

# **Working with Multilingual Student Writers**

A Faculty Guide



Purdue  
Writing  
Lab

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For current information about the resources discussed in this guide,  
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## Introduction

Reading and assessing the writing of multilingual students can be a unique challenge for college faculty. This guide offers strategies for how to read, assess, and provide feedback on the work of multilingual student writers, and it contextualizes these strategies in current Second Language Studies research. Please note that this guide primarily focuses on undergraduate students, though much of this material can also apply to graduate students. For more details on graduate student writers, please see the [Faculty Guide for Working with Graduate Writers](#).

## The Contexts of Multilingual Writing

### English and multilingualism

English is a language used all over the globe. It is the primary language of countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. It is the language of government and educational systems in formerly colonized countries such as India and South Africa. In addition, English is taught throughout the world as a global lingua franca and is used in organizations such as the European Union and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Importantly, English usage around the globe is fluid and changing due to the effects of globalization, global media, and the internet. The Englishes in our classrooms at Purdue are a microcosm of this phenomenon; Englishes from China, rural America, India, the East Coast, South Korea, and many other regions and countries can be heard across campus. The American Academic English that students are expected to adopt in their writing is one variety of English, but that variety is not appropriate for every context or audience. By continuing to develop a sensitivity to the varieties of English on campus, faculty can strengthen their understanding of the linguistic plurality and diversity on our campus.

*Multilingual students try to literally translate from their native language to English...I've been studying English since I was 4 years-old and I still have this problem. Daniela P.*

In this guide, the term *multilingual writers* will refer to international student writers whose first language is not American English. Historically, this population has been referred to as *English as a second language* (ESL). ESL is a problematic label that has long been out of use among language and writing researchers because it does not accurately reflect the characteristics of this group. The term *multilingualism* represents the linguistic diversity that our international students bring to campus. Specifically, some of these international students are learning to write in English as a third or possibly fourth or fifth language. Some may use English as their primary spoken language yet have had little experience writing in American Academic English. Some have been writing in English since they began school, though the

language spoken in their home is not English. Some will be lifelong users of a variety of English that may be very different from American or British English. Such varieties are imbued with vocabulary, turns of phrase, and rhetoric from their home culture. A central tenet of World Englishes (see Kachru, 2006, for more on World Englishes), and one that informs the thinking behind this guide, is that English belongs to those who use it, and, as such, it belongs just as much to international students using it in American classrooms as it does to domestic U.S. students and faculty. While many faculty assess writing for its adherence to the expectations of American Academic English, it is important to note that the writing being done in college classrooms is one variety of English used in a specific context and for a specific audience. It is not a monolithic use of English that all users should adhere to in all contexts. As such, it should not be presented to multilingual writers as the correct version of English.

## An overview of multilingual students at Purdue

Purdue ranks 4th among all U.S. public universities in total number of enrolled international students and 2nd among Big Ten universities, according to the university's fall 2019 statistical report. (Purdue University Office of International Students and Scholars, 2019). In terms of the Purdue student body, 20.4% of students at Purdue are international. To further clarify these numbers, 4,651 or 13.8% of undergraduates and 4,434 or 40.7% of graduate students are international. Because of these trends, most faculty who teach at Purdue can expect to have a substantial number of international students in their classes, and these students will likely be multilingual writers.

Faculty are faced with the dual challenge of assessing student work fairly and of helping students develop academic or professional standards of writing. Reading, assessing, and offering feedback on multilingual student writing may cause a degree of anxiety in faculty who feel unprepared to address the specialized writing issues international students are presumed to have. Typically, many readers feel compelled to provide feedback on aspects of grammar, style, and sentence structure that differ significantly from the accepted standards of good writing in a given discipline. While it is important for multilingual writers to continue developing mastery of and expertise in their English usage, it is vital that sentence-level issues not overshadow issues of writing expertise that all writers need to practice and learn: how to apply the stylistic conventions of their academic discipline, how to make an argument, how to appropriately use sources, and so on. This guide will offer recommendations and suggestions for navigating such tensions by offering a model for prioritizing concerns and for commenting on grammatical errors when that is the priority. The most effective writing feedback is selective and purposeful; commenting on every concern is not productive for either respondent or writer. Support for both writers and those offering feedback exists on campus and at the Purdue Writing Lab. *For a listing of Purdue's resources for international students, see the section on Resources.*

## Multilingual students' diverse experiences

An important point throughout this guide is that there cannot be a monolithic one-size-fits-all rule about multilingual writers because multilingual students' experiences with language learning, education generally, and cultural dynamics will vary greatly. Language learning approaches may have stressed communicative competence or may have focused largely on grammar drills. International students may have used English in everyday life, or it may have been learned primarily as a foreign language. Immigrants to the United States and their children (also known as *Generation 1.5*) may have initially been taught English as a foreign language and then taken ESL courses in the United States. Depending on how long they have been in the country, immigrant and Generation 1.5 students will have different experiences from each other (Ferris, 2009), and these experiences mean that their abilities with the English language may differ from their international peers (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999).

Differences in educational backgrounds will also exist among multilingual writers. Individual students may or may not have learned academic content in English, resulting in variations in vocabulary attainment. International students' English writing instruction may have focused on TOEFL-like essay questions or even individual sentences rather than the longer essays commonly assigned in U.S. classrooms. In contrast, Generation 1.5 students' educations may have been a hybrid of pre-collegiate courses in their home country/language and in the United States/English, resulting in American Academic English usage and writing skills that may look similar to their monolingual peers in some respects while still exhibiting features common to multilingual writers. *See Common Concerns about Multilingual Students and Writing for more on the effects of these educational dynamics.*

In addition to language and education, cultural dynamics will shape students' attitudes about English and the contexts of their current English usage. Students who see themselves as permanent residents of the United States may be more invested in English language and culture compared to those who plan to return to a home country upon graduation. Students may feel pressured to assimilate to monolingual English by the U.S. K-12 educational system. They may also feel conflicted about how English use changes their identity, depending on whether they view English as evidence of a colonial past or as an indicator of a global future. Students attending an institution with large numbers of peers who speak the same home language may find it more difficult to use English extensively outside the classroom, a prerequisite for acquiring greater skill with the language. Because multilingual writers have such diverse experiences with language learning, education, and cultural dynamics, instructors will find it helpful to understand students' needs on an individual, case-by-case basis.

## Common Concerns about Multilingual Students and Writing

Multilingual student writers come from a variety of backgrounds and geographical locations, and they vary in level of English proficiency. This section addresses some common concerns that faculty voice when working with multilingual student writers. The answers to the questions use some of the most current and relevant research in the field of second language writing. Please note that these are not meant as a set of rules to apply, but as contextualization for the best teaching practices in the sections that follow.

### Why is writing produced by my multilingual students sometimes so different from the writing produced by my domestic students?

All aspects of the writing process will be different because monolingual and multilingual writers are different kinds of writers.

Multilingual student writers and their monolingual counterparts have been found to have differences in composition processes, including planning, drafting, and reviewing their writing. Additionally, differences have also been found between their written texts on measures of fluency, accuracy, quality, and structure (Silva, 1993). Recent research in second language writing and translingualism argues that languages are resources that writers use in tandem during writing rather than shifting between discrete languages (Horner et al., 2011). When writers are moving between languages, they are not simply making direct translations but instead making purposeful choices about what language to use to represent their ideas. Ideas and knowledge can emerge from moving between languages, and a writer's phrasing and writerly voice is a result of knowing multiple languages. Sometimes the choice of language may not be clear for the intended audience. Odd turns of phrase should not simply be labeled as *incorrect* but should serve as a starting point for a discussion with the writer about how meaning, word choice, and clarity are often dependent on audience expectations.

*Writing in English is not similar to writing in Chinese at all. I cannot say that I am right now really good at English writing, but I am confident to write in English and show my work to other people for [feedback]. Yuwen C.*

Education and socialization can vary radically from one culture to the next and contribute to shaping a writer's rhetorical style.

Studies in contrastive, inter-cultural, and comparative rhetoric, as well as in education, have found that the first language, home culture, and the disciplinary

culture of a multilingual student writer all have an impact on the kinds of assumptions and ideas that student brings to a given writing assignment (Leki, 1991; Connor, 2002; Connor, 2018). For example, researchers in comparative education have found that the American high school STEM classroom is typically student-centered, inductive, and experiential while high school STEM classrooms in China are teacher-centered, deductive, and focused on book-learning (Su, Su, & Goldstein, 1994). In a comparison of American and Chinese college-level essay styles, Sullivan, Zhang, and Zheng (2012) found that the expectations for essay writing in the United States tended to be more critically and procedurally oriented while the expectations in China for essay writing tended to encourage literary elegance and a positive message. While these are just a few examples, the point here is that home culture may lead to different understandings of academic and professional conventions and expectations.

In addition to differences brought about by educational background, a writer's rhetorical style may be affected by various social factors. Cultural etiquette, gender, race, class, and other intersectional issues can shape how a writer approaches writing. For example, in some cultures, it may be a breach of etiquette for a woman to initiate an argument. Certain arguments may be culturally taboo for everyone, such as arguments that question or challenge governmental policy. In addition, how one approaches an argument is also cultural. In American academic writing, readers expect a *writer-responsible approach*: an argument is clearly stated in the introduction, receives explicit support throughout the document, and is likely restated in the conclusion. In this approach, the writer is responsible for the reader's understanding. Some cultures favor a *reader-responsible approach*, where an argument is made implicitly and is sometimes not fully stated until the end, if at all, and the reader is expected to fill in the gaps as they read. *For strategies on how to approach these differences, see Methods for Supporting Multilingual Writers.*

*Our logic of writing is largely different from the native English speaker, but we almost do not recognize it by ourselves...Our instructors always expect that we can write papers in an "American way." So...it was really challenging for me to adapt to another writing style. Yuwen C.*

## What do I need to consider in order to shape reasonable expectations for multilingual writers?

Learning to write academic prose in a second language takes a long time, and learning grammar is only part of this process.

Though language instruction in areas like grammar and vocabulary is obviously important in helping multilingual students become more proficient writers, research into second language writing has found that there is no quick fix when it comes to learning to write in a second language. It is important to note that (a) it takes a long time to learn how to write for academic purposes in a second language (Collier [1987] and Thompson [2017], for example, demonstrate that it will take around four

to seven years under ideal learning conditions), and (b) sending students to the Writing Lab will help, but in all likelihood it will not make multilingual writers suddenly write like their monolingual peers. Being realistic about how much students can improve their writing over the course of a single semester will reduce both faculty and student anxiety. Tolerating minor differences in grammar that do not impede communication will allow more time to focus on differences in grammar that do impede communication, in addition to prioritizing the global concerns in writing that all writers need guidance and feedback on. Content clearly communicated should be the most important goal.

*For different situations words may be used differently but this is very hard for people outside of English culture to acknowledge. Liuyi Y.*

What counts as good academic writing will vary between contexts.

Many academic writers regard academic prose as an information-delivery system that works best when the most important information is delivered as clearly and quickly as possible. Despite field-specific variation in writing conventions, some features of good writing are shared among academic disciplines in the United States. Such features include the clarity of prose, clear organizational structure, correct handling of citation conventions, and adequate support for claims. These are examples of generally-universal expectations for strong North American academic writing and are best to emphasize when discussing writing assignments and disciplinary conventions or when offering feedback.

On the other hand, the conventions of lab reports in mechanical engineering are different from those in biology, and the conventions of a sociology paper are different from the conventions of an applied linguistics paper. Being clear about genre- and discipline-specific expectations, including what guidelines students are expected to follow when writing, is essential for faculty who wish to help their students succeed in both the academic and professional world. Writers should be provided with information and guidance about the conventions of writing in a specific discipline, including style guides that explain and model these conventions. Additionally, the different components of a specific document (e.g., a lab report, memo, email) should be clearly explained, and students should be provided with examples of each component. Finally, formatting and citation guidelines should be clearly explained with visual models and references to specific resources students can use to replicate these expectations in their writing. Providing writers with the title of the specific edition of the citation and style guide that they are expected to emulate not only gives them a specific resource, but it also ensures that faculty have clear guidelines for evaluating how successfully writers adhere to such expectations.

The relationship between writing and other language skills is complex.

For many writers, language-speaking ability may not reflect the ability to write in that language. Components of good writing such as clear argumentation and organized structure are generally separate from other language skills. As a result, a multilingual writer who is struggling with a writing assignment might be struggling both with the writing and with English as a language. Research has shown that writing in another language can help improve language skills, and thus the relationship between language instruction and writing instruction is complex (Williams, 2012). To help students become better writers, attention should be drawn to the features of writing (e.g., logic) the instructor wants improved as well as to the language (e.g., verb tense or vocabulary). Research into Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has shown that there is very little that a language learner picks up without consciously noticing how a feature, such as phrasing or grammar, is used (Schmidt, 1990). Thus, to help students improve their writing in academic and professional contexts, it is necessary to teach writing explicitly as part of the curriculum.

*Even though my writing skills improved a lot, I do not consider myself a great writer neither in English nor Spanish. Manuel J.*

## Why Do I Seem to Encounter Plagiarism More Frequently with Multilingual Students?

Plagiarism, academic dishonesty, and intellectual property are all cultural concepts that represent specific cultural values.

Ownership of ideas and clearly attributing who owns certain ideas through citations seems foundational to the academy; however, this is a cultural practice that emerges from Western concepts of individualism and intellectual property (Lyon, 2009). Multilingual writers may or may not have prior or significant educational experience with academic citation practices. Writers should certainly be taught these conventions, but as conventions that emerge from specific, Western ideologies rather than as universal truth. In some cultures, sources are not cited because it is expected that educated readers are familiar with the original source material. When writers have received previous instruction in interacting with sources, that instruction may differ vastly from current course expectations.

Given these cultural differences, multilingual students who appear to have borrowed language from a source without proper quotation or citation should not initially be treated with suspicion. These instances are moments in which to discuss American academic conventions for interacting with sources and why academic audiences expect specific citation practices. Exploring the possible reasons why a student used language and ideas without proper attribution can help faculty better understand that student's current facility with source use and create a plan for continued development in citation practice.

## Citation practices are learned over time.

Since citation practices are an academic convention, students acquire proficiency as they advance in their education. Even students who have taken one or two classes where they received an introduction to citing sources will need continued practice and guidance to master citation conventions. For example, appropriate paraphrasing and quoting of sources is something that is largely learned by reading and observing how experts in a particular field interact with sources, and so this is something writers will become more adept at as they read more scholarship and interact with sources in their own writing. The length of time writers have been in the academy and the coursework they have taken greatly shape how much experience they have with academic writing and citation practices. In particular, multilingual writers may not have received the exposure to citation practices that many domestic students receive in pre-collegiate education, and even some domestic students may not have much practice with these conventions before entering college.

## Writing something in “your own words” is challenging when learning a new vocabulary.

“Make sure to state it in your own words” is the golden rule when students are reminded not to take language from other sources if they are not directly quoting them. Aptly summarizing and paraphrasing sources requires an extensive vocabulary in order to avoid duplicating the source’s language. This expectation can be particularly challenging for writers who are still learning large amounts of new vocabulary, especially when they encounter a new idea that is expressed in that new vocabulary. In such a situation, the writer may only be able to articulate the idea in the language of the original source. A multilingual writer who leans too heavily on a source’s original language may struggle to formulate a paraphrase. Multilingual writers are not just learning ideas when reading scholarship; often, they are also learning the language that communicates those ideas.

*Many times I fall short on something I want to describe because I simply don't find the words to do so. Manuel J.*

## Plagiarism often happens when writers panic.

The classic stereotype of plagiarism is that students do it to deceive their instructors in order to get out of doing their work. Some cases of plagiarism are simply mistakes or students not knowing specific conventions. In the case of deliberate deception, plagiarizing may be due to panic rather than sheer laziness. Multilingual writers, in particular, may face challenges with having the time and energy to complete a document because it takes longer to read and write in English. Students who feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of words needed for an assignment’s word count may resort to plagiarism as a coping mechanism.

Plagiarism may seem to occur more frequently in multilingual writing because it can be easier to detect.

Any writer who uses the writing or ideas of another without employing proper citation conventions often displays many tell-tale signs, including a shift in voice, tone, vocabulary, or content. Multilingual writers may often exhibit additional signs. For example, a frequent pattern of error, such as misused articles or prepositions, suddenly vanishes in one paragraph before returning later in the document. Such signals may make it easier to detect when multilingual writers are using writing that is not their own because it can be much more apparent than the subtle shift in voice and tone that a domestic student's writing might exhibit.

Plagiarism detectors should be used with caution.

Finally, plagiarism detectors can be useful tools for indicating potential plagiarism, but just because the algorithm identifies a passage as questionable does not automatically mean that the offending passage is plagiarized. It may just be a quotation or a cited source in another paper in the detector's database. Writers will likely not know this, and if they are asked to review their own writing in a plagiarism checker before turning it in, this can cause undue confusion, frustration, and anxiety if writers think they have dutifully followed citation practices and guidelines. Plagiarism checkers cannot ask students questions about their writing, nor can the checker understand the context in which something is written, so while they can be a useful tool in some cases, they cannot replace human judgment.

With so much to address, how do I prioritize which concerns to comment on?

Comment on global concerns before commenting on sentence level concerns.

Global concerns include the large, conceptual foundations of a document, such as content, organization, and genre conventions. They are considered by writing experts to have a significant bearing on the effectiveness of a given piece of writing and are thus considered more important to address than sentence-level issues. An essay that makes a provocative, original claim that is well-supported with reliable evidence is often preferable—even if it has grammatical errors—to a grammatically perfect essay that fails to communicate anything interesting about its subject. While some may argue that an essay should be both interesting and well-polished, that target might be outside of a multilingual writer's current linguistic proficiency. Note that we do not intend to set up a false binary between strong content development and grammar usage but rather to provide an example that questions where priorities are placed when giving feedback. While instructor feedback can help guide multilingual writers toward a higher level of language proficiency, strong writing is underpinned by strong thinking, and, as such, it is vital to attend to global concerns

before addressing sentence-level concerns such as missing or incorrect articles, incorrect punctuation, or inappropriate use of prepositions. *See Methods for Supporting Multilingual Writers for a detailed explanation of suggested feedback practices.*

Questions that deal with global concerns might include the following:

- How do the ideas align and cohere within the text?
- Does the content support the main purpose of the document?
- Does the big picture organization meet the assignment guidelines?
- Are the claims adequately supported by appropriate evidence?
- Is the writer using a voice and tone appropriate for the purpose, audience, and context?

*I am not a good writer in any language that I know...I also think my writing is very basic, like I don't know how to use more elaborate words. Daniela P.*

Sentence-level errors that impede meaning are global concerns.

When a sentence-level error affects meaning and hinders understanding, it should be prioritized as a global concern. Errors that occlude meaning can include issues with sentence structure, phrasing, or word choice. In contrast, many errors with punctuation, articles, and prepositions can be skimmed over by a reader without much of an issue. The following example illustrates when a punctuation error does not obstruct meaning and when it does:

**Meaning clear despite a punctuation error:** He argues that taxation is unjust and he claims he never pays his taxes. [Missing comma between two independent clauses.]

**Meaning changes with a punctuation error:** She identifies three major issues: discrimination against certain students, an unwillingness of school administration to address accusations with teachers and staff and parents feeling like they are unheard. [Who feels unheard? Staff and parents or just parents?]

When a sentence-level error obstructs meaning, then sentence-level errors should be addressed as global concerns. When possible, try to figure out where, exactly, the sentence gets off-track. Is the subject or main verb of a sentence unclear or missing? Is there a preposition, article, or punctuation error that obstructs or changes meaning? Is the misuse of a verb or an unclear word choice an inaccurate use of disciplinary terminology? Does this misuse of a technical term impede meaning? If so, this is likely a global concern. The development of field specific vocabulary is an important part of any academic writer's development, but for multilingual students in particular, field-specific uses of words may be new or unfamiliar. In all of these cases, faculty guidance can help multilingual writers improve the clarity of their writing.

Explaining to the writer where a reader gets tangled up in a sentence can help writers know why the sentence is confusing. Sometimes, what a writer actually means can be so unclear that it is hard to decipher what, exactly, causes a sentence to be confusing. In these instances, rather than just dismissing the sentence as “unclear,” it is best to explain that the phrasing is confusing and to ask a writer to try to explain it differently.

*I find very useful when instructors add comments in their feedback (instead of just marking it is wrong or they didn't understand). Daniela P.*

## When I do want to address sentence-level errors, how can I offer efficient and effective feedback?

### Comment on patterns of error.

Commenting on every possible grammar error in any essay is not a productive use of faculty time and energy. Receiving an essay filled with grammar correction will be overwhelming for most students and will likely offer little guidance on what to prioritize if students were to try to make changes. The goal of effective writing feedback should be to provide guidance for improvement, not copy-editing. In an interview, Ferris recommends that feedback on errors “be individualized and adaptive in the sense that as students make progress in one area you start focusing on something else” (Yao, 2015, p. 73). Start by commenting on errors that the writer tends to make often. A pattern of error would generally be an error that happens three or more times. For longer essays, three to four patterns are likely all a writer could feasibly attend to, and for shorter documents, the ratio of comments to writing should be balanced so that the feedback is not overwhelming. In addition, the discussion of errors should not overshadow the actual content of the document. Finally, such feedback should not be punitive, or it risks undermining writers’ motivation to work on grammatical issues that may feel outside of their capabilities.

### Provide time and space for revisions.

For grammatical corrections within a document to have an impact, faculty should consider how to systematically respond to a particular error type and how they want a student to proceed in future writing tasks, whether in revisions of the current work or in entirely new assignments. Writers need to be given space to practice improving on errors that they frequently make. Keep brief notes on improvements writers were asked to make. Refer to these notes when reading a new document and comment on writers’ progress. Consider offering small amounts of extra credit for writers to revise their patterns of error in final drafts. Ferris stresses in an interview that “it is critical that students be allowed or required to revise, correct, [and] apply feedback on a particular paper. I think you are kind of wasting your time if you give students error feedback and say next time you write a paper, remember that” (Yao, 2015, p. 73). For students to get the most out of feedback, and for faculty to get the most out of the time they put into giving feedback, writers should

be encouraged to work on patterns of error over time and should be provided with the means to do so constructively. *For more suggestions and tips on how to best provide feedback to multilingual writers, including suggestions about how to systematically respond to grammar errors, see [Methods for Supporting Multilingual Writers and Addressing Errors in Multilingual Writing](#).*

## What considerations can help me better understand the needs of my multilingual students?

### Time and energy are finite resources.

Writing and reading in another language often takes more time and energy than writing and reading in one's home language. For example, reading in a second language is influenced by a number of variables including proficiency in both the home language and English, the amount of time spent learning English, (dis)similarities between English and the home language, and many other factors (Verhoeven, Perfetti, & Pugh, 2019). In addition, students are in multiple classes, and, therefore, multilingual students are juggling writing, reading, and communicating effectively in English for multiple classes at once. Consider whether feedback is asking multilingual writers to do a significant amount of labor compared to what is being asked of their monolingual peers.

### Linguistic prejudice disrupts learning.

Many multilingual students report hearing and receiving remarks about their accents in both speech and writing, encountering impatience with their spoken and written English, and encountering negative assumptions about their intelligence because of their accented English. These encounters occur with domestic peers, staff and administrators, members of the larger community, and even faculty. Stray prejudicial remarks and actions can add up and derail students from language learning and writing. It is important that written and verbal feedback be phrased so that it is not interpreted as prejudicial. Faculty can help counteract linguistic prejudice by providing constructive feedback, accepting minor errors (such as with articles), and helping multilingual writers continue to practice their written American Academic English.

### Faculty language learning experiences can provide insight.

A faculty member's personal experience having lived or studied abroad can provide insight into the kinds of attitudes and behaviors in a host country that help a language learner thrive. Use such personal experience to identify challenges for language learners and to clarify support that contributes to success. Looking at personal experience can enable faculty members to better understand the challenges multilingual writers face in their classes. It is important to note, however, that particular forms of support may not work for all learners and may not meet all learners' goals for their own language learning.

## Methods for Supporting Multilingual Writers

The following suggestions should be considered best practices for working with multilingual student writers but are also applicable for college writers generally.

### Scaffold writing assignments.

Set up the assignment.

**Be as specific as possible** when outlining assignment requirements. This may include preparing a convention guide; discussing differences between genres; and providing examples of target work, citation guidelines, discipline-specific vocabulary, or rhetorical moves.

**Structure assignments to avoid cultural bias** by providing opportunities for multilingual student writers to be experts in what they know. For example, instead of asking students to focus on problems with American bridges or road surfaces, give them the choice of all bridges or road surfaces. Encourage and welcome an international perspective.

**Provide specific examples (model texts) of the work students should produce.** Additionally, spend time in class explicitly discussing these examples and the kinds of rhetorical moves that they make. For example, what goes into an introduction in a lab report and what kind of language is used to accomplish this task?

*I wish instructors would provide sample English writings for academic purposes or just, proper ways of expression. Liuyi M.*

**Provide specific examples of how writers will be expected to interact with and cite sources in the assignment.** Show students how to find and use the style guide required for the course or discipline. Because citation guidelines are revised frequently, it is unreasonable to expect writers to memorize all citation conventions.

**Use explicit rubrics.** Transparency about grading criteria lets students know the exact specifications that a given assignment requires. Check out Bean (2011) for a more extensive overview of the types and uses of rubrics.

Use a student-centered writing process.

**Assign multiple drafts** so that students work on papers over time, receiving feedback along the way. Peer review is one way to spread out the labor of feedback, although students will need instruction on how to comment effectively on each other's drafts.

*I wish instructors could be opened to making students submit a final draft before actually submitting the final report or just being opened to check the final report before submitting it. Daniela P.*

**Teach proofreading and other practices** like peer review that students can do on their own before they submit their work. Do not assume that students know how to proofread on their own. For specific proofreading strategies that students might use, visit the [OWL proofreading page](#).

**Know who students are**, including their language and educational backgrounds. Multilingual student writers at Purdue come from all over the world and will have different strengths and weaknesses when it comes to writing.

*I wish instructors knew how structure changes between different languages and how to transform that into English writing. Manuel J.*

**Encourage students to be proactive** in developing their professional and disciplinary vocabulary. This may include using an English dictionary (as opposed to a bilingual dictionary), keeping a discipline-specific vocabulary journal, or reading for pleasure in English.

**Support active reading practices** by being explicit about what students should look for in an assigned reading, providing context for the reading such as the author's background or where a particular research study fits with other research studies, or preparing a list of pre-reading questions.

Structure classroom time.

**For in-class writing and reading assignments, allow multilingual student writers more time.** Reading and writing in a second (or third or fourth) language requires more cognitive power and, therefore, more time. Keep this in mind for essay questions, in-class readings, Power Point slides, or when assigning small group work.

**Direct students to additional writing and language support resources.** The Writing Lab offers conversation groups, writing consultations, and workshops, and a variety of whole-class lab tours where students can learn how the Writing Lab operates. *For more on resources for multilingual writers at Purdue, see Resources.*

**Develop a plan for offering feedback.**

By developing a plan for delivering feedback, instructors can implement a system that is effective for writers' progress and is efficient and consistent.

Set realistic goals for error feedback.

It is unrealistic to expect drastic changes in the writing of multilingual student writers from one writing assignment to the next, and it is unreasonable to expect they will achieve native competence in a single semester. Instead, look for improvement throughout the semester. If there are particular errors multilingual student writers make consistently, help them focus on these errors. Expect gradual improvement from assignment to assignment, encourage self-editing strategies, be

clear about expectations, and be tolerant of minor differences that do not affect the overall purpose of the writing.

*I am not very confident when I am writing in English. There is a significant difference in how to write in English and Spanish, and for me to try to translate one to the other is very difficult. Daniela P.*

## Decide on the type of feedback.

Will students receive longer, narrative comments on global concerns, or shorter comments that refer to criteria in the rubric, or a mixture of both? Will shorthand be used for grammatical errors? If so, develop a list of shorthand to share with students and use it consistently. *For an example of this sort of code, see Distinguish between treatable and untreatable errors.*

## Explain commenting practices to students, and be consistent when following them.

All students, multilingual writers included, need to know what feedback they can expect and how to interpret it. This includes explaining the type of language that will be used for feedback (e.g., what abbreviations stand for) and the kinds of features that will be commented on. The more explicit instructors can be about what they are doing and why, the better the chance that students will be able to use the feedback to improve their writing.

## Read the draft all the way through before commenting.

Read the document all the way through to get a better sense of the most pressing concerns. Focus comments on a limited number of significant concerns rather than simply commenting on impulses during the initial reading (Sommers, 2013).

## Ask for writer's memos or author's notes.

A writer's memo, or author's note, is a brief introductory paragraph that writers can submit with a document to help guide an instructor's feedback (Sommers, 2013). Writers can share areas with which they struggled, particulars of which they are proud, and sections they would like to improve. The writer can direct the instructor to what they want feedback on the most or can outline what may not be helpful for them at that stage. For example, writers may not want feedback on sentence-level editing if they are considering making major revisions, and they can offer that information in a writer's memo.

## Complement written feedback with one-on-one conferences.

Having conversations about written feedback can clear up possible misunderstandings. Research has found that one of the biggest problems with faculty comments is that students often cannot read them or cannot interpret them in the way that the professor intended (Ferris, 1995). This can be especially true for

multilingual writers faced with handwritten cursive comments, any kind of shorthand that students cannot interpret because they have not been given a key, and vocabulary or terminology use with which the writer may not be familiar.

## Structure feedback to encourage the writer to apply it.

### Use a reader's response perspective.

Literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke (1973) likens academic discourse to a social gathering in a parlor: someone enters the parlor to find an ongoing conversation, listens in order to be able to participate, and briefly joins the conversation that will continue after they leave. One method to help writers consider this larger audience for their work is to use a reader's response perspective when commenting. Comments that focus on the perspective of a reader ask the writer to imagine a context and audience for a document beyond dutifully completing an assignment for an instructor. For instance, a comment such as "Your thesis does not take a clear position on the issue you are discussing, and this will cause readers to be unsure what position your essay is taking" offers a clear reason for the problem identified and also asks the writer to consider the kinds of audiences they could eventually write for outside of the classroom.

For all writers, learning to write for different audiences—such as fellow researchers, a public readership, or stakeholders in a project—is a useful rhetorical skill. For multilingual writers, the focus on reader's response can be incredibly useful for learning to write for readers in different cultures and for learning how different cultures approach different genres. This focus also helps all writers learn which aspects—such as tone, style, voice, and vocabulary—are appropriate for certain audiences, and this is especially crucial for the continual language development of multilingual writers.

### Be critically kind.

While instructors likely intend for feedback to sound neutral, it will often not be read that way by students, who may interpret all criticism as negative. Feedback that is perceived to be negative can sap motivation and confidence from writers, and writers may not seek out necessary formative feedback if they are anxious about receiving harsh criticism. Students need to be able to trust that the feedback that faculty provide them is both critically kind and constructive. Feedback of this type will provide a framework for students to improve their writing.

Rather than criticizing writers for what they did "wrong," critically kind feedback comments on both strengths and areas that need improvement. Even terse feedback such as "fix this" can be read as impatient, as it lacks specifics or a rationale. In contrast, critically kind feedback is an invitation to collaborate and grow as a writer. It is important in building writers' confidence and also building their trust in the instructor as a respondent to their work.

**Offer specific praise.** Identify at least one specific strength, and explain why it is a strength. Writers will be encouraged to repeat something they have done well, so specific praise gives writers insight into future writing projects. Using a reader's perspective is useful here too. For example, "Your conclusion is strong because it reminds a reader of the key points of your argument, and you conclude with a provocative question that invites the reader to continue thinking about this issue. Great work!"

**Avoid using praise to soften critical feedback.** Praise used to soften criticism can be confusing for writers because it is conflicting. For example, "This is a strong start at an introduction, but it needs a lot of improvements before it meets the assignment's requirements." In this example, it is unclear what is a "strong start," and, in any case, that "strong start" sounds like it needs many revisions before it meets the instructor's expectations, making it not a strength. Praise should be offered when something truly is a strength. If something needs improvement, but there is a strong foundation for those improvements, clearly identify what those strengths are. For example, "You have a good start with your hook in your introduction, which will pull a reader in with your anecdote. However, I think that the connection between the anecdote and your thesis needs to be made clear; otherwise, a reader has to guess what the connection is between the two."

**Align feedback with course goals.** Before beginning to write feedback, think about what the goals are for this feedback. Is the objective for writers to work on improving their writing? If so, leave feedback that encourages them to work on improving their craft. An assignment rubric can help faculty calibrate their goals. It would be fairly unusual for a rubric to only evaluate correct punctuation and formatting of citations in a written document, so it should be just as unusual to provide feedback that only focuses on minor sentence-level issues.

**Use reader's response to avoid making errors seem like personal transgressions.** Responding with a hypothetical reader's perspective shifts the focus from a personal response to an audience's response, which can help frame the critique as being about writing rather than about a writer's personal transgression. By moving away from the personal (e.g., "I don't understand...") to a reader's response (e.g., "I worry that readers may not understand..."), the critique is still offered but is not situated in a singular, personal response, making it kinder.

**Build rapport, but be careful with sarcasm and wit.** Praising writers when they succeed at executing something well or pointing out when they raise an interesting idea are ways to build rapport. Asking questions that further a discussion can also show them that their instructor values their ideas. Avoid using humor to build rapport. Tone can be hard to read in written feedback, and often the default way of interpreting all feedback is as criticism. Additionally, humor is based in both context and culture, so while an American student may easily identify a witty comment as humor, it may read very differently with a multilingual student from a different cultural context.

**Be self-aware as a reader and critic.** Academics who have years of expertise writing in their disciplines have had the time and experience to develop their own

opinions on what, exactly, makes good writing. This knowledge is built from disciplinary conventions, grammar and style conventions, and personal preferences. Personal preferences, sometimes known as pet peeves, may work for one writer in a specific context, but they do not necessarily translate to good writing for all writers in all contexts. When providing feedback, reflect on personal negative reactions to identified concerns. Does the concern overturn disciplinary convention? Is there a current grammar or style guide that explains the concern? Could this just be a matter of personal preference?

Offering a reader's response or including the "why?" of the "what, why, how" model of feedback (*for more details, see Provide comments that are appropriate for the stage of the writing process.*) allows an instructor to offer justification for commenting on a particular concern. Doing so helps the reader understand why the comment is important beyond the scope of the feedback and that it also goes beyond just faculty personal preference. This type of commenting also helps instructors better prioritize where to put their energy when providing feedback. For example, guiding a writer to follow disciplinary conventions will often trump commenting on one's personal dislike of a specific verb.

## Provide comments that are appropriate for the stage of the writing process.

There are two basic types of feedback: summative and formative. Summative feedback is given after an assignment has been submitted. It usually includes a grade and comments indicating how the student met or did not meet assignment requirements. Formative feedback is given over the course of an assignment and offers suggestions for how to improve the document before a final draft is submitted for a grade. Giving formative feedback after an assignment has already been submitted for grading is often ineffective as a means of improving student writing.

## Write formative feedback on rough drafts.

Formative feedback should be offered on a writing project's rough drafts. Since formative feedback is largely for both the development of the writing project and the development of the writer's skills, such feedback should clearly articulate the concern being addressed, explain why it is a concern, and offer advice on how the writer can work on resolving that concern. Studies on commenting practices have found that global comments that offer specific guidelines for revision are appreciated and more likely to be taken seriously and used by student writers (Straub, 1997). For example, a comment that tells a student why an introduction is inadequate and how the student should rewrite it to meet disciplinary, professional, or classroom expectations will prove more helpful than a comment that simply says, "Rewrite the introduction." See Bean (2011) for information about the connections between critical thinking and writing, Sommers (1982) for an explanation of how instructor comments focus student writers' attention when revising, and Hyland and Hyland (2006) for an overview of two decades of research on commenting practices and second language writing.

The following model, adapted from Howell (2016) and Chanock (2000), is a useful and easy-to-remember formula for providing constructive feedback: explain the **What**, **Why**, and **How** of the concern.

- **What** is the concern? Identify the specific concern and articulate it to the writer. Refer to terms used in the assignment description or rubric (thesis, evidence, sources, citations), use labels the writer can easily look up on the internet (comma splice, dangling modifiers), or describe the issue (past tense instead of present tense, missing subject in the sentence). When using grammatical terms, take care to ensure the term is accurate so that a student can locate it in a grammar guide later.
- **Why** does it matter? Motivate the writer to revise by describing why the issue in question is important. It may be helpful to use the perspective of a generalized reader. *For more on that, see Use a reader's response perspective.*
- **How** can the writer resolve the concern? Conclude formative feedback with specific suggestions for how the writer could approach revising the concern. Commands such as "fix this for the final paper" are not as useful as offering specific suggestions for revision. By offering specific suggestions, the writer not only gains some insight into how to approach the concern but also an understanding of what is considered an appropriate level of revision.

The following example shows how the three parts of formative feedback work together.

**[What]** This paragraph is confusing because there is a rapid shift in topic halfway through. **[Why]** The sudden jump in the discussion can confuse a reader. You also don't have enough room to fully develop both topics and provide the evidence you need for each discussion. **[How]** You could split this paragraph into two separate paragraphs and fully explore each topic in its own paragraph. This would give you the space you need to add more evidence to support your claims.

Since this model can be three to five sentences, it may take more effort than shorter comments. However, it provides writers with specific tasks to complete during revision and also the reasoning behind why these revisions will improve the overall quality of the document. When leaving formative feedback, it is important to prioritize the most critical feedback, such as meeting the assignment requirements, and to also emphasize patterns of error rather than commenting on every instance of an error. Commenting on sentence-level errors in a paragraph that will need significant revisions is not a productive use of instructor or writer time, as those sentences may well vanish entirely during global revision. *For information about addressing sentence-level errors, see Distinguish between treatable and untreatable errors.*

## Write summative feedback on final drafts.

Unlike formative feedback, summative feedback is evaluative. Summative feedback is generally written like a short letter to a student. Many faculty open with praise of a document's strengths, as this prioritizes what a writer did well and should replicate in the future. Two to three critical concerns should be shared with a writer, as well as what steps they should take to improve in these areas for future assignments (adapted from Sommers, 2013). The evaluative nature of the summative comment is intended to help provide a narrative justification for the grade. It is more personal than the grade and can be used to supplement a rubric to help a writer understand how the document met or failed to meet requirements as explained by the rubric.

## Be aware of the contractual nature of comments.

Unlike summative feedback, formative feedback should not be presented as evaluative, or a student may interpret it as contractual. Almost all instructors, when asked by a writer to give formative feedback on a draft, have heard questions such as "What do I need to change to get an A?" If making revisions is connected to getting a particular grade, the revisions are seen as contractual, which can cause frustration if the writer perceives that they made all the "right" changes but still didn't receive the grade that they wanted. For multilingual writers, especially, an overt emphasis on sentence-level errors in formative feedback can create the impression that fixing all of them will lead to a good grade. They may then spend their time on grammatical problems rather than focusing their energy on elements such as having a strong argument. By focusing feedback on the process (drafting, revising, improving as a writer) rather than the final product (an A paper), instructors can provide writers with opportunities to grow rather than perform.

## Prioritize and focus on the most essential errors.

Marking up an entire paper is not only time-consuming and stressful for the faculty member but the results will be overwhelming and discouraging for the student. When providing grammar-oriented feedback, choose a few areas for the student to focus on improving, and encourage students to proofread for those errors on the next assignment. One way to do this is to thoroughly comment on one paragraph and then ask the student to examine the remaining paragraphs, looking for similar errors. Another way is to choose one or two treatable errors and mark these throughout the entire text. See *Addressing Errors in Multilingual Writing for help with prioritizing errors*.

## Distinguish between treatable and untreatable errors.

A treatable error is governed by rules that can be learned and applied. Usually these rules can be located in grammar textbooks. For instance, verb tense errors or incorrect comma use are treatable errors; the student can learn and apply the rule in order to use the construction correctly. An untreatable error is an error that is idiosyncratic to a particular writer and context. These might include using the wrong word ("Another *piece* of this experiment included..."), the wrong word form

("Another part of this *experimental* included..."), incorrect idiomatic expressions, or the wrong preposition ("On other words..."). Often, untreatable errors are a matter of vocabulary knowledge and of learning that, for example, verb X always takes preposition Y. In a sense, untreatable errors are best handled in the same way as global errors, i.e., provide explicit advice regarding the nature of the error and how to fix it.

Best commenting and feedback practices suggest that instructors focus on systematic patterns of error correction with the goal of helping students learn to identify their own errors. This will include (a) raising awareness of student need, e.g., making sure that students know what kinds of mistakes are problematic and why, (b) helping students recognize particular error types, and (c) helping students find and correct their own errors (Ferris, 1995; Ferris, 2011). In addition, it is important to prioritize errors that impede meaning over errors that do not impede meaning. *For more on this subject, see With so much to address, how do I prioritize which concerns to comment on?* The information on the next few pages offers two ways of raising awareness.

*I wish instructors would correct the words that are misused and also tell us the common writing way for a native English speaker. Yuwen C.*

## Raise student awareness of treatable grammar errors by labeling specific error types.

In *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors*, Linville (2011) offers a list of the six most frequent and treatable error types made by multilingual student writers at the college level.

Subject-verb agreement errors occur when the subject does not agree with the verb in person or number.

Verb tense errors occur when an incorrect time marker is used.

Verb form errors occur when a verb is incorrectly formed.

Singular and plural errors often occur when there is confusion about which nouns are countable and which aren't.

Word form errors occur when the wrong part of speech is chosen.

Sentence structure errors occur for a variety of reasons: A word (often a *to be* verb) is left out; an extra word (often a duplicate subject) is added; word order is incorrect; or clauses that don't belong together are punctuated as one sentence. (p. 119; examples in the original removed)

To use a list like this, faculty should first categorize the type of error and then write this categorization near the problematic word or words or in the margins of the line where the error appears. This may be done minimally, using the categories above, or with extensive coding. Ferris (2011) prepared the following list of error codes that college writing instructors commonly use when offering feedback. Remember that it

is essential that these abbreviations be explained to students beforehand. Do not assume that a multilingual student writer will be familiar with these codes.

**Error Type Abbreviation/Code**

Word choice WC	Run-on RO
Verb tense VT	Fragment Frag
Verb form VF	Punctuation Punc
Word form WF	Spelling Sp
Subject-verb agreement SV	Sentence structure SS
Articles Art	Informal Inf
Noun ending N	Idiom ID
Pronouns Pr	

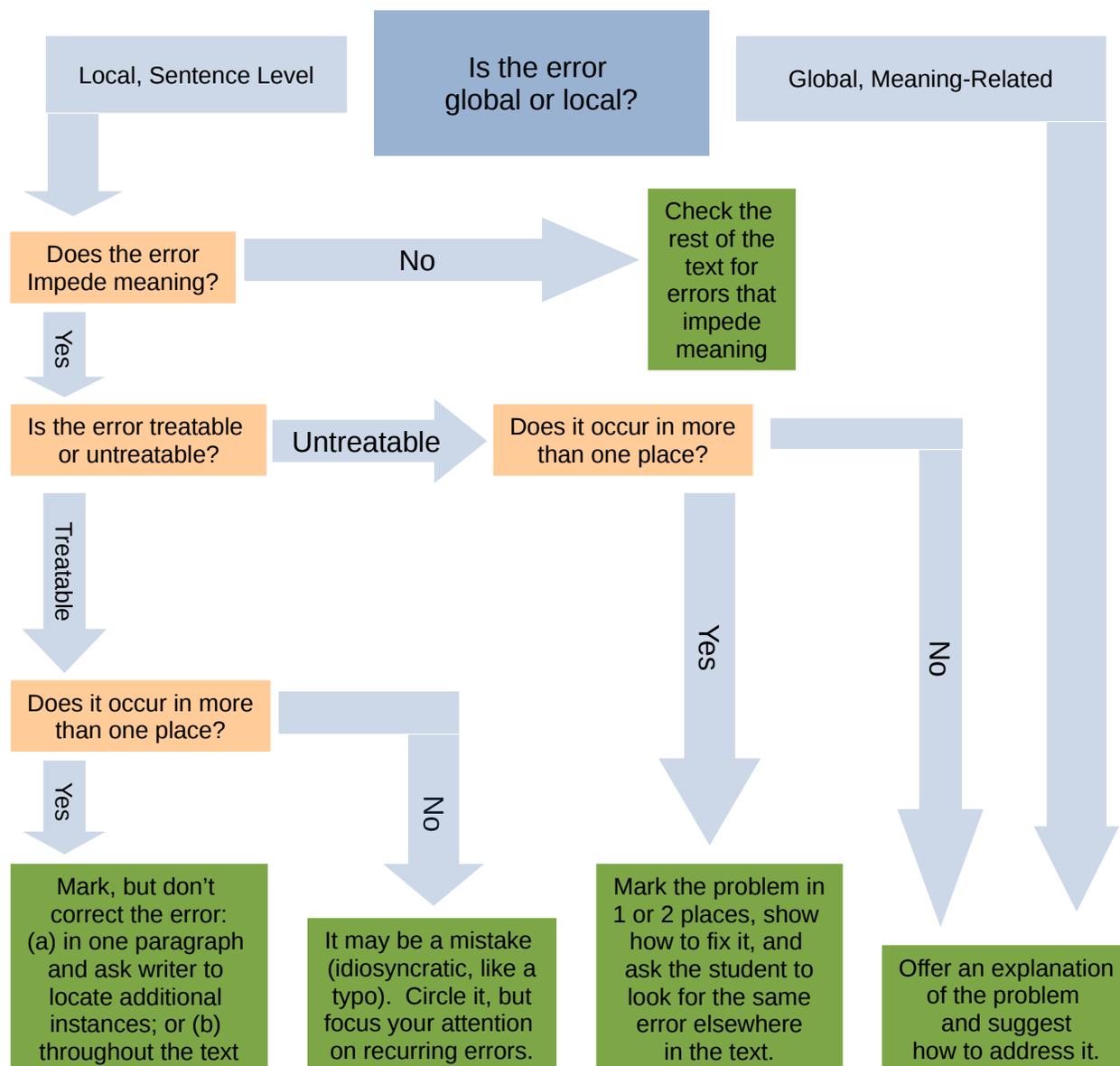
Raise awareness by marking student errors with underlines or circles.

Some studies have shown that students are able to effectively self-edit their work when instructors circle or otherwise mark treatable grammar errors (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Ferris, 2006). This means that instructors do not need to identify the type of errors for students, as most multilingual writers at the college level are familiar enough with grammar usage rules to recognize the type of error and correct treatable errors themselves, once they have been pointed out. Presumably, the more proficient the multilingual writer is, the better this approach will work.

## Addressing Errors in Multilingual Writing

This flowchart provides a systematic procedure for addressing errors in multilingual writing. Remember to prioritize errors that impede meaning and to explain feedback (*Methods for Supporting Multilingual Writers*). Start with these questions:

- Have higher priority concerns already been addressed? If not, address those first (*With so much to address, how do I prioritize which concerns to comment on?*).
- Is writing in-progress or a final draft (i.e., should the feedback be summative or formative)? (*Provide comments that are appropriate for the stage of the writing process.*)
- Has the writer improved upon problem areas from a previous assignment?



## Resources

This section provides a brief list of some of the language and writing help available to international students at Purdue and in the surrounding community. The list is not exhaustive and might change without notice at any time.

### The Purdue Writing Lab

The Purdue Writing Lab offers Purdue students, visiting scholars, staff, and faculty the opportunity to work one-on-one with trained writing consultants. These appointments can be conducted face-to-face or virtually. For up-to-date information about all Writing Lab programs, go to the [Purdue Writing Lab website](#) or call **765-494-3723**.

Writing Lab consultants can help writers with all stages of the writing process: brainstorming ideas, researching, drafting, developing support, clarifying the argument, organizing main points and support, discovering disciplinary conventions, correctly citing sources, and addressing grammar and sentence-level concerns. Ideally, writers will seek feedback multiple times for a single document throughout the writing process.

An initial study of Writing Lab use from Fall 2008 to Spring 2015 indicates that students who visit the Writing Lab for consultations for English 106 assignments have a statistically significant higher semester grade point average, an effect that holds up across any number of metrics (residency, college, ethnicity, and sex, as well as ACT, SAT, and TOEFL scores). **For detailed information about this research, visit the [Writing Lab's web page for research](#).**

Although students benefit from Writing Lab consultations, Writing Lab services are not limited to students. Faculty can collaborate with the Writing Lab to develop writing-related curriculum to improve their students' writing. Faculty can also consult with the Writing Lab on writing projects of their own. One of the best ways for faculty to acquaint themselves with Writing Lab services is to make an appointment to work one-on-one with a writing consultant. Not only will faculty receive feedback from an experienced reader on their document, but they will gain firsthand knowledge of how the Writing Lab works (which, in turn, will help their students make best use of the Writing Lab). Alternatively, faculty are invited to get in touch with the Writing Lab to simply chat about what the Writing Lab offers for students and faculty.

### Faculty Support at the Purdue Writing Lab:

**Curriculum collaboration.** The Purdue Writing Lab should not be regarded merely as an outside service, a fix-it shop for writing, to which erring students can be referred. Instead, faculty are encouraged to work with the Writing Lab through every step of the writing process. Writing Lab staff are available to help faculty design and write assignment prompts, assessment tools, and writing workshops. Consultations can also cover topics such as proofreading strategies to share with

students or big-picture strategies for incorporating writing into every kind of classroom or teaching style.

**Writing-related resources.** The Purdue Writing Lab has a comprehensive library of writing-related texts, including guides for designing rubrics, working with multilingual learners, and conceiving of and drafting assignments. Additionally, the Purdue Writing Lab has a collection of Purdue-specific sample student papers and disciplinary convention guides. All of the above are available for faculty use.

**Writing workshops and collaborative workshop development.** Purdue Writing Lab consultants offer writing-specific workshops on various subjects (e.g., cover letters, citation conventions). The Writing Lab also seeks to help faculty design their own writing workshops. Collaborating on workshop design is more effective in helping students become better writers because the content of these workshops is tailored to specific assignments and disciplines.

## Purdue Language and Cultural Exchange (PLaCE)

The Purdue Language and Cultural Exchange (PLaCE) is designed to help improve the oral and written skills of international students at Purdue.

**Visit <http://www.purdue.edu/place/> for more information.**

## English Department Courses

Purdue's English department offers a number of courses specifically designed for international students, including the following:

- ENGL 106i: First Year Composition for International Students
- ENGL 620: Classroom Communication in ESL for Teaching Assistants
- ENGL 621: Writing Communication for International Graduate Students

## The Office of International Students and Scholars @ Purdue

The Office of International Students and Scholars (ISS) is committed to the internationalization of Purdue University by providing appropriate services and support to international clientele and various University departments and offices. ISS seeks to enhance the academic, cultural, and social pursuits of students and scholars from abroad through knowledge and expertise in recruitment, admissions, immigration, advising, and cross-cultural programming.

**Visit <https://www.purdue.edu/IPPU/ISS/> or more information.**

## Various Community Programs

West Lafayette and Lafayette are home to many programs that offer services for international students, including English language classes and conversation groups. For a list of these programs, please contact the Purdue Writing Lab and ask for a copy of the *Academic Resources for International Students and Scholars at Purdue* handout.

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