

ESL Writers

A GUIDE FOR
WRITING
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TUTORS

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“Earth Aches by Midnight”

*Helping ESL Writers Clarify Their Intended Meaning**

Amy Jo Minett

In 1993, I joined the Peace Corps and went to Hungary to teach English. And just as the commercials promise, it was a time of adventure: I stomped grapes during a harvest festival, got lost in a Transylvanian blizzard, and fell off bicycles on muddy village roads. But looking back, most vivid to me now is how I struggled to learn the language, to express myself and to make my meaning clear. It was a challenge shared every day by learners of other languages all around the world.

A story to illustrate this challenge was told to us by our Hungarian teachers. One newly arrived volunteer sat down to eat with her homestay family: they didn't speak English, nor she Hungarian, yet. Wanting to be gracious, she tried to ask what the main course—a delicious meat dish—was. Once she got her question across (through pointing, upturned palms, and a wondering tone), her homestay father smiled with delight. He lacked the vocabulary but knew the sound the animal made. “Ruff ruff,” he replied proudly. The volunteer dropped her fork. “Ruff ruff?” she asked, a little fearful. “Ruff ruff!” repeated the father, and the rest of the family chimed in. “Ruff ruff!” The volunteer hesitated, then picked up her fork and went bravely on to eat her supper. Only later did it turn out—during an elementary lesson on “what do the animals say” (the duckie, the chicken, the cow, etc.)—that in Hungarian, the pig says, “Ruff ruff!”

In this story, the volunteer leaped to what seemed a logical conclusion (same sound, even if, in Hungary, a different animal makes it). Similarly, when we struggle to understand an ESL writer's text, it is tempting to leap to conclusions about the meaning the writer wants to convey. This chapter helps

* For his many research insights and invaluable guidance with this chapter, I am indebted to Dr. Dan Tannacito of Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

avoid this pitfall, first, by helping you, the tutor, understand *why* you might not understand. You might ask the following questions.

- Has the writer tangled the syntax, as in this typical example: *But most of people feel not natural that making small talk with strangers in my country?*
- Or has the writer used sudden, strange words? One of my students once wrote, in a lovely if confusing instance, “I do not want to know the earth ache.”
- Or did the writer compose whole paragraphs of seemingly unconnected ideas, or save the thesis statement until the very end? Baffling though such texts sometimes are, in this chapter, you'll also find strategies that you can use to help English as a second language (ESL) writers clarify just what it is they want to say (and it's hard enough in a first language, right?).

First, though, let's explore *why* you may not understand an ESL writer's intended meaning. Then we'll look at how you can help clarify meaning at four levels: essay, paragraph, sentence, and word.

Clarifying the Essay's Main Idea

In 1966, Robert Kaplan published an article that dramatically changed how we understand ESL writers' texts. In it, Kaplan says that logic is not universal but culture-specific, and it's reflected in the patterns we use to organize texts in our first languages.¹ He arrives at this conclusion after studying hundreds of ESL student essays and identifying different types of development. While English essays are often linear (e.g., stating claims explicitly and then supporting those claims with evidence), essays written by Asian students may be much less direct and even withhold the thesis statement until the very end. In my experience, too, Russian, Polish, and Hungarian writers frequently hold off stating their main points until the last page—believing it creates more suspense for the reader—which is how they were taught to write. The problem, however, is that if you are accustomed to reading texts developed according to the conventional rhetorical patterns of academic English, the effects of *other* ways of structuring essays (be it Spanish, Russian, or Chinese) can cloud your understanding of an ESL writer's meaning.

Here's one rather startling example from the Budapest center in which I tutored. Magda, a Polish writer of a history paper, almost *seemed* supportive of the Nazis in the Holocaust, right up until the last paragraph, when she finally spun around and lamented the tragedy (in which members of her own family had died). When the somewhat anxious tutor asked why she had waited until the very end to make her position clear, Magda cried, “Because that's how I'd write it in Polish! It sounds best this way. Readers in Polish would *know* I wasn't siding with the Nazis!” The U.S. tutor, on the other hand, accustomed to a different pattern of essay development, was quite understandably misled

by the writer's rhetorical choice of saving her thesis until the very end. Another reader may not even have finished reading, which would have been unfortunate, as the reader would have missed the writer's main point.

If you feel that cultural differences in text organization are affecting your understanding of an ESL writer's intended meaning, you might spend some time talking directly with the writer about contrastive rhetoric. In Magda's case, the tutor asked her how arguments were typically organized in Polish, and then they explored together how essays are usually structured in English. In this way, Magda came to understand how cultural differences might shape a particular reader's understanding of the intended meaning—in this example, an U.S. reader with U.S. expectations of essay structure—and she understood what changes she needed to make to meet those expectations. For instance, her conclusion, with some tinkering, became her introduction, which made her intended meaning quite clear (and poignantly so). Equally important, as Ilona Leki says, open discussion of contrastive rhetoric can produce in ESL writers “instant enlightenment about their writing in English, as students suddenly become conscious of the implicit assumptions behind the way they construct written ideas and behind the way English does.”² Helen Fox, too, believes in talking directly with ESL writers about cultural differences in “communication styles” so that they can better understand the audience for whom they're writing, especially professors in U.S. universities who expect writing to be “so explicit and precise that they can follow the argument without any effort at all.”³ Perhaps most important such discussion also helps make clear how English conventions (and audience expectations) are, as Kaplan said, no better or worse than other conventions.⁴ They're just different.⁵ Finally, the writers' stories will be fascinating and may further put writers at ease as they become aware of what backgrounds and traditions they bring to the writing conference, and why they're not always understood.

Clarifying Paragraphs

Not only essay structure, but paragraph development, too, differs in other cultures and can blur our understanding of an ESL writer's meaning. Paragraphs might seem flip-flopped to us, as ESL writers often state the main point of the paragraph in the last sentence (as opposed to the first). John Hinds concludes that—while English writing is typically reader-friendly in its directness and clarity—Japanese writing, in contrast, is *writer*-friendly, and it's mainly the reader's job to determine the writer's intention.⁶ He describes how Japanese authors like “to give dark hints and to leave them behind nuances” and how Japanese readers “anticipate with pleasure the opportunities that such writing offers them to savor this kind of ‘mystification’ of language.”⁷

Part of this “mystification” comes from the different use of connectors like *however* or *in contrast*. While in English, we are taught to use these connectors to guide the reader explicitly through our logic (and through the ideas in our

paragraphs: can you find all the connectors in this chapter so far? Have you even noticed them as you read?), in Japanese and other languages, these “landmarks” may be absent or at least more subtle, thereby demanding the reader be more active and work harder to understand the writer's meaning.⁸ For someone who is used to reader-friendly English, understanding the meaning in such texts may feel like driving in a strange city without street signs or a road map. We want the writer to tell us exactly where to go. We want coherence and cohesion.

One strategy you can use to help ESL writers whose paragraphs aren't coherent (and whose meaning is therefore unclear) is called *topical structure analysis* (but don't be put off by the name. The strategy is easy).⁹ With it, writers are able to look at both global coherence (what the whole text is about) and local cohesion (how sentences “build meaning” by connecting to each other and to the text as a whole).¹⁰

In its simplest form, topical structure analysis works like this. Start by asking ESL writers to find sentence topics (what the sentence is about) in individual sentences. I might offer a sentence of my own, such as “Writing poetry is like meditation to me.” Writers should underline “writing poetry” as the topic.

Next, ask them to find and underline the sentence topics in whole paragraphs and then discuss the relationship between the topics and the paragraph, and the paragraph and the whole essay. In so doing, writers should discover (1) different ways that sentence topics build meaning, and (2) that the reader's ability to understand the meaning depends in part on how the topics in the paragraph progress.¹¹ Here are examples I've used to help writers understand.

1. Parallel Progression:

“Writing is often a struggle. It can also be a joy. Writing poetry, for example, feels like meditation to me.”

Here the writer can see that the meaning of the underlined topics (writing, it, writing poetry) is the same. The main idea of the paragraph (writing) remains absolutely clear to the reader (though too much progression of this type may lead to monotony).

2. Sequential Progression:

“My room is undoubtedly the messiest in the house. Books and papers are scattered everywhere. My clothes lie about in sad piles. Anyone entering does so at their own risk. My brother, for instance, last week tripped on a bean-bag chair and broke his foot.”

In this example, the topics are all different (my room, books and papers, my clothes, anyone entering, my brother), though the meaning usually comes from the previous sentence. Clearly, too much development of this type can disorient the reader, a point which ESL writers quickly come to understand when they see how, as in this example, the writer goes off on one dizzying tangent after another and sentence topics continually shift and change.¹²

3. Extended Parallel Progression:

"My room is undoubtedly the messiest in the house. Books and papers are scattered everywhere. My clothes lie about in sad piles. My room is a disaster."

Here we find the last sentence returning neatly to the first topic (my room, books and papers, my clothes, my room). In this way, the main idea is developed in detail but then restated again directly, which helps the reader understand the main focus of the passage. The paragraph is clear and coherent.

Once ESL writers get the hang of finding and analyzing progressions in sentence topics, you can ask them to "test" how coherent their own writing is by diagramming *their* underlined sentence topics, like this:

Parallel Progression

1. Writing
2. It
3. Writing poetry

Sequential Progression

1. My room
2. Books and papers
 3. My clothes
 4. Anyone entering
 5. My brother

Extended Parallel Progression

1. My room
2. Books and papers
 3. My clothes
4. My room

With the topics diagrammed this way, ESL writers can better see the relationships and coherence (or lack thereof) between sentences, paragraphs, and the main idea of the paper.¹³ They can then revise so that the topics of their sentences build the intended meaning consistently and coherently throughout the paragraph. As a final "check" of coherence, Ann Johns recommends students write a one-sentence summary of paragraphs, which becomes more difficult if coherence is lacking and the sentence topics are constantly changing.¹⁴

This might also be a good time for you and the writer to discuss cohesion, or how sentences build meaning by connecting to each other. For this purpose, I always keep a handy list of common connectors (like *however*, *nevertheless*,

in addition) over my desk to yank down and share with ESL writers who might need to make explicit the logical links that may be missing between sentences. Many college writing texts include such lists, Eli Hinkel notes, and ESL students especially need to understand what they mean, when and how to use them, and how vital they are when writing for college classes.¹⁵ It's one more way you, the tutor, can help ESL writers clarify their intended meanings.

Clarifying Sentences*Focus on Form*

So far, we've seen how cultural differences in essay and paragraph organization might obscure an ESL writer's intended meaning. Sometimes, however, single sentences are difficult to understand. To help the writer in this case, you might try a strategy from second language research called "focus on form."¹⁶

Interestingly, "focus on form" works best during a writing conference in which you and the writer still mainly concentrate on "higher order concerns." Don McAndrew and Tom Reigstad spell out these concerns nicely as being "central to the meaning and communication of the piece" like "matters of thesis and focus, development, structure and voice."¹⁷ However, during such a conference, if you just *occasionally* direct the writer's attention to problems with language that obscure meaning, you can help the writer more clearly express herself, provided she is developmentally ready, that is, provided the writer has enough background knowledge about the meaning and use of the language form (see Chapters 2 and 5). For instance, can the writer use negatives correctly? Is the word choice accurate? Are verb tenses in control? In most cases, we can probably safely assume that ESL college writers are developmentally ready. Furthermore, if you as tutor help ESL writers notice their existing language problems, then you are actually engaging their developmentally sharpened language processing mechanisms, which help the writer break into the new language system like spies cracking a code.¹⁸ In short, you are helping writers extract the form, which they can then map to meaning and function.¹⁹

Here's an example (to clarify my own meaning). If a writer has made a mistake and you don't understand the text, try repeating the unclear sentence back to the writer, perhaps in the form of a question, but with the mistake corrected. If the writer has written "I study by midnight," you could ask, "You study *until* midnight? Or *around* midnight? *At* midnight?" which might be enough to help the writer notice the problem with the preposition and how the meaning changes with each choice (unless he is too tired, having been up all night). Or, if we return to the example provided at the beginning of this chapter, "I do not want to know the earth ache," you might ask, "Earth ache? Hmm. . . Well, ache means hurt. Does the earth hurt in some way? Are you writing about environmental problems?" If the writer shakes her head, you might volunteer more suggestions. "Do you not want to experience an 'ear'

ache? Or do you mean an earthquake, like what they have in California and Japan?" (The answer, by the way, was earthquake, which the writer most definitely did not want to experience.)

This technique is simple and useful, but we shouldn't forget that writers will benefit most from only the *occasional* focus on form, and on just one or two problems at a time.²⁰ For the most part, higher order concerns probably should remain just that—a higher priority.

This is probably also a good time to bring up the issue of appropriating a writer's text, which, as a trained writing center tutor, you might be worried about after reading the previous example (see Chapter 5). After all, we don't want to take over the writer's work, and volunteering words might seem like too much help. With ESL writers, however, we might need to rethink our approach to the conference. Joy Reid believes we have responsibilities as "cultural informant[s]" to our students.²¹ I would add that we may also have—to some extent, at least—responsibilities to them as language resources. When we offer the writer a number of choices related to meaning (earth hurts? earache? earthquake?), it's still the writer's choice in the end to decide which word (and which meaning) he wants to convey. We might even see this as one way meaning is negotiated between tutor and writer, and second language research suggests quite strongly that negotiated meaning (1) facilitates learning, and (2) leads to better writing (and therefore, probably a clearer expression of meaning).²²

How Much Help, and When?

If we take the view that you, the tutor, and the ESL writer will together negotiate the intended meaning as a part of clarifying what the writer wants to say, then it's also important to know how much help to give, and when. Some experts suggest that as tutor (and therefore, probably a more capable user of English), you can best help ESL writers work at their potential level of ability by offering help only so long as it's needed, and then withdrawing your help as soon as writers "show signs of self-control" and the ability to go it alone.²³ So, if Vlado, a Bulgarian writer, comes to me, here's what I'd do to help him express his meaning more clearly.

First, I'd ask Valdo to read his paper silently and, on his own, underline and correct the errors he can find (in the meantime, I'd drink a coffee, file papers, maybe hum a little). When he says, "Ready, Amy," I would sit beside him and together we would discuss the corrected errors, which might go like this:

"Yes, good, that's right: you were *bored* by Tolstoy, not *boring*, though it's too bad you weren't *interested* in the novel, because I think *War and Peace* is a very *interesting* book."

If he missed an error that obscures meaning, I might point to the sentence and look puzzled, or ask him, "Hmmm . . . is there anything wrong *here*?" If Vlado is still unable to see the problem, I would offer more direct help by

pointing this time to the phrase or word and asking again: "What—about—here?" If Vlado is still unsure, I would target the problem directly: "Look at the verb tense here. 'I had been lived in Moscow for one year when I read Tolstoy.' Now, I know you don't live in Moscow now, because we're in Budapest. What's wrong with the verb tense?" If necessary, I will give the correct answer and explain the grammar rule, or we'll look it up together, but I will first offer help in ever more explicit and guided forms. Vlado will need my help only so long as he doesn't notice the error, or notices it but can't correct, or corrects just with specific pointing. Over time, however, he should rely less and less on my guidance, until finally he has consistent control over the problem structure, be it verb tense, word form, or something else.²⁴

Interactional Cues

In the previous example, you may have noticed how my puzzled look communicated to Vlado that there was some kind of problem with the sentence. I might also have frowned, grinned, stroked my chin, or widened my eyes. What you didn't see were Vlado's facial expressions and the other signals he gave me that showed when he was struggling with something and when he was about to solve a problem by himself. Amy Snyder Ohta calls these "interactional cues," and she presents quite convincing research that shows that, as tutor, you can help the writer the most when you pick up on and respond to these often very subtle signals, for that's when the writer is most developmentally ready to listen, and learn.²⁵ In other words, you can read these cues to know when it's time to help clarify writers' intended meanings, and when they are probably on the verge of clarifying it for themselves. Here are some things you should listen for before jumping in.

- rising or falling tones of voice
"The verb tense is past . . . present? I had lived . . . I have had . . . lived?"
When the voice goes up at the end in question form, the writer is ready for help. If the voice doesn't go up at the end, the writer is still thinking, so don't jump in yet. Wait for more signals.
- restarts of sentences
"The author, the author pre . . . per . . . , the author persites, presits, *persists!*"
Re-starts indicate the writer is still working out the problem, so wait.
- rates of speech
If the writer is speaking quickly, she is probably still at work on figuring out the best solution. When the rate slows down, you should get ready to offer help.²⁶

These are just a few examples. As tutor, you too can learn to interpret the writer's many differing cues, especially if you meet with the same writer regularly. And

one last point here: It's also important to remember that ESL writers frequently need more wait time after questions or when they are working out problems for themselves, so don't be afraid of longer silences. One way or another—by sigh or tone—the writer will let you know when he is ready for your intervention.

Clarifying Words

Lastly, a few words about words. Hinkel discusses an important survey in which U.S. college faculty describe ESL papers as too often “vague and confusing,” precisely because the writer may lack the necessary vocabulary to clarify their intended meaning.²⁷ You can, therefore, also help ESL writers by talking about certain words that can help clarify meanings dramatically. Hinkel describes the following as top priorities for ESL writers:

- qualifying hedges like *apparently*, *probably*, *ostensibly*, *seems*, *perhaps*, *most likely*
- modal verbs like *may*, *might*, *should*, *could*, *can*²⁸

In both cases, using these words can soften the writer's rhetoric considerably. Just listen to the difference in meaning between these two sentences:

Raising tuition will lower student enrollment.

Raising tuition will most likely lower student enrollment (we can't be sure it will, can we?).

You should also be prepared to encourage ESL writers to avoid vague nouns like *society*, *people*, *world*, or the vaguest of all perhaps, *truth*. My Hungarian students loved to use the phrases “to tell the truth” and “to be honest,” which they had learned and were (justifiably) proud of. In most college writing, however, these phrases can be problematic. Helping ESL writers build their academic vocabularies this way can not only help clarify their intended meaning, it can also relieve some of the anxiety and frustration they feel when they get their papers back all marked up in red ink.

This chapter has explored why you may not always understand an ESL writer's meaning, and it has offered the following strategies that you can use to help writers clarify just what it is they want to say.

- You can explore with writers how they learned to write and what's expected at U.S. universities.
- You can help them analyze how coherent their paragraphs are.
- You can guide them through rough sentences and help them choose clearer words.

Through my work tutoring ESL writers, I've learned that in Egypt, babies are welcomed into the world by a party on the seventh day. In Taiwan, the number four is unlucky (it rhymes with the word for *death*). What challenging work, I say. And how rewarding.

Notes

1. Kaplan, 12.
2. Leki, 138.
3. Fox, 114.
4. Kaplan, 12.
5. For more on contrastive rhetoric, see Panetta (2001) or Connor (1996).
6. Hinds, 65.
7. Suzuki, quoted in Hinds, 66.
8. Hinds, 67.
9. This idea comes from Connor and Farmer (1990), 126–39. Connor and Farmer draw on the work of Finnish linguist Liisa Lautamatti.
10. Connor and Farmer, 127.
11. Connor and Farmer, 128–33.
12. Connor and Farmer, 130.
13. Connor and Farmer, 130.
14. Johns, 256.
15. Hinkel, 144.
16. Long in Doughty, 259–84.
17. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
18. Doughty, 276.
19. Doughty, 265.
20. Doughty, 290.
21. Reid, 218.
22. See, for instance, Goldstein and Conrad (1990).
23. Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 466–68.
24. Modeled after Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 469–71.
25. Ohta, 52.
26. Ohta, 62–77.
27. Hinkel, 52.
28. Hinkel, 247–50.

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