

# TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S PROGRAM IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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## HOW CAN WE BEST SERVE MULTILINGUAL WRITERS?

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THREE VERY SUCCESSFUL UNDERGRADUATE MULTILINGUAL WRITERS

By Kate Vieira  
Writing Across the Curriculum

One of the strengths of the UW-Madison is the rich linguistic diversity of our students. The UW enrolls approximately 3000 international students, as well as many students from within the U.S. who speak languages other than English in their communities.

While almost all students find writing at the college level challenging, research suggests that it can often be more difficult for multilingual writers—from gathering materials to organizing ideas to revising the final draft.

So what can we, as instructors, do to serve multilingual writers best? I've recently had the pleasure of interviewing three successful undergraduate multilingual writers who offer their answers to this question. Of course, these three students do not represent all multilingual writers on this campus. Yet it is still instructive to hear about their experiences with writing here at UW and their advice for instructors.

### Questions for Mijung

#### What was your best experience with writing at the UW?

My best experience was in a Comm-Arts class last semester. When I asked the professor about my topic and argument, she wanted to talk with me more. She asked questions like, "Why do you think this?" and "Why don't you add a discussion of that?" She listened to my points and really liked my ideas!

Then I asked her if she would mind reading my paper before it was due. She read my paper and said that my ideas made sense, but that the style could be better. She helped me to make certain expressions more idiomatic and told me her opinions about my

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**Mijung Kim is a junior majoring in communication arts. She moved to the U.S. from Korea for college.**



**Mohamed Yusuf graduated in 2007 with a B.A. in business. Born in Somalia, he completed high school in Egypt and moved to the U.S. for college.**



**Erika Lopez is a senior majoring in political science and economics. She moved to the U.S. from Ecuador at the age of 13.**

### SPECIAL ISSUE ON MULTILINGUAL WRITERS:

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# HOW CAN WE BEST SERVE MULTILINGUAL WRITERS?

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arguments. It was a very special experience for me, and I learned a lot from it.

## What kinds of challenges and talents do you bring to the class as a multilingual writer?

My biggest challenge is with time. In essay tests, for example, it seems like native-speakers can think as they are writing, but I don't have time to think. So I memorize by heart all my notes and even examples. Also, for take-home papers, I have to revise three or four more times than a native speaker.

Learning the American academic writing style was also challenging. Unlike the Korean academic style, it seemed to require repeating points over and over again. I had only read magazines in English before coming here. And they have a very different style—no thesis statement! So I learned to write in the American style through a lot of trial and error.

As for talents, Korean culture helps me to have a different point of view towards everything. For example, in my Comm-Arts major, I had to write a movie script. Because I had learned in class what makes Hollywood films exciting, I based my script on the Hollywood style. But I also added some Korean pop culture to it. I made it more moving because Koreans often like to see some warmth in a film. So I added those kinds of elements to the script, and my TA really liked it.

## Questions for Mohamed

### What was your best experience with writing at the UW?

My best experiences were in a business communications class and a philosophy class. In the business communications class, the instructor knew that my writing needed special attention and graded it accordingly. For example, we had to correct mistakes in memos. She told me not to worry if I couldn't get everything, but to try my best. This attitude really encouraged me to work hard in that class, because I knew an "A" was achievable. The professor also told us that she would consider the ways our cultural backgrounds impacted our writing and participation. Her paying attention to my culture was really important because my culture has a great impact on my worldview.

In the philosophy class, I had a chance to express my ideas and write a meaningful argument. We discussed important topics like the duty to reduce starvation, gun ownership, and animal rights. It is easy to argue a point when you are speaking, but writing an argument

was challenging. At first, I had a lot to say, and my thoughts weren't organized, so my argument didn't make sense. When I started following the rules of writing arguments and learned how to approach and develop certain points, I was better at making myself clear. I think that's an important tool nowadays to decrease miscommunication between different cultures and to reach a better understanding of others' points of view.

### What recommendations would you give instructors?

Know students' cultural backgrounds; show empathy; ask students what problems they have with writing; show them examples of successful writing; show them how to polish their drafts; make them love writing by raising their interest level; and don't put them on the spot unless you forewarn them.

## Questions for Erika

### What was your best experience with writing at the UW?

In one English class I took, I had assignments that allowed me to express my thoughts. I could write what I wanted to. But the professor was tough! Even if he thought it was a great paper, he would still give me points to work on. Sometimes it made me mad—to work so hard on a paper and still have red marks and criticism. But I appreciated his comments because they were clear.

### What are the challenges and talents you bring to a class as a multilingual writer?

My challenge and my talents are the same: I can be very descriptive! Part of the reason I am descriptive is that I continue to be unsure about my English and want to make sure my writing is understandable to the audience. In Spanish, for example, sometimes there is just one word that would explain everything I want to say. But in English, it might take me a whole paragraph to explain.

It can be frustrating, though, when I try very hard to make something clear, and am very descriptive, and the professor *still* doesn't understand me. I don't want professors to kill themselves trying to understand my writing. But they should ask: "Is this person trying to be clear? Is this person trying to communicate?" Of course, if I am being unclear, I want to know. But I also appreciate it when professors understand the effort I am making.

### What advice do you have for instructors?

I need guidance about the specifics of what instructors are looking for. Examples and models help a lot. Also, keep in mind the language barrier! Some ideas might not come out clear because of cultural or linguistic issues. Instructors should be conscious of this. ♦

**In Spanish, sometimes there is just one word that would explain everything I want to say.**

**But in English, it might take me a whole paragraph to explain.**

# WHAT EVERY INSTRUCTOR SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON WRITING



Assistant Professor Mariana Pacheco  
ESL/Bilingual Education Area,  
Curriculum and Instruction



Sandra Arfa  
Director,  
English as a Second Language



Julie Minikel-Lacocque  
Dissertator,  
Curriculum and Instruction

By Kate Vieira  
Writing Across the Curriculum

**H**ow do our cultural backgrounds influence our writing? In the past, scholars have made broad generalizations about, for example, how “Asian” writing differs from “Western” writing. More recent research suggests, however, that our cultural backgrounds do not determine that we are destined to write in one and only one cultural mode. Still, culture can influence writing in some important ways. So how can instructors address the impact of students’ cultural backgrounds on their writing and help all students communicate more effectively?

To answer this complex question, we interviewed three UW specialists: Mariana Pacheco is an assistant professor in Curriculum and Instruction in the ESL/Bilingual Education Area; Sandra Arfa is the director of UW’s English as a Second Language Program; and Julie Minikel-Lacocque is a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction who is writing her dissertation about multilingual Latino/a undergraduates at the UW.

## **KV: What kinds of cultural expectations and experiences can influence students’ writing?**

**SA:** Instructors should remember that multilingual students come from diverse backgrounds—maybe they had very little writing instruction or maybe they had a very different kind of writing instruction that may seem to interfere with the style of academic writing your course requires. For example, things like what kind of information should be cited and how a paper is logically organized can vary in different cultures. Some academic cultural styles do not require an article’s main argument to be laid out at the beginning of a paper. Such differences

can make it hard for students to make the jump to a particular style of writing in your discipline.

**MP:** The kinds of writing we ask students to do in the university, for example, can be really difficult for people because it requires a great deal of culturally-specific knowledge. Graduate school was difficult for me as a Chicana/Latina, especially since I felt like there were certain theoretical and philosophical authors I was already supposed to know about, and I didn’t have that knowledge yet. Also, I still identify myself as an English-language learner and wonder how my experience in academia differs from that of native English speakers. So, it’s important for instructors to re-think our assumptions about what our students already know or should already know.

**JML:** I work with multilingual undergraduates who went to high school in the U.S. Most of them did not go to a white, middle-class school, and they are acutely aware of not having had the privileges that many of their college classmates have had. They see that their peers are coming in with these great academic writing skills and they aren’t necessarily. It is an issue of race, class, and language, and instructors need to be aware of all of these elements.

## **KV: What are ways to teach with writing that are culturally inclusive?**

**MP:** Consider the kinds of cultural expectations embedded in your writing assignments. We have to be really thoughtful about what we expect students to know already as they participate in college-level writing. For example, as an instructor here in Madison teaching about Latino/a students, I have to be careful not to expect all students to know what terms like

*(Continued on page 4)*

# WHAT EVERY INSTRUCTOR SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON WRITING

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“Chicano” and “Latino” signify. I have to be explicit about what the labels I use signify. Generally, either breaking down the assignment with students or creating flexible assignments that allow students to build on what they know—not what you think they should know or what the academy thinks they should know—can help.

Because students are all going to interpret assignments differently, I create assignments that build on each other. This sequencing gives me a sense throughout the semester of how students are making sense of the reading, the class, and the subject so that I can go back into the classroom and help students where they’re struggling.

**SA:** One way to make accessible writing assignments that contain culturally-specific knowledge is to have a session or two to give students the knowledge that they need to be successful at the assignment. Another possibility that is less time consuming for instructors would be to have some small-group brainstorming time so students can share their cultural questions and knowledge. Another possibility is to provide help looking for resources.

**JML:** For the student population I research, that one-on-one relationship with the instructor is really important. Students appreciate individual specific feedback on their writing. One research participant kept getting bad grades on a writing assignment, but the instructor didn’t give any specific suggestions on how to improve! Additionally, evaluation systems like portfolios that take students’ progress as writers into account can really help. Instructors also can help hook students up with university resources by actively encouraging students to work with the Writing Center and even showing them where the Writing Center is. The

students I work with often already feel out of place, and so they don’t necessarily feel comfortable navigating the bureaucracy that could help them with their writing.

**KV: What are ways that instructors can use the cultural differences students bring to their writing positively?**

**It is an issue of race, class, and language.**

**Instructors need to be aware of all of these elements.**

**JML:** Often, the students I work with bring passions, life experiences, and a way of communicating that is an asset and can be celebrated and honored in a classroom where writing is being used. In addition to teaching more traditional academic writing, instructors can honor these differences by giving all students some flexibility about the genres in which they write, letting them reflect on course content with, for example, poetry or expository writing.

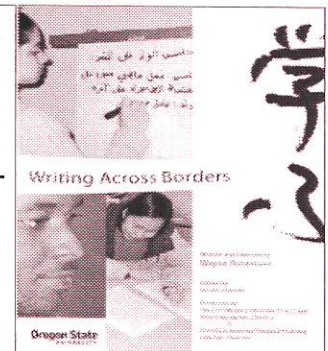
**SA:** Sometimes international students do not feel comfortable contributing to a group. These are smart students who think people don’t have patience to listen to them. Think of what we’re losing! It helps to do some free writing before talking. This activity gives all students more

time to prepare to speak and helps to include all voices in the classroom.

**MP:** I teach graduate courses in education, and I am very explicit about the fact that all of us come with our own social, ideological, and cultural biases. So one way I use cultural differences positively is by attempting to be very explicit about them. One of our very first writing tasks requires students to acknowledge that bias and to reflect on how that bias will affect the kind of research they conduct. But these cultural differences are also essential to expanding the ways we write about, think about, and explore particular educational issues. ♦

## Looking for a time-efficient way to increase your knowledge about multilingual writers?

Check out the film *Writing Across Borders*, directed by Wayne Robertson of Oregon State University. Only thirty minutes long, this film presents international students’ perspectives on writing in U.S. universities, accompanied by advice for instructors from ESL specialists. The website offers a discussion guide for those who are using the film for professional development purposes: <<http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/wab/>>



# TOP TEN WAYS TO SERVE MULTILINGUAL WRITERS

**1 Acknowledge how talented multilingual writers are!**

**2 Resist the tendency to lump multilingual writers together in your thinking.** The UW student body comes from diverse continents, countries, cities, and home environments. Similarly, all of our students have different minds, unique bodies of knowledge, and varying degrees of proficiency in English and in their home language.

**3 Talk often with multilingual students.** Holding one-on-one conferences throughout the semester to work on prewriting and drafts can benefit all students. Let your students do a lot of talking, especially to make sure they understand and have a good start on your writing assignment.

**4 Get to know the multilingual writers in your class!** They bring intellectual curiosity, a range of experiences, and a unique perspective that your entire class can benefit from. Plus, you serve all students better when you get to know them.

**5 Think carefully about unspoken assumptions** about successful writing in your course. All students benefit from explicit expectations for each assignment communicated in both writing and in conversation.

**6 Incorporate models into your curriculum.** For example, if you're assigning a thesis-driven paper, supply your students with models of thesis-driven essays from your course or discipline.

Models may be articles that you've already built into the syllabus or anonymous samples of student writing obtained from students who've given you permission to use their essays as teaching materials. Spend time in class discussing and critiquing features of the models.

**7 As much as possible, give multilingual writers "more of everything"** that helps monolingual writers: clear assignments, time for multiple drafts, individual conferences, models of good writing, etc.

**8 Prioritize which errors to mark.** Rather than commenting on all errors, you should try to identify a few of the most common *kinds* of problems that make it difficult for you to understand a sentence—sentence-boundary problems, for example—rather than minor slips with articles.

**9 Differentiate between errors that do not interfere with meaning and those that do.** Errors that do **not** interfere with meaning can involve:

- articles, e.g., "We must protect the nature" (Leki, 1992, p. 114);  
Leki, Ilona. *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992.
- prepositions, e.g., "to mention about" or "to discuss about" (Leki, p. 119);
- verb forms, e.g., "By **stop** the destruction of the Amazon valley..." (Leki, p.116)

**10 For errors that do interfere with meaning,** signal that communication has broken down and ask a question that might help the writer clarify his or her thoughts and/or wording. ♦

## Global English on the Horizon by Kate Vieira

Consider the following trends: Globally, "non-native" English speakers are gradually outnumbering "native" speakers. This shift is occurring in part because the population of "native" English speakers is declining, and in part because English is becoming the lingua-franca of many "non-native" English speakers. Such demographic realities mean that in place of one standard English, World Englishes with various standards are being developed that deserve respect. In fact, Standard Edited American English might soon become just one of many dialects.

What might the consequences of such a shift be for instructors who use writing in their courses? I propose the following possibility: Instead of helping multilingual writers adapt their writing to monolingual standards, we might instead spend some of our instructional time teaching monolingual writers to understand, adapt to, and write in different varieties of English. Some researchers believe that the time for such pedagogical change is now, and that we should be teaching both monolingual and multilingual writers to switch among and even to merge different dialects and languages to communicate with diverse global audiences. ♦

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**Want to learn more about teaching with writing?**

**Check out these workshops for faculty,  
instructional staff, and TAs!**

**Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing**

Are you looking for advice about responding to student writing? Or are you an experienced instructor hoping to streamline your efforts? Then this workshop is for you!

**Designing Effective Writing Assignments**

Looking for creative writing assignment ideas? Want to help your students to work better and revise more? Learn how effective assignment design can help you reach your teaching goals with this workshop!

**Our Global Classrooms: Multilingual Writers in Your Course**

This brand-new interactive workshop offers essential advice on fair and culturally inclusive methods for working with multilingual writers.

For schedules and registration, go to <[www.wisc.edu/writing/](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/)> and click on "classes."

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