

Tips for International Writers

Seminary writing, despite dealing with topics that are often very personal and subjective, nonetheless still places a very high emphasis on rationalism. This means that western theological scholarship, like the broader university tradition that emerged out of it during the medieval era, emphasizes many of the tools of western education: deduction, grounds for claims, formal rhetorical argument structure, etc. This often differs from other cultures' academic traditions, which may be based in the reiteration of received knowledge with little emphasis on the opinion of the student. Therefore, several cultural values affect your success in the seminary context:

Organization: While many cultures value a less direct, more cyclical argument, such an approach may be seen as being “unfocused” or “disorganized” in this academic context. The American tradition, being what sociologists call “low context,” usually expects explicit cues and overt statements. This differs greatly from much of the world, where academic traditions are often “high context.”

- **Rhetorical structure** is required for almost all written work.
- **Citation** is usually mandatory and sources must be identified clearly.
- **Plagiarism** may result from presuming your readers know the origins of sources.

Individualism: Because of the cultural emphasis on the individual, it is often acceptable for students to levy criticisms of authorities in a way that might seem unnatural in other cultural contexts. Conversely, simply repeating others' ideas may be interpreted as not being argumentative enough, with the expectation that the student will contribute their own intellectual ideas instead of summarizing.

- **Persuasive writing** is valued over informative writing.
- **The Aristotelian argument** is employed widely as the standard organization.

Standardized Language: While English is the language of instruction in many of the world's universities, the naturally-occurring variations of global English are often interpreted as being inferior in the Western context. This means that—despite being a native speaker of English or showing competency in a foreign context—a student may be seen as less competent in the western context because of a lack of awareness of language variation. As a result, academic American English is often the only target variety acceptable, which can have a great impact on the success of international students.

- **Grammaticality** of language production (being statistical) may be affected.
- **Vocabulary** may require adjustment.
- **Syntax** may differ from one's home context.
- **Phonology** of spoken language is rarely British (R.P.) English.

Self-Learning: Because the relationship between professors and students is more symmetrical in the American context, students are often expected to take greater responsibility for their own learning. As a result, professors will often expect students to extrapolate a single comment on a paper to the entire text (or class), expecting the student to self-learn to a greater extent than in their home context. Put succinctly, not all of the knowledge you will be expected to know will be taught to you.

- **Revision** is the responsibility of the student.
- **Time management** becomes crucial.