

ESOL Writing: Developing Your Style

This section examines style issues across languages, some differences in types of English, and provides steps you can take to develop your writing style. This is because the clarity of your writing depends on your writing style, also. A writing style is a writer's unique way of communicating with words. It is the way you put together your sentence(s). Your writing can bewilder the reader if you fail to organize your ideas coherently. Of course, coherently organizing and explaining your ideas in writing is a difficult task for most writers and a daunting one for ESOL graduate student writers. As ESOL graduates come from diverse cultures, rhetorical styles, and languages, understanding these factors can help you improve your writing in English. The figure below demonstrates how stylistic, literary, and genre conventions impact how writers across cultures and language groups write in different styles.

- Culture at play – direct versus less direct styles of rhetoric
- Thought patterns – how to structure a discourse in writing
- Genre differences – different types of written genres require different writing approaches
- L1 at play – applying L1 structures (incl. grammar) to L2 writing

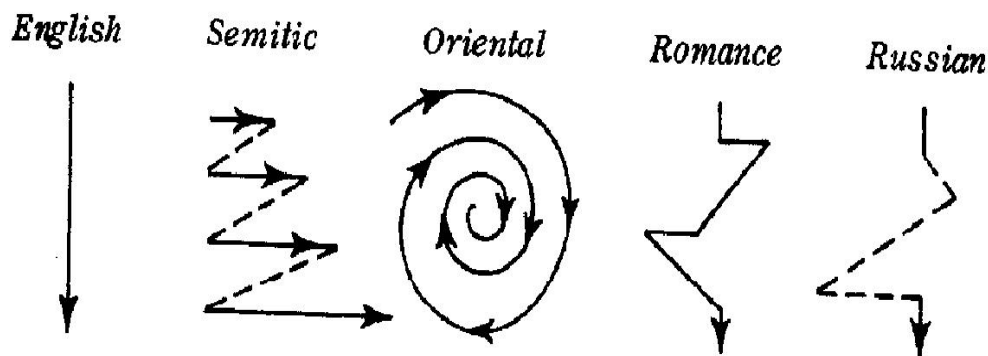


Figure from Kaplan, R. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. Language Learning 16.

- **English** – (also includes Germanic languages such as German, Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish) Communication is direct, linear and does not digress or go off topic.
- **Semitic** – (for example, Arabic or Hebrew) Thoughts are expressed in a series of parallel ideas, both positive and negative. Coordination is valued over subordination.
- **Oriental** – (Languages of Asia) Communication is indirect. A topic is not addressed head on, but is viewed from various perspectives, working around and around the point.
- **Romance** – (Latin-based languages such as French, Italian, Romanian and Spanish) Communication often digresses. It is fine to introduce extraneous material, which adds to the richness of the communication.
- **Russian** – Like Romance languages, Russian communication is often digressive. The digression may include a series of parallel ideas.

As is true of all communication styles, there are variations that depend on purpose or genre as well as individual differences that make communication even more complex. However, understanding these broad styles can be useful for finding your own perspective on writing as an ESOL writer. If your writing style usually has significant digressions, you can learn to incorporate those into your academic writing in a more focused way (such as



CENTER FOR
TEACHING & LEARNING

through end notes). If you favor parallel discussions, you could instead consider how useful that structure is for literature reviews and comparative writing.

Overall, however, academic English prioritizes straightforward writing with clear outlines; academics do not enjoy being “surprised” by sudden changes in argument, style, or data. Academics want to see clear thesis statements, a familiar structure to each genre of writing, and a clear introduction and conclusion, among other things. This may require adjustment of your preferred communication style in order to adhere to faculty, journal, and discipline preferences. The final section of this handout goes into further detail regarding the development of your own writing style. For further support regarding style, please check the following resource:

Williams, J. M., & Colomb, G. G. (2013). *Style: lessons in clarity and grace* (11th ed.). Pearson.

Quirks of American English: Idioms, analogies, and expressions are among the most challenging phrases to learn in other languages. US English is full of such expressions, even within academic writing. Whether you wish to use them in your own writing, or simply understand them in other writing, you will want to learn about them. Here is a list of many common American phrases and their definitions: <https://7esl.com/american-idioms/>

As you gain more exposure to US idioms, expressions, and other unfamiliar language, we recommend discussing them with other graduate students or faculty. This can be very productive for both you and them. It is common that native English speakers struggle to explain certain idioms, because their implicit meanings are part of a shared cultural vocabulary. Talking through them can help you and your colleagues better understand their use, and they will realize that expressions are not universally understood, which can lead to clearer writing for everyone involved. Asking for clarification may seem challenging because it can cause a faculty member or colleague to become defensive, but it is often a productive discussion.

Other Dialects of English: International writers should also remember that there are frequent differences between American English and other dialects of English (incl. British English, which is a popular form of taught English in many countries). You are probably aware of common changes, such as the change of -ou to -o in words such as colour/color and the shift from s to z in words such as organise/organize. Here is an article with some further changes between the two dialects: <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/what-are-the-differences-between-american-and-british-english>

It is also important to consider that many scholars who grow up speaking and writing in English (especially in the US and UK) do not realize that the way they write is culturally specific. It comes naturally for them to use expression and non-standard structures, and they often do not consider the difficulty that many ESOL academics have in interpreting those creative rhetorical choices. Writing styles often incorporate spoken style choices, which are more heavily influenced by sociocultural factors. As a writer, you can decide whether you want to learn to use these expressions and non-standard structures, but you should become familiar with the common metaphors, analogies, and cultural points of contact. For example, a native-born U.S. author may state that their research “hit it out of the park,” a cultural expression rooted in the sport of baseball. You do not need to use those expressions, but it is useful to know that this means their research was a great success.



CENTER FOR
TEACHING & LEARNING

Developing Stronger Writing: The following section addresses the broader principles of effective academic writing, including the process of improving your own writing using well-written examples. The goal of effective academic writing is to communicate your ideas clearly to the audience. Every discipline has different standards for writing, so in order to become an effective writer it is important to read examples that are well-written and come from different perspectives. When reading an article, take notes on the way it is written as well as the content. We recommend reading articles and other content from academics first, but also consider magazines, newspapers, and journals outside of your own discipline. Here are a few questions and points to consider when reviewing examples:

- Was the document written by a single author, or by multiple authors?
- What backgrounds do those authors come from, and how might that influence the writing style of the document?
- Does the author use the same sentence structure, or do they frequently change the length, punctuation, and style?
- What transitions and connections does the author use as they move from one part to the next part?
- Does the author make use of metaphors, analogies, culturally specific examples, or idioms? Are those difficult to understand, or do they help the author's argument?
- Who is the audience? Are they other scholars, a general audience, politicians, or another group?
- What parts did you enjoy reading?
- Are there any sentence structures, phrases, or other style choices you could adapt for your own writing?

An ESOL graduate student should focus on expanding and developing their own style of writing—take what you learn from other writers, including other international scholars, and incorporate it into a style that works for you. If you feel comfortable writing in a technical style, continue writing that way, but work to reduce typos and occasionally include different sentence structures and transitions. If you want to write using some colloquialisms and figures of speech, practice writing with them and get feedback from other scholars. Writing styles exist on a spectrum, from direct and short writing, to dense and rhetorical writing, to creative and informal writing.

Asking for Support: Writing is always a negotiation between what you want to say, the tone you use, the expectations of your discipline and audience, and the interventions from your advisors and other scholars. Remember to ask for clarification, to meet with your faculty, get them to revise your work, and to take their comments seriously. If you are struggling to interpret a comment, please contact Graduate Support at CTL and we can help you. Keep in mind that for most of us, our faculty advisors are not experts in all forms of writing, but they understand the genres within the discipline, and can write effectively about the content they specialize in.

When you ask for advice, be willing to listen, but always interpret and consider their comments in this context. Your goal as an ESOL graduate student is to become an effective writer for your own purposes. In developing your own writing, remember that finding a writing style involves more than mimicking somebody else's writing, though that can be tempting. You want to incorporate other styles into your own.

Also, please remember that many other students are happy and willing to help you as you develop your writing (and speaking as well). It can be useful to create a peer review group within your department or group of friends. Having a mixture of academic and social English practice will improve your usage of both. If you require more substantive review, the consultants at Graduate Support are always happy to help in a consultation or via our Graduate Online Writing Lab.

Examples of Effective Writing: Here are some example papers that showcase effective writing across a range of disciplines:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249252344_Native_or_non-native_Who%27s_worth_more

<https://davidcard.berkeley.edu/papers/njmin-aer.pdf>

https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/45831/Zimmerer_2-13n130n4ip6rs4.pdf?sequence=1

<https://jb.asm.org/content/182/10/2675.short>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1129726>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3659790>

Other References and Resources:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ960446.pdf>

<https://sites.google.com/site/introtoacademicwritingforesol/oer-textbook>

<https://www.nu.edu/student-services/writingcenter/writingacrossthecurr/workingwitheslandint/>

<https://www.nypl.org/help/community-outreach/immigrant-services/learn-esol-online-resources>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/teaching-multilingual-students/>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/style/>

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/writing_style/style%20/Style%20Introduction.html

<http://blog.tesol.org/great-grammar-academic-writing-resources-for-advanced-ells/>

<https://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/resources/ell/esl-resources/>

<https://blog.taaonline.net/2014/10/10-tips-for-eslefl-academic-writers-and-everyone-else-too/>

<https://vwcceng111.pressbooks.com/chapter/chapter-4-the-writing-process/>

<https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/explore-our-resources/developing-an-academic-writing-style>

<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting>

<https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>