all the information you find must have nothing to do with the former government. Otherwise you can be put in jail."
- Most telling of all--
"I was putting things down that I didn't want to put. Every time I got the thoughts that were natural to me, I had to look for other ones. It felt as though I was being aggressive to myself. I was really mad sometimes, because I felt as if something was going against me."