

Responding to the Writing of Non-native English Speakers

With the understanding that expectations vary among academic disciplines, classes and instructors, we offer the following tips for faculty to consider when responding to the writing of students for whom English is not a native language.

Responding to Language

Read for “big things” (such as content and organization)—at least in early drafts— and consider overlooking minor mistakes that do not interfere with comprehension (such as missing articles and singular-plural errors). Expect that students from different language and dialect backgrounds will “write with an accent” just like they speak with an accent.

Focus on patterns of error. Students improve their grammar by learning how to recognize and correct patterns of error in their own writing. Mark all of the errors in the first paragraph (if you wish), and then mark one or two of the most significant *patterns* of error in the remainder of the paper.

Avoid red pen syndrome. Overcorrected and heavily marked writing can be discouraging and counterproductive for students, sometimes causing them to regress into “safe,” simple sentence structures and less sophisticated vocabulary in order to avoid embarrassment.

Set the bar at an attainable height. Language learning takes time. Therefore, you might not see rapid improvement in one semester, especially for students whose language background is very different from English. If your expectation is for near-flawless writing, you will likely need to invest significant time working with students one-on-one, as well as referring them to the Writing Center, where they can get assistance with their writing.

Talk it through. If you encounter student papers that are incomprehensible, meet with the student to explain that you do not understand, and ask them if they can explain their ideas, separate from the paper. It is possible that the student wrote the paper in his or her native language and used a translator program to convert it to English. If this is the case, you might suggest starting over and writing in English first.

Responding to Culture

Consider plagiarism a teachable moment. In some cultures, it is acceptable to borrow words and ideas from sources without citation. It is also considered disrespectful for students to submit written work that is not well-polished and edited. Therefore, it is important for faculty in U.S. academic cultures to exercise tolerance and patience with students as they learn the rules governing plagiarism.

Recognize cultural roadblocks. Students who have not been in the U.S. long might have difficulty with writing assignments that require knowledge of popular culture. They

might also feel uncomfortable with argumentative writing or assignments that require them to criticize authority or the government.

Respect diversity. Non-native English speakers are a diverse population made up of international students who have studied English for many years in their home countries, as well as refugee and immigrant students who may not have studied English before arriving in the US. Their writing skills and backgrounds, as well as knowledge of English grammar, will vary greatly.

Understand where students are coming from. Not all non-native English speaking students have taken ESOL classes at LCC. Some place directly into college-level, academic classes. Also, ENGL 121: Composition 1 is not a prerequisite for most classes. Therefore, many students will encounter their first college-level writing assignments in classes other than ENGL 121.

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Some of the above information is also drawn from and supported by materials available on the University of North Carolina Writing Center website and the video, *Writing Across Borders* (available on *YouTube*).