

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN WRITING ACADEMIC PAPERS IN ENGLISH

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ACADEMIC WRITING

Definition: Academic writing involves a complex combination of generating ideas, selecting the ideas that are appropriate to the writing task, translating these into text and polishing the text to produce a presentable document. In doing this, the writer has to attend not only to his or her own thoughts, but also to the content and style conventions of the community for whom the piece is being written (Torrance, Thomas & Robinson, 1994, p.379).



PROBLEMS...

- Academic writing becomes more difficult for ESL/L2 students since we conduct the writing in a second language, and we are unfamiliar with conventions and expectations of academic writing in English-speaking countries.
- Academic writing has been perceived as the most demanding part in the ESL/L2 student academic life.



TEACHING, LEARNING & WRITING

Findings from studies in writing academic papers in English:

- **In China, students learn through observation, reading, and imitation**, while the U.S. educational system places an emphasis on the importance of critical thinking and inquiry.
- **Chinese students are quiet and orderly** and the Chinese educational system looks down on volunteering information, whereas active participation is encouraged in the American system.
- **Writing is at the center of teaching and learning in the U.S. higher education**, but not that important in the Chinese educational system.



WRITING, LEARNING.....

- **Chinese writing approaches focus more on orthographic (spelling), grammatical and structural aspects** of written text than composition strategy, which views the writing as a creative and expressive process of developing organization and meaning, communicating genuine thoughts and experiences.
- Chinese students found it more challenging to achieve **relevance and coherence** in writing than linguistic factors.
- **English language proficiency** was reported to have caused problems in their academic writing, although it was not regarded as being a major issue. Nonetheless, ESL/L2 writers' linguistic proficiency cannot be overlooked.



CHINESE WRITING STYLE

- ❖ Chinese essays tend to be more general and vague in content.
 - Culture: No-confrontational, no debatable, harmonious.
 - Language difference: for example: Omit subjects & objects (It snows vs. fall snow).
 - Interference of the Chinese culture and the first language.



ENGLISH WRITING STYLE

- **English essays emphasize the argumentation and specific proof.** In other words, the reader expects the author to make a concrete claim and then proceed to support that claim with a lot of evidence — detailed examples, statistics, even first-hand experience.



WRITING CONVENTIONS AND STANDARDS

- ❖ Sections: Title, Abstract, Introduction, Methods/Procedure, Results, Discussion/Conclusion, and References
 - Thesis and topic sentences in each paragraph



CHINESE WRITING CONVENTIONS

- ❖ Chinese writing tends to have the point of the essay be inferred from the text rather than explicitly stated and continuously reinforced with evidence.
 - Focus more on sentence-level problems with grammar and vocabulary than the importance of discourse organization.
 - Tend to ignore the general level of development in composition.



COLLOQUIAL HABITS IN CONSTRUCTING SENTENCES 1

- Chinese writers often place prepositional phrases that indicate comparison in front of the main idea. Doing so pushes the main idea towards the back of the sentence.
 - Chinese-English colloquial habit: “Compared to dogs, cats are nice. “ Instead, one should say “Cats are nicer than dogs.”



COLLOQUIAL HABITS IN CONSTRUCTING SENTENCES 2

- Chinese writers usually preface the main idea by first stating the purpose, condition, location or reason first. The logic behind this colloquial habit appears to be introducing the main idea instead or directly stating it would be too direct and perceived as somewhat offensive.
 - Chinese-English colloquial habit: purpose (beginning too many sentences with “**In order to...**” and “**For the sake of...**”) condition (beginning too many sentences with **If** and **When**) location (beginning too many sentences with **In**, **At**, and **From**) or reason (beginning too many sentences with **Due to**, **Because**, and **Since**).



COLLOQUIAL HABITS IN CONSTRUCTING SENTENCES 3

- Overuse of First Person. Third Person is more objective. First Person is so common in Chinese documents (professional or otherwise) that many writers are unaware of this colloquial habit. An exception to using First Person would be if the author wants to emphasize a personal opinion such as **We believe**, **We can infer**, **We conclude**, **We recommend**, and **We postulate**. In contrast, using Third Person style removes a feeling of subjectivity or personal bias that the First Person style has. Moreover, Third Person Style creates an environment in which the author can objectively separate himself or herself from the contents so that the readers can assess the manuscript quality themselves.
 - We suggest... The results of this study suggest....

Try to read through the draft of the paper you are prepared for the writing contest and see if you have written any colloquial sentences.



TELLING V. SHOWING

Show, Don't Tell is a writing maxim

Showing allows writers to expand details and describe things across a large space on the page. *Also referred to as scene.*

Telling, in its simplest form, means a concise statement for covering the ground. *Also referred to as summary. The grass was soft and green.*



SHOWING VS. TELLING EXAMPLES

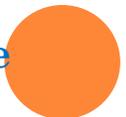
Each of these sentences has two versions. One version is too general and therefore lacks the visual clarity that a reader needs to fully understand what the writer is talking about. The other version of the same sentence uses specific details and makes the image the writer is presenting much more vivid and alive.

- ❖ *Vague*: She went home in a bad mood. [What kind of a bad mood? How did she act or look?]
Specific: She stomped home, hands jammed in her pockets, angrily kicking rocks, dogs, small children, and anything else that crossed her path.
- ❖ *Vague*: My neighbor bought a really nice old desk. [Why nice? How old? What kind of desk?]
Specific: My neighbor bought a solid oak, roll-top desk made in 1885 that contains a secret drawer triggered by a hidden spring.

Assignment: After reading the sentences above, rewrite the vague sentences below using your own specific details.

- She wears really strange outfits.
- The scenery in the mountains was beautiful.

Again, go through your entire paper looking for sentences where you have used good, specific details. Also, try to find the sentences that are too general, and add details that make those sentences come alive.



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