



## Writing in Global Contexts: Composing Usable Texts for Audiences from Different Cultures

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# 10 WRITING IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS: COMPOSING USABLE TEXTS FOR AUDIENCES FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES

*Kirk St. Amant*

## OVERVIEW

The international spread of online access means we live in an increasingly interconnected world. This situation means our students will likely write for audiences in different parts of the globe. Writing for such diverse audiences means addressing different contexts affecting how individuals perceive texts. Writing students can benefit from approaches that help them understand the reading expectations of other cultures. This chapter introduces the *globalized rhetoric* approach of identifying the reading expectations of other cultures and overviews how students can use this method to analyze audience expectations among different cultures when composing for them.

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## INTRODUCTION

The international spread of online access means we live in an increasingly interconnected global environment.\* These connections encompass almost every aspect of life, from business and economic developments to social and political discussions to entertainment and leisure activities. This means you might one day find yourself writing for audiences located in different nations or from other parts of the globe. Your audience will comprise individuals who will likely come from different cultures or groups

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with different values, beliefs, and expectations from yours. These cultural factors can affect how these individuals perceive and respond to the ideas you share with them through writing. The better you understand these dynamics, the more effectively you can compose texts that convey information to individuals from other cultures.

### COMPOSING ACROSS CULTURAL CONTEXTS

This international environment changes the composition context. While you might have written for different audiences before, chances are they came from the same culture as you. This means you could draw from a common set of cultural understandings—from historical examples to discussions of fundamental social concepts—to compose texts for these readers. Different cultures, however, can have different perspectives on everything from what constitutes a valid topic for a composition to how one should introduce and discuss certain subjects in a text. The better you understand such factors, the more effectively you can compose texts for audiences located in different parts of the globe.

Let's be honest: composing for audiences from other cultures can feel daunting. It's not an easy situation to address, and it takes time to develop the understanding needed to do it effectively. After all, cultures can have nuanced expectations of what constitutes an effective text. The *globalized rhetoric approach* can help you identify such factors and compose texts that better meet the expectations of audiences from other cultures.

Globalized rhetoric involves understanding:

- The culture of the audience for which you are writing
- The genre you are writing in when sharing information with that cultural audience

In this essay, you'll learn how to use globalized rhetoric to understand the ways cultural factors affect the expectations groups associate with an effective text. This approach focuses on *usability*. Specifically, it helps you create texts a cultural audience can use to achieve a particular objective—the reason for which they are reading that text.

### RE-THINKING THE WRITING PROCESS FOR GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Globalized rhetoric focuses on three things:

- Rhetoric: How individuals organize information so an audience can use it
- Audience: The people who use/read texts in order to perform a task
- Genre: The formats into which documents are organized for effective use (St.Amant, “Globalizing” 50-51)

By addressing these factors, you can create texts a particular cultural audience can use in the context of their culture. The process involves asking certain questions in a particular order. The resulting answers can help you compose texts that meet the reading preferences and usability expectations of different cultural audiences.

### QUESTION 1: WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE/FOR WHAT CULTURE ARE YOU WRITING?

All cultures have *rhetorical expectations*. The members of a culture generally expect messages to be structured in certain ways and contain particular information to be considered credible or worth using (Campbell 36-44; Driskill 26-33). These expectations are deep-seated and exist beyond the language a person speaks. Thus, they affect how members of a culture view a message (i.e. whether it is credible and usable), regardless of the language it is in (Ulijn 80-81). This is important, for you might be using a common language—your native tongue—to craft messages for other cultures. But, doing so can lead to the assumption that strategies you use to present information in your own culture can be used with other cultures. That would be incorrect.

Here’s the issue: cultures can have different perceptions of what constitutes a credible presentation of information (St.Amant, “Globalizing” 51-52). Cultures often use different rhetorical approaches to craft and evaluate messages. If individuals know the culture for which they are writing, they can research the rhetorical expectations that culture associates with credible messages and usable texts. Writers can use this information to craft messages that meet the rhetorical expectations of the intended cultural audience (Woolever 48-49).

Answering this initial question is the first step in the globalized rhetoric process of writing another culture. Cultures can have different expectations of how to use texts—differences that can cause misuse and miscommunication if not addressed. Once you know the cultural audience, you can use the following questions to learn about its rhetorical/reading expectations.

## **QUESTION 2: WHAT GENRE WILL YOU USE TO SHARE INFORMATION WITH THAT CULTURAL AUDIENCE?**

Audiences rarely read randomly. Rather, they often use certain kinds of texts to achieve a particular objective. When you write for an audience from another culture, you are trying to produce a particular kind of text for that audience to use to achieve an objective. This factor of usability—or how easily individuals can use an item to achieve an objective—is central to determining rhetorical expectations.

*Genres* are standard forms of writing or conveying information (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1-2). When you write in a particular format, you are likely trying to create a certain genre of text. Genres are not random. Rather, audiences usually associate a particular purpose with a given genre. They read—or use—that genre to access the information needed to achieve an objective (St. Amant, “Globalizing” 50-52). For example, individuals use the genre of an instruction manual to access information on how to perform a process, or they use the genre of a movie review to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a film.

This genre-purpose relationship is key to usability, since differing cultural expectations of genres and the uses associated with them tend to create challenges. That is because cultures can associate different purposes with a genre (Campbell 36-44). Some cultures, for example, might associate instructional manuals with a product’s marketing materials and expect manuals to contain information about the product’s technical specifications in addition to instructions on how to use the product. Other cultures, however, could consider the purpose of an instruction manual only to present information on how to use a product. For these individuals, the addition of non-instructional technical information might seem unnecessary or distracting. So, writing for the genre needs of another culture involves understanding what those needs are because they are connected to how individuals plan to use the related text. To understand those needs, you must answer a series of related questions.

## **QUESTION 3: DOES THE GENRE ACTUALLY EXIST (AND IS IT USED) IN THE CULTURE OF MY AUDIENCE?**

It is tempting to think because your culture uses a particular genre for sharing information that it exists in other cultures. This is not always the case (St. Amant, “Globalizing” 55-56). In fact, other cultures might not have or use the same genres that your culture does. Some, for example, prefer verbal interactions over written documentation to share information on

different business activities (Woolever 56-57). As a result, the assumption you might need to use this genre to share information could be inaccurate depending on the culture of your audience.

Additionally, just because a genre exists in a culture does not mean members of that culture use the genre often—if at all. The genre of a Twitter post (a tweet) exists in German culture. Relatively few Germans, however, actually use Twitter (St.Amant, “Reconsidering” 16). As a result, such posts are not an effective mechanism for sharing information with certain German audiences.

These factors are important. If not known or considered, you could spend a great deal of time and effort creating texts in a genre your intended audience does not use. For this reason, writing for other cultures involves determining if the culture for which you are writing uses a particular genre. If not, you need to consider what other genres that culture might use to share certain information (e.g., using face-to-face discussions vs. written contracts to establish business agreements). Then, you can do a deeper review of genres to determine if you are using them effectively to share ideas. This situation leads to another key question.

#### **QUESTION 4: IF THE GENRE EXISTS, WHAT PURPOSE DOES THE RELATED CULTURE ASSOCIATE WITH IT?**

The same genre might exist in another culture. That factor, however, does not mean the other culture associates a similar purpose with that genre, uses it the same way to achieve the same objective, or expects to encounter the same sort of information in it.

Scholars like Charles Campbell and Peter Grundy have noted cultures can associate different purposes with the same genre (Campbell 36-44; Grundy 170-180). Anglo-Americans, for example, often use the genre of the business letter to convey information related to business processes. Other cultures, however, associate different purposes and uses with that genre. Certain cultures, for example, view the business letter as a mechanism used to display a knowledge of the recipient in order to establish a relationship with that person (Campbell 39-40). The idea is individuals from these cultures are more likely to do business with individuals who wish to form long-term connections vs. those who focus on short-term relationships. For this reason, they might review (i.e., use) letters to find some indication the writer has taken the time to learn something about the recipient’s background – a gesture indicating an interest in creating long-term relations (Campbell 39-40).

Writers who do not understand such differences in use might fail to address the rhetorical expectations of a given cultural audience. This can result in the author's work being dismissed as non-credible, for it cannot be used as expected by the related audience. Writers, therefore, need to make sure they know what purpose and use a cultural audience associates with a genre. They can then take steps to meet such expectations and have their work seen as credible and usable by that audience.

Should you discover a cultural audience associates a different purpose and use with a genre, you need to ask certain follow-up questions (see questions 5-7 here).

### **QUESTION 5: WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION DOES A CULTURAL AUDIENCE EXPECT TO ENCOUNTER IN THAT GENRE?**

The purpose for which individuals use a genre affects another factor: the kinds of information one needs to present to meet the audience's expectations for that genre. If, for example, I associate the purpose of an instruction manual with providing information on how to complete a process, that manual needs to present information on that topic for me to use that genre as expected. If, however, I associate that genre with determining the quality of the related product, the manual needs to contain information demonstrating the product's quality (e.g., specifications on the abilities of the properties of the product) so I can use it to achieve that objective.

Failure to address such expectations can affect perceived usability in two ways. First, readers might think a text is not credible or usable because it lacks information needed to achieve the process for which readers are using the text. Alternatively, a text could contain information the reader does not think is essential within the context of a genre, because it is not associated with the objective for which readers use that genre. This situation could undercut a writer's credibility, since the writer could be seen as wasting the reader's time by presenting unnecessary information that affects how individuals can use that text.

Determining what information to include or omit is not easy. Expectations can vary from culture to culture. Also, the topics your native culture associates with achieving a particular objective in a genre (e.g., forging long-term relationships via a business letter) are not necessarily the same topics other cultures associate with achieving that same purpose in that genre (Campbell 36-44). For this reason, you cannot assume you know what information to exclude or include in a genre when writing for another culture. (This essay's next major section—"Researching Culture and

Genre Expectations”—provides strategies for identifying these genre-related factors.)

**QUESTION 6: IN WHAT ORDER DO YOU NEED TO PRESENT INFORMATION IN A GENRE?**

Cultures can have different expectations of the order in which one needs to present information in a genre for the related text to be considered credible (Driskill 28-29). Such factors reflect how the audience plans to use that text to achieve an objective. This means knowing the topics a cultural audience expects to encounter in a genre is not enough. Writers also need to know the sequence in which to present that information to make it usable for that audience. Failure to do so can cause confusion as audiences might consider essential information missing, only to find it at a later point in a text. Alternately, audiences might find certain information appears earlier than expected in a text; as such, they might not know how to contextualize that information because it appears in a sequence they are unfamiliar with and don't know how to use. In either case, such aspects affect the ability of the audience to use the text quickly and easily to achieve an objective.

These factors can include everything from the overall organization of a document and encompass what information to include in introductions and conclusions (Driskill 28-29). They can also occur at a more micro level and involve the order in which certain information appears within a paragraph. Such factors could even affect if writers are expected to note the connections between different items presented in text (like transitional sentences), or if information should be presented in seemingly disconnected chunks that require readers to intuit the connection among ideas.

These organizational differences can affect other aspects associated with the usability of a text. For example, where in a text should a table of contents appear? Is it in the front of the text before the introduction/body text, or is it at the end of the text, after all of the body text in the entry? That factor can affect how individuals perceive a text (that is, something is missing or is out of order) or how they use it (they cannot find information because they cannot locate the table of contents). Outlining the organization of a text prior to writing it thus becomes a matter of organizing information in the format in which members of the intended cultural audience expect to encounter it. Doing so should include accounting for the specifics (how are transitions among topics done?) and the generalities (what should be included in the introduction section?) of overall documents and genres.

## QUESTION 7: WHAT VISUAL ELEMENTS SHOULD BE INCLUDED AND HOW?

Visual elements are often expected in certain texts so readers can use them as needed or expected. In some cases, they provide examples of what something should look like (for example, the tools used to assemble an item). In others, they illustrate how to perform a process (such as drawings showing how to perform the actions described in a text). As with other genre aspects, the use of visuals in a text and the connections of visuals to usability can vary from culture to culture (Kostelnick, “Cultural” 182-184; Kostelnick, “Seeing” 31-33). Creating credible and usable texts for a cultural audience thus involves understanding and addressing expectations associated with the use and organization of visuals as well as with those of words.

Cultures can vary in terms of how much visual information they expect to encounter in a text. Some cultures might prefer more images in a space/related to a block of text than others (Fukuoka et al. 175-176). As a result, what constitutes a usable number of images per page for one culture could be considered overwhelming for another. Cultures can also vary in terms of what constitutes a credible and acceptable visual to represent something. In this case, using an image the related culture considers unacceptable or offensive could cause that audience to reject a text. In all cases, the issue is the usability of the resulting text—whether an audience can or will use it to achieve a given objective easily and effectively.

The nuances in such situations can be complex. Failing to address them can undermine a text’s credibility, limit its usability, and lead cultural audiences to perceive documents in unintended ways. The more writers understand cultural-rhetorical factors, the better they can craft materials that address the expectations cultures associate with the usability of a genre. Gaining such insights involves researching the cultural audience who will use a given text. The next section of this essay overviews methods you can use to research the usability expectations a cultural audience has for a text.

## RESEARCHING CULTURE AND GENRE EXPECTATIONS

Understanding the rhetorical and the usability expectations of other cultures is not easy. Like any writing project, it requires you to do initial research on your intended audience. When doing so, you need to remember:

- Collecting information directly from your audience is key; you need to interact with members of your intended cultural audience to get the answers to the questions noted here.

- Cultures are not uniform; every culture contains different groups that have their own reading and communication preferences. You should never think, “I need to write a letter for individuals from culture X.” Rather, be as specific as possible when researching your audience—e.g., “I need to write for 18- to 21-year-old college students studying at public universities in culture X.”

Once you’ve identified the specific audience, you’ll need to interact with members of that group to identify their expectations of genres, usability, and writing. Sometimes, you can do this via face-to-face conversations with individuals from that cultural audience. In other cases, you might need to use online communication technologies like Skype or Google Hangouts to interact with these individuals.

### WRITING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Regardless of how you interact with individuals, the overall research process is the same. It involves asking the following questions to members of the intended cultural audience:

- Question 1: Do you use [kind of genre] in your culture? (Next, see table 1.)

Table 1. Questions to ask and answers to consider when writing research questions.

	If “yes”	If “no”
<b>Question 2:</b>	What is the purpose of [kind of genre]—what kinds of information do you use it to convey, and what do individuals expect to use it for?	How do you share information about [process you want individuals to perform]?
<b>Question 3:</b>	What specific kinds of information do you expect to encounter in [type of genre] to achieve this objective/use it effectively?	What specific kinds of information do you expect to encounter in [type of genre] to achieve this objective/use it effectively?

	If “yes”	If “no”
<b>Question 4:</b>	How is information organized in [type of genre]; what information comes first, second, third, . . . last? [Use responses to previous question to determine how many pieces of information to organize.]	How is information organized in [type of genre]—what information comes first, second, third, . . . last? [Use responses to previous question to determine how many pieces of information to organize.]
<b>Question 5:</b>	Do you expect visuals to appear in [kind of genre]? If so, can you describe the visuals used, how many are used, and where on a page they appear?	Do you expect visuals to appear in [kind of genre]? If so, can you describe the visuals used, how many are used, and where on a page they appear?
<b>Question 6:</b>	Have you ever read American [or author’s native culture] versions of [genre]? If so, did you find anything odd or that you would suggest changing if Americans [author’s native culture] write for individuals from [respondent’s culture]?	Have you ever read American [or author’s native culture] versions of [genre]? If so, did you find anything odd or that you would suggest changing if Americans [author’s native culture] write for individuals from [respondent’s culture]?
<b>Question 7:</b>	Do you have any suggestions about writing a [genre] for members of your culture?	Do you have any suggestions about writing a [genre] for members of your culture?

These questions allow you to collect information on cultural expectations of rhetoric, genre, and usability. You can then consult this information when composing texts for the related cultural audience.

### METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Two relatively effective methods for collecting answers to these questions are interviews and focus groups, but you can also use a mixture of these two approaches.

## INTERVIEWS

Interviews involve meeting one-on-one with members of a culture, asking individuals the questions noted in the previous table, and collecting and comparing responses to identify commonalities in the answers received. But it can be tricky to determine how many individuals to interview. While more is better, realities of time, availability, and access to people from other cultures can create limitations. As a general practice, consider the “rule of threes”:

- Responses from 1 person = personal opinion
- Common responses from 2 people = could be a coincidence
- Common responses from 3 or more people = likely indicates a trend

Based on this approach, if you can interview three or more individuals from the intended audience, you can begin to collect the information needed to identify cultural rhetorical expectations for a genre.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups involve getting 3-5 people from your intended audience in one place and asking them to respond, as a group, to these questions. The idea is, group interaction can prompt participants to talk through and better reflect on and remember expectations for credible and usable communication in a genre. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups allow you to collect information from multiple individuals relatively quickly. Conversely, group interactions can lead to “groupthink,” where the members of the group shift toward a group norm vs. individual preferences when conveying information. Ideally, you would use two or more focus groups comprised of 3-5 different people each time and compare responses across groups to identify trends. Achieving this objective, however, is a matter of the access you have to members of the intended audience and the time individuals have to meet as a group.

## MIXED METHODS

You might also consider using *both* interviews and focus groups to collect information from the members of an audience. In this case, you could compare:

- Interview responses from different people to look for trends
- Focus group responses for each group and across groups to look for trends

- Interview trends with focus group trends to see if there are commonalities across both

Drawing from both approaches allows you to compare responses collected in different contexts. Such comparisons can help determine if consistencies in rhetorical and usability expectations exist across individual responses and group replies.

### MEDIUM OF INTERACTIONS

It's best if you can meet with individuals in person to conduct interviews and focus groups. Yet this might not be possible. In that case, consider how you might use online media to interact with people in other nations. You could, for example, use Skype to do one-on-one interviews or a group Skype chat to conduct focus groups. Alternately, you could try to collaborate with someone in another country to organize an on-site focus group there and ask questions of the group via a technology like Google Hangouts.

On occasion, you might have on-site access to a very small number of individuals from a particular culture. In such cases, you might need to mix on-site and online interactions to gather multiple perspectives on cultural expectations. In the end, it is direct interaction with members of the other culture that is essential to gathering information on rhetorical and usability expectations. For this reason, technological options that allow for such contact can be an effective solution.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Writing in greater global contexts can be complex. It involves understanding the rhetorical expectations of other cultures—and of groups within those cultures—to craft messages they can use to achieve an objective. The globalized rhetoric approach can help you do this. The key is using certain methods to collect information on rhetorical and usability expectations directly from the members of a cultural audience.

By gaining direct answers to key questions, you can learn what other cultural groups consider credible, usable presentations in a genre. You can then use this information to craft messages that address these expectations. The more you know about your cultural audience, the better positioned you are to craft messages that audience will view as usable. In the end, it is a case of knowledge is power.

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## TEACHER RESOURCES FOR WRITING IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS: COMPOSING USABLE TEXTS FOR AUDIENCES FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES BY KIRK ST. AMANT

### OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Aspects of culture and composition are often addressed at one of three points in a writing course:

- When discussing global contexts of writing
- When discussing writing for specific cultural audiences within the student's own nation
- When discussing online composition practices and the international access they allow
- This essay can be taught when examining any or all of these areas. By focusing on rhetoric and its use in relation to culture, the article provides students with a mechanism for examining cultural reading and writing expectations in a variety of cross-cultural contexts. When teaching this overall area, instructors need to make students aware that:
  - genre expectations are connected to the cultures using them vs. inherent to genres; and
  - cultures are not monolithic entities, but are comprised of diverse groups.

To this end, students need to learn the core idea that one doesn't write for culture X, but one writes for audience Y in culture X.

The globalized rhetoric framework described here provides students with an initial understanding of and a mechanism for examining the dynamics of these factors. Ideally, students will use the research questions and approaches noted in the entry to gain a better, broader understanding of such factors. The key is interacting with and collecting cultural-rhetorical information directly from the members of a specific cultural audience when composing for them. Instructors can use this chapter both to convey these ideas and have students test and apply related concepts in ways that enhance their understanding of such factors.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

To help students explore the ideas discussed in these entries, consider having them address—as individuals, in small groups, or as an overall class—the following questions:

1. What genres do you use on an everyday basis and for what reason do you use them? What purpose do you seek to achieve when writing in or reading one of these genres?
2. What venues—on-site or online—do you currently use to interact with (or have the potential to interact with) individuals from other cultures? How might these venues be places where you might need to compose texts for those individuals? What kinds of texts would you compose and why?
3. The chapter provides a discussion of writing in terms of usability and how writing is used by readers to achieve an objective. Do you agree with this usability-focused approach to writing? Why or why not?
4. This essay discusses a particular approach to researching audiences from other cultures in order to create more effective texts for them. Do you think you could use this research approach when composing texts for readers from other cultures? Why or why not?
5. Could the approach—both the overarching questions and related research process—be applied to understand audiences within your own culture? If yes, how? If not, why not?

Examining these items can help students better reflect upon and consider how to apply the ideas presented in the essay within the context of their own writing processes.