

# HELPFUL PRACTICES FOR WORKING WITH INTERNATIONAL/BILINGUAL STUDENTS AND THEIR TUTORS

## Ideas for Approaching Analysis

*Confidence/Ownership challenges:* Depending on their cultural and educational backgrounds, words like “argument,” “tension,” “controversy,” “critique,” and “conflict” can seem disrespectful and even intimidating. Students have told me they avoided bold thesis statements and active voice in general because “it’s rude” or “I don’t know anything.”

### *Strategies:*

- Sara became bolder once we discussed “arguing” as “contributing to a conversation.” She felt more comfortable knowing she could acknowledge strong parts of someone else’s argument while still questioning a possible problem or suggesting a change.
- Jake made progress when he realized that anyone, even an inexperienced writer, could write about any opinion, even a simple one, as long as he or she supported it.
- Several students felt more confident when they learned to qualify the nature and intensity of opinions—a concrete step towards stating a decisive stance. (See page 4 of “A Writer’s Word Bank” on the Student Resources webpage.)

*Argument structure:* International freshmen typically place analysis only in the conclusion paragraph or at the end of body paragraphs. Often, unframed, report-style summary is seen as “evidence.”

### *Strategies:*

- Many students made progress once we redefined terminology: a writer’s “conclusions” became “analysis” or “argument.”
- Conventional U.S. format seems like a math equation with unknown variables, so I tell international students the expected function of sentences. They progress more easily once I have directly stated which sentences in an essay need analysis (e.g., thesis statement, transitions, sentences after cited material, and concluding sentences). At times, I have suggested how many sentences to use so that they have a quantifiable guidepost for argument development.
- Often, students want to use a Writing Center session to plan a paper or draft a thesis statement, two processes which depend on analysis. I have never been able to accomplish these tasks without directing the students to summarize source material first, whether verbally or in writing.
- If they have been previously required to write a summary for one of the sources, they produce better work and we can construct argument more

efficiently within a session. If a professor has directed all students to include one paragraph of summary after the introduction, we can practice framing the summary as necessary background for the coming analysis.

- Some students skip evidence and jump to analysis. These students can also benefit from the strategy mentioned above: explain the function of sentences within a paper. For example, Alex created a better paper after he realized that in every paragraph, he needed to introduce the example or concept and then dedicate one to two sentences explicating its details. We discussed this explication in relation to his evidence and analysis.

### **Ideas to Support Grammar Development**

*Sentence-level challenges:* International and bilingual students often assume their grammar and word choice are poor, which leads to low confidence. Sometimes, they mistake these sentence-level issues as the only problem with their writing.

*Ways to comment on student grammar:*

- Always comment on grammar, but not only on grammar. If you comment on grammar only, students do not believe they need to improve global issues.
- Avoid commenting on every single grammar mistake. State that there are mistakes and that you have prioritized two consistent errors for them to study this semester. Or, state that there are mistakes and that you have highlighted several sentences as particularly problematic.
- If you comment in the above ways, students and tutors will have clear starting points. Also, students will know they have grammar work to do without feeling as overwhelmed.
- When commenting on grammar, use the same terminology found in the Hacker guide under “Detailed Menu” at the end of the book. Students will learn more quickly if we use the same terminology with the same reference points in a resource they can review with a tutor or independently.
- When commenting, avoid informal, idiomatic language. For example, avoid “a hair too repetitive” and write “some repetition.”
- When commenting, use your best handwriting and know that not every international student can read cursive. Track changes can be quite helpful, but students often express confusion regarding where the edit is needed.

*Ideas for extra or more specific grammar support:*

- Give students basic review materials that you like; ask tutors to expand on these materials in a tutoring session.
- *Example:* One professor gave a student the “Verbs” section of a style manual, and he brought this to our standing appointment. We read it together and wrote example sentences. We then read his drafts and matched times/contexts in the draft to examples/rules we had studied. I have had similar sessions using Hacker and a chart of the 12 English Verbs.

- Show students high standards and ask tutors to help them understand how to reach those standards.
- *Example:* For international/bilingual students, recognizing and following conventional grammar or word usage can be a mysterious process. One professor used track changes to rewrite two pages of a student's paper the way she herself would have using correct grammar, conventional phrasing, and formal vocabulary. The student and I studied all of the changes and thought of other ways to achieve similar effects. Over several weeks, the student learned how to connect ideas using better grammar with more style.
- Show them how to use online resources for both vocabulary and grammar support in order to find conventional phrasing and prepositions. For an example, look up "control" on [ozdic.com](http://ozdic.com) and [oxforddictionaries.com](http://oxforddictionaries.com). Show them the "Word Families" and example sentences on [vocabulary.com](http://vocabulary.com) as well.
- *Example:* During a conference with them or when commenting on grammar, show/tell them to use the resources above when addressing usage errors. Students and tutors prioritize directions from professors, so if you, a professor, suggest this groundwork in a conference or in written comments, tutors can visit the website and expand on ways to use it with your student.

*A note about articles (a, an, the):*

Often, college-level, non-native speakers make article mistakes for two reasons: 1) they are unaware of common collocations [e.g., *an/the* increasing number *of* X], or 2) they have attained so many advanced skills that some basic skills have been neglected, such as article use.

- Try to introduce concepts and discipline-specific terminology with examples of the correct articles (e.g., **an** indicator, **the** GDP of Canada). If this language is on the syllabus, assignment sheet, or class handout, tutors can reinforce the correct phrasing with confidence.
- *Collocations:* Help students prepare for or check for correct article use with key words or expressions necessary in their paper by showing them the following resources: [oxforddictionaries.com](http://oxforddictionaries.com), [macmillandictionary.com](http://macmillandictionary.com), and [ozdic.com](http://ozdic.com). For an example, look up the word "increase" on these sites; you will see example sentences that show article usage and accompanying prepositions in common collocations (e.g., *increase **the** number **of**, increase **by** X, **the** increase **in** Y*).
- *Basic skill review:* Direct students to the "Using Articles (a, an, the) Correctly" handout on the Writing Center website under Student Resources for International and Bilingual Students. The chart shows basic rules of the most common mistakes and offers practice sentences.

- *Specific rule support: The Article Book* by Tom Cole, which breaks down article usage into fifty rules and fifteen exceptions, is in the Writing Center for anyone to use. This book can help professors, tutors, and students pinpoint consistent errors. For example, if you notice that a student repeatedly breaks Rule 18, which is "Do not use an article when generalizing about abstract nouns [The Peace is our goal.]," you or a tutor can give the student a practice exercise just for this rule. The book also includes comprehensive quizzes that could be used as a general review or diagnostic.

### **Ideas for Approaching Citation**

*Plagiarism Challenges:* International students come from different curriculums in which different skills are valued, such as memorization versus argument development. As a result, they may have confusion about when and why to cite or experience emotional resistance to citing.

#### *Strategies*

- Help students accept citing as scholarship by explaining how argument points that reference additional research or general corroboration will be perceived as more credible, more persuasive. Or, try to motivate them to cite more by asking them to reflect on how citations have helped them in their own academic endeavors.
- Give students concrete examples of what to cite so they can begin recognizing common versus uncommon knowledge. In sessions, I try to help them notice names, titles, dates, uniquely phrased points, and precise details. They may also benefit from reading "Plagiarism in the U.S." on the International/Bilingual Student Resources webpage. Writing Center tutors can review assigned reading or tutorials regarding plagiarism with clients. Such sessions especially benefit international students.
- Sometimes defining "common knowledge" can be a problem for international students. They may have more historical background memorized than the average US reader or studied a topic not typically taught in US high schools. For example, Olga did not cite a sentence that included a specific date. When I suggested she do so, she replied, "Why would a reader doubt this date? Everyone knows it." Tutors explain that "common knowledge" is basic information anyone around the world could find easily in one Google search.
- Language skills contribute to plagiarism because students' vocabularies are still developing. Since they are learning new words as they read, rephrasing brand new vocabulary into paraphrases is an extra hurdle. Also, many international students memorize material well, which can result in their inability to distinguish between their own thoughts and an author's.

- *Example:* Henry learned to avoid inadvertent plagiarism by taking notes while reading and planning paragraphs around a piece of evidence he could physically point to in an actual text. He then compared his paraphrases and sentences to the original material in order to recognize repeated phrases.
- Another language skill may also add to unintentional plagiarism: distinguishing stance. For example, Ken’s professor asked him to cite one of his opinion statements because it read like a fact and was placed after a topic sentence before analysis statements. In our session, we revised the statement to include the words “evidence may suggest,” signaling to readers that Ken was introducing a piece of evidence.

### Considerations for Assignments

*Providing support while facilitating choice:* What happens in class before an international student begins writing a paper substantially impacts what they produce. If you require a visit to the Writing Center for a paper, consider what students and tutors have to work with in terms of completed reading assignments, assignment sheets, and class notes. Also, know that writing topics may have personal or cultural dimensions not immediately apparent.

#### *Developing Vocabulary for Writing*

- As writers, international students must manipulate key words and ideas using academic language, which means class discussion about a required text is extra important for them. When they come to a session before the class discussion about the text, tutors can help them develop reading strategies and begin anticipating vocabulary. When they come to a session after the class discussion about a text, tutors can help them manipulate key words, word forms, and synonyms.
- Writing Center tutors can also help international clients utilize vocabulary resources and discuss vocabulary-building strategies. For example, [vocabulary.com](http://vocabulary.com) has a list-making option that students could use and review with tutors. Students can also record lecture vocabulary in their class notes to review later with a tutor. If you present these strategies, tutors will be better able to address the issue in a session.
- If an assignment is based on a text(s) rich with idiomatic language, international students will definitely need class discussion to support comprehension—and possibly additional resources as well. Joe read an idiom-rich *Rolling Stones* article twice with me and twice on his own before feeling confident enough to analyze its meaning. Greg read the introductions of several idiom-filled online book reviews with me, and if we had not

consulted *yourdictionary.com* together, he would have misunderstood several key ideas.

- In some cultures, taking notes is not the norm. Encourage international students to practice writing notes in English as a way to develop their overall English skills. Link note-taking to vocabulary acquisition and a pre-writing skill. Suggest they at least record questions you ask the class because each one has a point that could help them connect papers to course themes; similarly, any summary of an author's point they write while reading is a possible piece of evidence for a paper. For extra motivation review NPR's article *Attention, Students: Put Your Laptops Away* by James Doubek on [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).
- International students also need support in recognizing and using common expressions or sentence constructions relied on by academic writers. Discussing examples of such language in assigned texts can be helpful as can requiring them to produce several examples of their own using this language.
- *Example:* One professor had students complete an evidence-framing exercise in *They Say/I Say* with tutors. In the session, I helped Leah practice introducing and interpreting three quotes using conventional phrasing, expressions, and punctuation. By completing this exercise with me, a tutor, Leah was exposed to more permutations of possible language and more precise connectors than she would have been on her own. Moreover, because I knew about this exercise, we referred to these three correct examples later in the semester.
- Isolating a skill such as the one above is quite helpful for international students. Once they study several variations of just one element, such as an introduction to a quote or the first sentence of a paper, they can better create one of their own. Tutor guidance can reinforce the common, logical pattern behind the different vocabulary or sentence constructions in the examples they read and the ones they draft. If you provide an ideal example for your discipline, tutors will guide students more efficiently.

### *Building in Diplomacy*

- When given the freedom to choose a topic, some international students may fear making the wrong choice. However, boredom or lack of motivation may result when they can only write about certain texts or themes that do not resonate with their personalities or cultures. As a tutor, I have noticed that partial choice seems most motivating for international students and leads to more productive brainstorming.
- *Example:* One professor's students discussed several key readings and videos in class. Students felt supported because, thanks to class discussions, they understood some source material very well; however, when they found the

required additional resources, they could bring in other subject areas and approach the material from different perspectives. This guided choice neutralized both fear of choosing inappropriately and resentment about writing on a topic considered too personal, trivial, or “boring.”

- An international student’s grammar errors influence their grades. Consequently, proofreading is an especially important step for them. Tutors often find that the most effective proofreading sessions occur after a paper has been graded. Since students can no longer consider what to say, they can focus on how they said it. Building a proofreading stage into assignment deadlines might result in more grammar development and higher grades with less angst for all involved. For example, if professors said they would accept a “sentence-level edits only” revision (guided by a tutor and due within a certain timeframe), international students might be motivated to proofread—and systematically improve their grammar.