

CONSIDERING CULTURES: How to Write for Global Audiences

- An American businessperson sends a letter to his Chinese supplier complaining that the supplier has “moved the goalposts” with his new pricing structure. The supplier reads the letter, shakes his head, and throws the letter away: He has no idea what “moved the goalposts” means.
- A Japanese CEO gets a report from the head of her US subsidiary. The report contains a series of charts showing, from left to right, how the subsidiary’s year-to-year finances have improved over the last decade. There’s only one problem: the Japanese businesswoman reads the charts from right to left.
- A Mexican parts-factory owner receives an email from the CEO of a US car company, a man he’s known personally for many years. The email contains just three sentences; they demand to know why the factory’s latest parts shipment is late. The Mexican businessman is offended and decides to make his US counterpart wait for an answer. Why? Because the email never once asks about the Mexican businessman’s family.

At Hurley Write, we emphasize that before you begin writing any document, you should answer two questions: 1) “Who are my readers?” and 2) “What do I want my readers to do after they’ve read the document?” This article is about one particular aspect of the audience question: When you write, how should you account for the culture of your audience? The examples above show what happens when a writer fails to do that.

“Culture,” in this sense, refers to how your readers view the world and act in it: their values, their attitudes, their language, their customs, and so on. People most often use the term “culture” to refer to national identity; the culture of Japan, for example, differs from the culture of Germany, which differs from the culture of Great Britain.*

In an increasingly globalized economy, more and more US businesses have relationships with other countries. When writing documents for international readers and trying to communicate across cultural barriers, you may want to keep in mind the following:

1. **Avoid slang, slogans, humor, and American idioms and metaphors.** Just as a Chinese business owner may not understand the football phrase “move the goalposts,” readers in other parts of the world may not understand common US phrases like “threw us a change-up” or “low-hanging fruit” or “grow the bottom line.” American business executives often resort to military metaphors (“we are in a battle for customers,” “our chief weapon in the war on rising prices is greater inventory control”), but to many foreign readers, such imagery comes across as aggressive and confrontational. As for humor, it rarely translates well. (In some countries—Germany, for

example—beginning a business presentation or correspondence with a joke is considered frivolous and unprofessional.)

2. **Use common English words and relatively simple sentence structure.** Even if your readers appear fluent in English, they may not understand unusual English words like “pecuniary” or “tranche.” Keep your wording simple, without making it childish. Generally, keep your sentences fairly short, without too many qualifying phrases and clauses. This doesn’t mean, however, that you should avoid complex ideas or talk down to your readers.
3. **Use the same word each time for the same object or concept throughout the document.** The words “outlet,” “socket,” and “receptacle,” for example, may refer to the same electrical device; however, a best practice is to use the terminology to avoid confusing your readers.
4. **Avoid acronyms.** A foreign audience might not know, for example, what “NASA,” “ASAP,” “MBA,” or “SSN” mean. Nor are they certain to know what an “HR Department” is.
5. **Choose an appropriate tone and level of formality.** A Japanese or Spanish businessperson will expect business documents to have a fairly formal tone; in a business letter, she’ll expect you to address her with her title, full name, and appropriate honorifics—even if you consider her a longtime friend. If you begin with “Hi, Yui” and jump straight to a sales pitch, she is likely to feel disrespected. A French reader will expect some subtlety, flourish, and indirection in a business letter; the usual American “get to the point fast and state it bluntly” approach may strike him as crude and unsophisticated. British readers often find American sales pitches overly optimistic, simplistic, and boastful; they prefer a more realistic, modest, understated approach. And the “hard sell” in a business solicitation is considered rude in Scandinavia. Indeed, much of the world prefers a less blunt, more subtle tone in their business communication than is common in the US.
6. **Begin in a way that meets your reader’s expectations.** Many countries have strict customary salutations in their letters, more elaborate than our “Dear Mr. Smith.” (Example: “Dear Respected Sir.”) As for the body of the document, in the US and much of Western Europe, most business readers want you to state the point of your document immediately. That approach doesn’t work in many parts of the world, where establishing (or reestablishing) a more human relationship with the reader first is important. A business letter in Japan, for example, is likely to begin with a reference to the seasons: “We are having a beautiful spring here in Virginia. I hope you are enjoying the cherry blossoms in Tokyo.” An introducing-yourself business letter in Mexico is likely to begin with a reference to family (“We recently traveled to Cancun with our three teenage sons. Your country is beautiful. We enjoyed the hiking immensely”) or to mutual acquaintances (“I enjoyed meeting your chief financial officer Jose Machado at last week’s international finance conference in Denver”). In Russia and many countries of the Middle East, readers expect business communications, whether in person or in writing, to begin with talk about mutual acquaintances

or common personal histories in some way; trusting the writer comes before trusting the document. In many countries, you should treat your international readers as simply fellow human beings and would-be friends before you address them as business targets.

7. **Use “international,” not “American,” English.** Although English is now the language of business in many parts of the world, don’t assume that readers in other countries will understand “American” English. In fact, in English commonwealth nations like Australia and Canada, and in many developing countries like Tanzania, where English is one of the two main languages of business, British English is more likely to be written and spoken. Thus, if you talk about “football,” such readers will think you’re talking about soccer, and if you use the word “billion,” they’ll think of the number that we Americans call “trillion.” (What we call “billion,” they call “a thousand million.”) Likewise, they’ll understand “kilometers” and Centigrade temperatures more easily than “miles” and Fahrenheit and, for them, you loosen a screw by turning it “anticlockwise,” not “counterclockwise.” And so on. (An Internet search for “American English vs. British English” will provide you many more examples.) Generally, choose words and phrases that are the same in England and the US when possible.
8. **Use graphics when appropriate, instead of words, but choose graphics carefully.** Graphs, charts, tables, illustrations, and photographs can be a good way to avoid the confusion language can cause for foreign readers. In a set of instructions, for example, a few clear illustrations might do the job of many words. But as in the case of the Japanese executive who reads charts right to left (as the Japanese read prose), you need to be alert to cross-cultural concerns even here. The Japanese, for example, are comfortable with cartoon-like illustrations such as clip art, even in their business documents; the Germans, on the other hand, find such cartoons trivializing and simplistic. Even colors should be chosen carefully: in the US, for example, red is associated with warning (red lights) or passion (red Valentines); in Argentina, it’s associated with craftsmanship. If you have photos of people, make sure their clothes, gestures, and poses aren’t considered obscene or insulting in the culture you’re writing for.
9. **Have your writing reflect your readers’ cultural values.** In many Asian countries like Japan, China, and South Korea, for example, the welfare of the group or community as a whole comes before the desires of the individual. In the US and some western European countries, on the other hand, individual goals may come first. Thus, if you’re trying to sell a new business plan in Asia, you might stress how it will help the company succeed as a whole and add to the prosperity of the company’s home city; in the US or England, you’d be more likely to stress how it could lead to higher wages and greater job stability for each worker. You should consider other values, too: In their automobile sales materials, for example, Volvo stresses safety and reliability in the US and Switzerland, whereas in France it stresses social status and leisure.

10. **Learn the strongest emotional triggers of your readers' culture.** For example, in Japan, China, Mexico, and many other countries, it is important for everyone to “save face” and avoid being shamed. Thus, if you need to write a letter to someone in those countries complaining about a product, avoid suggesting that anyone is to blame, lest they lose face and feel embarrassed (and never want to think about you or your company again). You may instead make excuses for the problem (blame bad weather or a miscommunication). You may even avoid ever stating what's wrong with the product; instead, only hinting at the need for some change. Likewise, failure to use the appropriate title for a reader or to acknowledge the reader's place in the corporate hierarchy can offend readers in many nations where hierarchies are important.

11. **Include the appropriate amount of detail.** In countries like Germany and the US, instructions, for example, tend to include a great deal of detail, listing and showing each tool needed, each part provided, and each small direction to be followed, like this: “to connect the hose to the waste outlet, turn the black connection bolt no more than three turns clockwise until it fits snugly, using a half-inch wrench.” In countries like Japan and China, the directions might simply say, “Connect the hose to the outlet.” That's all. Readers in those countries may find super-detailed instructions insulting to their intelligence.

12. **Follow the mechanical writing conventions of your readers' culture.** For example, dates in most of the rest of the world are written like this: 12 October 2015 or 12.10.15 (not “October 12, 2015” or “10/12/15”), and time is often written military-style (“23:30” instead of “11:30 p.m.”). As a courtesy, when you write a phone number for an international audience, include the country prefix, as well as the in-country number. The location of dates and addresses on a business letter varies from country to country. Even the size of the paper used for business correspondence is different in different countries. (Most countries use A4 paper, which is longer and narrower than standard 8 ½ x 11 US letter paper.) A quick online search will usually lead you to the conventions of the country you're writing for (search for “Spanish business letter etiquette,” for example.)

Even a document as small as a business card should meet the expectations of a foreign audience: for example, the business card you hand to a Japanese businessman (using two hands, please) should have your company's information in English on one side and Japanese on the other, and you should hand it to over with the Japanese side up. You should also include such a business card with any introductory business letter to her. (Curious fact: Until recently, many companies in France required job applications to be handwritten, believing that handwriting reveals a great deal about a person. Today, most French companies accept printed or email applications.)

13. **Choose an appropriate organizational structure.** In the US and much of Western Europe, most business people prefer a straightforward linear organization in their written documents: state the main idea or request, lay out your argument or explanations in an orderly succession of tightly focused paragraphs, and end with a summary conclusion or request. A Japanese business letter,

on the other hand, usually begins with a reference to the weather and family (see #6, above), then circles around the general subject for a paragraph or two before getting to the main idea or proposal (if it gets there explicitly at all). A business letter in South America is likely to stress family and mutual friends before mentioning business, and to mix references to both throughout. Asian countries like Japan, China, and India also have a long tradition of accepting apparent digressions in their writing, anecdotes, asides, and references that seem at first to have nothing to do with the business subject at hand; only in the end does the relevance (usually) become clear.

14. **Choose: direct or indirect.** We in the US are accustomed to business documents that state the main idea directly, bluntly, and early: “Would your company be interested in purchasing our inventory software?” “Why was your most recent shipment late? We hope this won’t happen again.” In much of the rest of the world, however, the indirect approach is preferred. In China and Japan, for example, the main proposal of a sales letter may never actually be stated. Instead, somewhere deep in the letter might be a sentence like this: “We would enjoy sharing more information about our inventory software to give you a further understanding of its potential benefits for your company.” Such indirection lets the reader off the hook: If he wishes to turn down your proposal, he doesn’t have to insult or shame you by giving you a direct “No.” Both of you save face. Indeed, he doesn’t need to respond at all. His silence may be all the rejection you get.
15. **Do your homework and, if you can, use test readers from the culture you’re writing to.** As you can see, writing for a business audience in another culture can require that you understand a great deal about that culture—the nuances can be intimidating. To give yourself the best chance to succeed, study the culture you’re writing for. A good place to start is online, with websites like cyborlink.com, which give good general information about cultural attitudes and customs in specific countries. An online search for “good Japanese business letter” or “writing for an Indian business audience” will also lead you to good advice and examples. (Here, for example, is an excellent website offering advice for writing a Spanish business letter:
<http://www.englishspanishlink.com/learn-spanish/letters-emails/offerwithdiscount.htm> .)

Even better, try to find test readers who are native to the country you’re writing for and have them read your document. Knowing first-hand the subtleties of that country’s customs and attitudes, they’ll provide you the best advice.

16. **Don’t be intimidated.** We know: all this advice about how to write across cultural barriers can be overwhelming. But don’t let that stop you. Just do the best you can to account for the expectations, customs, and attitudes of your foreign audience. Remember, too, that business leaders in other countries are working hard to understand our expectations, customs, and attitudes, and a Japanese businessperson is likely to give you the benefit of the doubt if your

business letter sounds a bit more like New York-speak than Tokyo-speak. Indeed, she's probably studying how to write the direct, linear kind of business document that she is told Americans prefer.

Yes, writing for business people in other cultures can certainly be challenging. But learning to understand other cultures can be fascinating and rewarding and can result in your company's finding new avenues to success, world-wide.

*Note: National culture is only one kind of culture you should consider in your writing. One can also refer to "corporate culture" and "professional culture": the corporate culture of Google, for example, is different from the corporate culture of the U.S. Department of Defense, and the profession of medicine has a very different culture from the profession of advertising. If you're a software engineer looking for a job, the resume you send to Google will look and read very different from the one you send to the Defense Department—if you're smart. Identifying corporate and professional cultures, and writing for them, is a topic for another time.