

**Different Cultural Writing Styles of Organization vs the American Style of Organization:
How Culture Affects the ESL Student in America.**

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Abstract

My research topic is about American style essay organization. The American style of organization includes a clear introduction, a clear body supporting a thesis, and then concluding by showing that the evidence verifies the thesis statement. Many ESL students come from different cultures and different writing traditions and as a result many struggle to follow the American style of organization. My main questions is, how can American organization help ESL students to write a better essay? I am interested in this topic because the American reader will understand my essay better if it's in the style they are familiar with. I learned a writing style organization from Sri Lanka and I am having to learn this American style organization for the American reader. Furthermore, I am also interested in looking into this topic because I want to give solutions and alternatives to my ESL peers. I interviewed two ESL students and one ESL professor at UC Davis about their experiences. In addition, I looked at library databases and writing center websites for secondary research.

Introduction and Background

Many public and private American universities follow a structure of organizing writing according to American cultural values, which makes writing here different from in other cultures. As a result of this, many foreign and international students struggle with the American way of writing and thinking. The American essay organization includes a clear introduction with an explicit thesis, body paragraphs that provide evidence verifying the thesis statement, and a conclusion that restates the thesis and summarizes the evidence. The argument that I am making is two sides of the same coin. One side of the argument is that there is a certain style of American academic writing which is very straightforward. The other side is that students who have other cultural styles of writing might struggle when they write academic papers in America.

My first argument is that American organization style is direct and straight forward, which is the reason ESL students struggle with writing. The article “Ten Steps for Writing Research Papers” by the American University Academic Support Center gives this direct and straightforward way to write a research paper. The steps are “Step 1: Select a subject, 2: Narrow the topic, 3: State the tentative objective (or thesis), 4: Form a preliminary bibliography, 5: Prepare a working outline, 6: Start taking notes, 7: Outline the paper, 8: Write a rough draft, 9: Edit your paper, 10: Write the final draft.” (np). This is a good example of the directness that the American reader expects from the writer. Utah State University’s “Organizing an Essay” gives further instruction on what the American reader expects from the writer. For example, the authors write about how papers should be outlined before writing, writers should get feedback from peers for clarifications, and finally, and most importantly, make sure that each paragraph is connecting back to the main introductory paragraph (1-3).

Furthermore, Harvard University's Elizabeth Abrams in "Essay Structure" writes that "structuring your essay according to a reader's logic means examining your thesis and anticipating what a reader needs to know, and in what sequence, in order to grasp and to be convinced by your argument as it unfolds" (1-3). The article "American Style of Writing" on the Indiana University of Pennsylvania's website explains that the first step in essay writing is stating a problem or an issue in the beginning of the paper and it has to be clear what the issue is. Then the writer must prove that the main points of the argument are supported with evidence and linked back to the thesis statement (np). I argue here that, because of this demand for straightforwardness and narrow focus, the writing lives of foreign ESL students is difficult because they have been taught from an early age a different way of writing. I found this advice on organization to be very mechanical and different from other cultures.

My second argument is found in "Writing Across Borders," a video produced by Oregon State University, which discusses how many international students struggle to write in the American style because their cultural values differ from American values. Many find that the American style is too straightforward and direct, and conflicts with their culture's way of writing. Many ESL students struggle, taking years of practice to change to writing in the American style. For example, I had to learn the American style of writing in high school after leaning the Sri Lankan way. I had to unlearn my cultural style and then learn a new style, and I had to do this in just a few years before college.

To support my position, I will include my own experiences with the Sri Lankan style of writing and I will give specific examples of why my cultural style is different from the American style. Furthermore, I will discuss my struggles that I had to go through to learn the American way and how I adapted to improve the situation. Robert Kaplan in his essay "Cultural Thought

Patterns in Intercultural Education” discusses the concept of “contrastive rhetoric,” showing the variety of writing styles across cultures. He also shows that no one way of writing is best or correct (11). My argument is almost like cause and effect. The cause is straightforwardness and the effect is international students struggle.

Furthermore, I will discuss how this American style has confused many ESL students at UC Davis. I will give advice and solutions for ESL students who are trying to succeed in American education. Through personal interviews with students and teachers, I hope to have demonstrated examples of ESL students who struggle with organization, to help them loosen the knot, so that they can tap into their own potential in American higher education.

Methods

The topic of American organization is a very confusing for many international ESL students when they first come to the U.S. As a result of this, many struggle to continue their education in America and some even have to drop out because they are unable to properly use the American style of organization and thinking.

When I interviewed two ESL friends and my instructor, the specific questions that I asked were: Why do many ESL students struggle in the American organization? Does culture have anything to do with this? Do you find the American organization to be straightforward and focused compared to other cultures? Finally, and most importantly, I asked them if they had any advice for ESL students. I included my story as just one story in the larger picture of how ESL students struggle with the American writing. I must stress that these interviews that I have used to support my argument won't give the exact picture of what is happening, but this is a good start in order to study and to understand this problem.

Findings

My research discovered that the students that I interviewed struggled in the American organization and both of them struggled because of cultural differences from their writing organization to American organization. In addition, I was able to find that American organization is too straight forward and that is also another reason for why both the ESL students that I interviewed seemed to struggle in the American style. These arguments were supported by my two ESL students and the UWP instructor. In addition, these arguments are supported by my secondary sources.

Daniel Melzer, a professor from the University Writing program (UWP) in University of California, Davis, mentioned that many ESL students who are international students who didn't have education here in America struggle because in their cultures the only American style writing they have studied is the five paragraph essay, a structure that American colleges don't encourage . As a result of this, he mentioned when he would assigned a complicated research paper like the one I am writing, the majority of ESL students get overwhelmed or stressed out because of the way they have been taught in their culture is different. He said that American research organization is more about having a clear introduction, research method section, discussion section, and a separate conclusion section. And that each section has multiple paragraphs, which differs from the five paragraph system as well. In addition, he mentioned another reason international students struggle is that the American organization structure is straightforward and strict. For example, he mentioned that for some cultures the writing style is

more of a story telling manner and that ideas are introduced in more of circle than a straight line. As a result of this, he said, when it comes to American organization writers must really focus on the thesis statement and making every paragraph support the thesis statement.

In addition, Professor Melzer mentioned that culture has a big part to play with why many international students struggle in following the straightforward American organization. He ended the interview by giving advice on how ESL international students should overcome this problem. He said that they should get all their ideas on paper and then try to follow the American style of organization and to really focus their ideas and paragraphs back to the thesis statement. For example, he mentioned that after writing the first draft, come back a day or so later with a fresh eye and then organize it. They should try not to organize and worry too much about perfecting the first draft because this will get them stuck. Another solution is to get feedback on organization from an outsider like a teacher, American peer, or a writing tutor. Finally, he mentioned that looking carefully at American writing examples to get a better idea of how to organize and develop complicated paragraphs that support the thesis.

The two ESL international students that I interviewed, one from Taiwan and the other from China, shared the same view that my professor shared and told me their story. My first interviewee was Tracy Yeng, a junior whose major is Physical Science and who lived in Taiwan the majority of her life. She mentioned that Taiwan culture, and Asian culture generally, tend to organize its writing in a circular style, which reflects their speaking. She mentioned that Taiwanese people don't like to go to the straight to the point because they find it arrogant or rude. In addition, she mentioned that when she was in Taiwan her teachers always taught in a way that gave more background information on what she is about to discuss in the paper and that it wasn't as focused as the American style of organization. This is because Taiwanese people like

to build up the conversation and then tell the reader why they have decided to talk about the topic they have chosen. She said that when she first started school at UC Davis, her instructors told her to get straight to the point and focus, but she didn't know what they meant. As a result of this, she had to repeat her Workload 57 class, which caused her a lot of money and time. However, she mentioned that she has developed an American writing style, but still struggles in some aspects of American organization. She ended the interview by giving advice on how to improve or develop into the American style. She said the best way is to read many articles and try to reflect on how the authors of those papers organized and wrote their papers. This was the way she learned and she said that this works.

My second interviewee was Aiden Chen, a third year Statistics and Spanish double major from China who also shared similar views to Tracy's. He said that in the Chinese culture writing is supposed to give descriptions of the environment. Unlike the American organizational style, Chinese writing is in more of story fashion and circular. This is very similar to Tracy and her culture. Even though this is what he learned in China, he did mention that some schools in China taught the five paragraph system which contained an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. He ended our interview by saying that the best way to learn the American writing is to read and to really observe the writing.

I grew up in Sri Lanka for 15 years and share similar views and experiences to my interviewees. I was also encouraged to write in a fashion that gave background information about the topic and then continue to build a relationship with the reader, rather than telling the reader exactly what the paper is about and where it is going. As Tracy and Aden mentioned, in Sri Lankan the writing structure reflects the speaking structure and that if we were to go straight to

the point that would be considered rude or disrespectful. This could also be because Asian children are told from a young age to respect the elders and to not speak out directly.

These experiences and examples are also backed up by secondary sources. For example, Robert Kaplan's "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," includes the concept of "contrastive rhetoric," which means that there is no one way of writing and that every culture has their own way of writing. In addition, he mentioned that one cannot say there are certain principles or criteria that need to be followed in order to produce competent writing, but rather every culture has their own way of writing (11). In "Writing Across Borders," public health Ph.D. candidate Jean Kaunda from Malawi discussed how she was asked by her professor to write a critical paper. She explained that this was hard for her because where she comes from the government does not allow critical papers to be written. Therefore, it is not even a matter of writing style, but rather a political restraint. Not every culture is like American culture and that is why the American reader must understand a variety of styles. It would be very arrogant and rude of the American reader to think that the American way is the only way and this is why the American reader must have an open mind.

Conclusion and Solution

After doing the research and finding out that international ESL student struggles are common this helped me understand the situation better. Culture affects communication. Two solutions that might help international students are first, encouraging professors to limit the number of assignments so that students can really focus on one or two big assignments, and second, teaching the American style of organization in ESL classes including using quality

American style writing to show how they have written their papers and what the American reader expects from the writer.

When I was taking several writing classes, I wanted out from these classes because I was so stressed out and learning a new way of writing which was hard. Many of the classes had too many big assignments and I didn't really fully learn and understand the American style. I was confused and lost. That is why I am recommending that they follow a structure that is similar to UWP 1Y, because focusing on one big assignment really helped me to define my ideas and what I wanted to write. In addition, I was able to better understand the American way of thinking and better understand the American reader.

Many of the writing classes that I have taken did give reading assignments and they were good readings. However, I wasn't able to process them well because I didn't know the fundamentals of writing in the American style. Even though I passed all my classes, it was just getting the assignments done and never reflecting on what I did and how I did it. For my second solution, what I recommend is giving out readings from previous ESL students' writings and giving out quality American writing so that the ESL students can get a better picture and fully understand what the American reader expects from them and what they need to focus on. This will help them see what the writer does in order to walk the reader with their thought process. In addition, this will help them get a better picture of how their culture's writing is different from the American one and how they should write to go further in the American education.

In conclusion, the American reader must understand this vulnerable situation and should be willing to also listen to other culture's writing as well. However, those international ESL students who are willing to go further into the American education must really understand what

the expectations are for the writer and must also make sure that they clarify and support their thesis statements at all time. This, in return, will take them far in the American education system.

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