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1

Unit

Writing in English as Chinese speakers

Upon completion of this unit, you will be able to:

- have a better understanding of the varieties of good writing among different cultures;
- analyze the differences between English and Chinese writing;
- gain some skills in English writing.

Writing short essays in English is perhaps the hardest thing you as Chinese students have to do in college — and, for many of you, it is one of the most important things. You have to write them for the national College English Tests (the CET-4 / 6) for a better future career, and you have to do the same for the IELTS or TOEFL if you choose to further your education in a university outside China, where you will have to write longer essays. The ability to write well in English, therefore, is becoming more critical to your success in school and your future career.

Your Chinese writing teachers in high school must have told you again and again that good writing does not happen by accident and that the secret of writing well is “Practice! Practice! Practice!” Yes, practice makes perfect, but only when you do it in the right way.

Read this short dialog between an English speaker from China (A) and his British superior (B) (Ramsay, 2008, p.7).

- A: Sir.
B: Yes, what is it?
A: My mother is not very well sir.
B: So?
A: She has to go into hospital sir.

B: Well, get on with it. What do you want?

A: On Thursday sir.

B: Oh, god, what do you want on earth?

(At this point, speaker A mumbled something like “Nothing sir” and left the office.)

In this short dialog, Speaker A, as an English speaker from China, was asking for compassionate leave from Speaker B, only to find his superior from a different background was somewhat irritated. This was because Speaker A was being indirect by delaying his request, while a more direct approach was expected.

An English essay that fails to meet the expectations of the reader leads to similar communicative breakdown! Fortunately, the conventions of English essays are more formulaic than we Chinese students might think. In this book, we will explain everything that goes into effective essay writing in as clear and concise a way as possible. At the same time, as the above communication failure suggests, you have to unlearn what you have learned about “good Chinese writing.”

In this introductory unit, however, we will help you gain a quick understanding of some essential differences between English and Chinese writing that you cannot ignore if you want to sharpen your English writing skills.

1.1 How does good writing vary between cultures?

It is not that hard for you to tell whether a piece of Chinese writing is good or bad. You know it when you see it. But things get more challenging if it is in a different language, say, English.

Read the letter below, a translation of a letter of request written by a Chinese listener to the China Service of Radio Australia (Kirkpatrick, 1991, pp.189-190), and answer the questions in Activity 1.1.

Respected Radio Australia producers:

I have been a loyal listener to Radio Australia’s English teaching programs and to “Songs You Like” for several years. I consider both programs to be extremely well produced.

Let me describe myself a little: I am a middle school student, I am eighteen and my home is in X, a small border city. The cultural life really isn’t too bad. Because I like studying English, I therefore follow those programs closely. But because the Central Broadcasting Station’s English programs are rather abstruse, they are not really suitable for me and therefore I get all my practice in listening comprehension and dialogue from Radio Australia’s English programs. This practice has been of great benefit. As I progress step by step through the course, I am keenly aware that not having the teaching materials presents several difficulties. Because of this, I have taken time to write this letter to you, in the hope that I can obtain a set of teaching materials from Radio Australia’s English program. Please let me know the cost of the materials.

In addition, I hope to obtain a Radio Australia calendar. Wishing Radio Australia's Mandarin programs even more interest.

(Listener)

(Date)

Activity 1.1

- 1 Do you think the original is a good letter of request in the Chinese context?
A Yes. **B** No.
- 2 What is the purpose of the letter to Radio Australia?
A To tell the producers that she loves their programs.
B To introduce herself to the producers.
C To tell the producers about the Central Broadcasting Station's English programs.
D To request teaching materials and a calendar.
- 3 In which paragraphs does the writer make her request?
A Paragraphs 1 and 2. **B** Paragraphs 2 and 3.
- 4 Do you think the letter is still a "good" Chinese letter of request without the first paragraph?
A Yes. **B** No.

The letter above represents "good writing" in the Chinese context. The writer introduces herself and explains the reasons of her request before she makes the actual request.

However, English speakers when reading it may wonder when the writer is going to get to the point? (Kirkpatrick, 1991). This is mainly because the letter seems too "indirect" to Australian readers: It gets to the point only at the very end.

A similar letter written by a native speaker of English would be something like the following.

Dear Radio Australia:

I would be very grateful if you would be kind enough to send me teaching materials for your excellent English-language teaching programs. I am learning English from your programs but am finding it difficult without the materials.

I would also be very grateful if you would be kind enough to send me a Radio Australia calendar.

Yours sincerely,

(Listener)

(Date)

Activity 1.2

Compare the two letters, and decide what makes the first one “indirect” to native speakers of English?

- 1 The letter contains what seems to be unrelated to the writer’s purpose.
A Yes. **B** No.
- 2 The writer does not state her intention of writing the letter in the first paragraph.
A Yes. **B** No.
- 3 The writer has a lengthy explanation of the reasons why she needs the teaching materials.
A Yes. **B** No.
- 4 The writer introduces herself in the letter.
A Yes. **B** No.

Essays are often evaluated in terms of clarity and focus, organization, content (ideas and themes), language, style, and grammar. However, people from different cultural backgrounds may have different ideas about, say, what is clear and what is not. For example, the letter to Radio Australia is “clear” to Chinese readers, but native speakers of English may find its ideas and focus hard to access.

Then, what makes “good writing”? A good letter or essay meets the expectations of the target readers. This means your English essay may be necessarily different from a similar one in Chinese because the expected readers are not the same group of people. When writing an essay in English, you should be aware of the writing conventions that most native English readers and writers take for granted. In other words, writing in English is challenging for non-native students in a variety of ways, depending on where each student comes from.

1.2 How does writing in English and Chinese differ?

Much research has been conducted to unveil the ways in which Chinese writing differs from English writing. The following are some fundamental differences between the two, which learners of English in China cannot afford to ignore.

Firstly, English writing tends to be more formulaic than Chinese writing. It is even perceived by Chinese and other peoples as “simple, direct, and even rude” (McCool, 2009, p.31). Native English writers are accustomed to a linear pattern: quickly moving to their central idea at the beginning of the essay, supporting it with main points in the body, and concluding with an assertive summary. The central idea of an essay is technically called a thesis, and it is a thesis statement when it appears in the form of a declarative sentence (a statement) in an essay. In Unit 3 (pp.43-66), you will learn how to create a strong thesis statement.

The following essay by an American student is about the expression “If at first you don’t

succeed, try, try again” (Starkey, 2004, pp.105-106). Read it and see how the short essay presents the thesis in Paragraph 1, supports it in Paragraphs 2-4, and summarizes the central idea in the last paragraph.

There are many factors involved in achieving success. But what if countless failures end with a poor result? **It is not failures themselves that lead to success, but rather a combination of natural ability, persistence, and even luck.**

The thesis containing three subtopics to be discussed in the body: natural ability, persistence, and luck

When I started competitive swimming, at age seven, I had some **natural ability**. Swimming came easily to me. When shown the correct techniques for strokes, turns, and starts, I was able to employ them much quicker than many of my teammates. In fact, within a few months, I was swimming faster than some kids who were on the team for a few years. They had “failed” many times in the meets they swam in, but it did not seem to help them understand the techniques or come up with better strategies. I “failed” just a few times that first year, but my times were better. My natural ability helped me to achieve more in comparison with their numerous failures.

The first subtopic:
natural ability

Persistence has also been a factor in my success. For the past eight years, I have attended practice at least three days a week, with a short break between each of two seasons. I swim at least 300 days a year. This persistence has allowed me to improve both technique and speed. In comparison, those who do not continue to practice frequently and find ways to swim better and faster do not make the times I do. On my old team, we practiced for a[n] hour and a half, three days a week, forty weeks a year. On my new team, practice is five days a week for two hours, and we have just four weeks off a year. This new practice schedule has helped me to take seconds off every time, and my new team as a whole performs better than the old one.

The second subtopic:
persistence

Luck is also a factor in success. I once won a regional meet because my competitor, who was one hundredth of a second ahead, made an error and was disqualified. Another time, a competitor was sick on the day of the meet and didn’t swim his best time (which would have beaten me). My successes at those meets involved, at least in part, luck.

The third subtopic:
luck

So failure is just one part of success. The more important factors are natural ability, persistence, and luck.

The summary
reconfirming the central idea

(24 sentences; 382 words; about 16 words / sentence)

By saying that English writing is more formulaic, we also mean English paragraphs are more “mechanical” or “rigid” structurally and functionally. In Unit 4 (pp.67-82) and Unit 8 (pp.153-171), we will explain the functions and structures of the introductory paragraph

and the concluding paragraph respectively and introduce a number of methods of writing introduction and conclusion. Unit 6 (pp.103-128) and Unit 7 (pp.129-151) will deal with the body paragraph.

Secondly, compared to Chinese writing, English writing tends to be more direct. By “direct,” it is meant, first of all, that English writers often present their thesis at the beginning of an essay (in the introductory paragraph for a short essay). In contrast, in Chinese writing the central idea can be delayed until the last paragraph, as is the case in the letter to Radio Australia that you have read in the previous section. This is often called an inductive pattern, as opposed to the deductive pattern preferred by many native speakers of English.

In a paragraph with the deductive pattern, the main idea is also presented in a sentence at or near the beginning, followed by sentences that support it. However, a Chinese paragraph may have its main idea at or near the end. Read the following two body paragraphs from *Quanxue* (《劝学》) by Xunzi (荀子), and see how the writer summarizes the main idea of each paragraph with the last sentence.

吾尝终日而思矣，不如须臾之所学也；吾尝跂而望矣，不如登高之博见也。登高而招，臂非加长也，而见者远；顺风而呼，声非加疾也，而闻者彰。假舆马者，非利足也，而致千里；假舟楫者，非能水也，而绝江河。君子生非异也，善假于物也。

南方有鸟焉，名曰蒙鸠，以羽为巢而编之以发，系之苇、苕。风至苕折，卵破子死。巢非不完也，所系者然也。西方有木焉，名曰射干，茎长四寸，生于高山之上而临百仞之渊；木茎非能长也，所立者然也。蓬生麻中，不扶而直。白沙在涅，与之俱黑。兰槐之根是为芷。其渐之滫，君子不近，庶人不服，其质非不美也，所渐者然也。故君子居必择乡，游必就士，所以防邪僻而近中正也。

译文

我曾经整天思索，却不如片刻学到的知识多；我曾经踮起脚远望，却不如登到高处看得广阔。登到高处招手，手臂并没有加长，远处的人却看得到；顺着风呼叫，声音并没有加大，闻者却听得很清楚。借助车马的人，并不是脚走得快，却可以到达千里之外；借助舟船的人，并不是水性特别好，却可以横渡江河。君子的天性跟一般人没什么不同，只是善于借助外物罢了。

南方有一种鸟，名叫蒙鸠，它用自己的羽毛做巢，又用毛发细细编织，将之系于芦苇之上。大风一来，芦秆折断，鸟蛋摔破了，幼鸟也死了。这并不是因为鸟巢做得不完美，而是它所依托的东西使它这样的。西方有一种草，名叫射干，它的干长四寸，生长在高山之上，俯对着百丈深渊；之所以如此，不是因为它的干长，而是它所生长站立的地势高。飞蓬生长在大麻之中，不用扶持自然就能长直。白沙混杂在黑泥中，自然也会和它一起变黑。兰槐芳香的根叫白芷。如果用酸臭的脏水浸泡它，君子不愿意接近它，普通人也不愿意佩戴它，这并不是因为它的本质不美好，而是因为被脏水浸泡的结果。因此，君子定居时一定要选择乡邻，出游时一定要亲近有品学之士，用来防止沾染邪恶的东西、接近正确恰当的思想。

The two patterns are equally effective (and direct) in their own cultural context, but you are

considered “indirect” if you use the Chinese pattern to communicate with native speakers of English. Read the following essay by a Chinese student about the statement “Happiness is not the absence of problems, but the ability to deal with them” and discuss with your partner(s) why it is “indirect” to native speakers of English. It should be noted that the text has not been edited for grammatical errors and misuse of words.

It is an established fact that the topic concerning happiness has aroused stormy discussions in newspapers, television and network. So what is happiness? When it comes to the above-mentioned question, people’s opinions vary widely. While some people hold happiness equal to nonexistence of problems, others stand on a different ground, for they argue that happiness results from confronting and addressing problems instead of disregarding or avoiding them.

First paragraph
without the writer’s
thesis

While the pace of people’s living is speeding up, the happiness index is lower and lower. According to the recent statistics conducted by CCTV — China’s most influential television station — people who hold that they are in a state of unhappiness account for 78 percent. This phenomenon is mostly due to different attitudes toward happiness. To my mind, for one thing, it is necessary to keep a positive mind when confronting with unpleasant things. For another, cooperation is of great significance in our life.

On the basis of the analysis above, we may draw a conclusion that keeping optimistic, cooperative, and stronghearted, combined with being persistent and decisive, really count in dealing with problems and being happy. Only people who are skilled in handling problems can fully enjoy happiness and success.

Delayed central idea in
the last paragraph

(10 sentences; 197 words; about 20 words / sentence)

Sometimes, the central idea in Chinese writing is implied, instead of being presented in a clear statement. When your English-language essay goes without a clearly stated thesis or with a thesis in the form of a question, you are being “indirect,” as in the following opening paragraph of a student’s essay.

Thesis in the question form

When it comes to the topic of “happiness,” people’s opinions usually vary widely, which gives rise to heated discussions among the public concerning the way to achieve happiness. “Happiness is not the absence of problems, but the ability to deal with them,” as the saying goes. Is this statement about happiness right?

(about 17 words / sentence)

A question is not a thesis, because it is not a claim. It is great to pose questions like this to yourself as you think through the topic, but you do not have a thesis until you are prepared to defend a particular answer to such a question.

Compare this sample with the one below, which ends with a formally stated thesis about the writer's claim about what happiness is.

Thesis in the statement form

The pursuit of happiness is one of the fundamental human rights, but opinions disagree markedly as to what it is, which often gives rise to heated discussions in private conversations as well as public media. Many people believe happiness is the absence of problems, only to find they are unhappy because they have to grapple with them frequently. **Actually, the secret of happiness lies in one's success in removing his or her life's obstacles, one after another.**

(about 26 words / sentence)

Another difference between writing in English and Chinese lies in sentence and word variety. While both languages make use of repetition in sentence structure and word choice, it seems that more variety is expected of English writers than Chinese ones. We will explain the strategies for effective sentences and words in each unit, but for now you may want to see how repetition could ruin a strong paragraph by comparing the one above with this rephrased version.

The pursuit of **happiness** is one of the fundamental human rights, but **people's** opinions about **happiness** differ widely. This gives rise to heated discussions in public media. Many **people** believe **happiness** is the absence of **problems**, but they fail to achieve **happiness**. It is mainly because they have to grapple with various **problems** in their **life**. Actually the secret of **happiness** lies in one's success in solving **problems** in **life**.

This short text is hard to read, because the words *happiness*, *people*, *problems*, and *life* are repeatedly used and the sentence structure is monotonous. Of course, sometimes writers repeat words and sentence structures for emphasis, but for good reasons (for example, the use of the word *unnecessary* in the following quotation from William Strunk Jr.).

Many of you might be wondering: Isn't vigorous writing concise? This is what William Strunk Jr. (1918, p.17) says about it in the first edition of *The Elements of Style*, now a classic writing manual.

A sentence should contain no **unnecessary** words, a paragraph no **unnecessary** sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no **unnecessary** lines and a machine no **unnecessary** parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Finally, English writing tends to use more connective words than Chinese, between clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. While such connective words in Chinese writing at many places are implied, those in English are often clearly stated. Compare the following sentences from the sample essay on Page 5 with their Chinese translations, and see how the same meaning can be expressed in the Chinese version without a connective word or phrase.

[1] When shown the correct techniques for strokes, turns, and starts, I was able to employ them much quicker than many of my teammates. **In fact**, within a few months, I was swimming faster than some kids who were on the team for a few years.

学习了正确的划水、转身和出发技巧，我在练习中掌握得比很多队友快得多。**(事实上，)**练习了仅仅几个月，我游泳的速度便超过了一些参队好几年的队友。

[2] This persistence has allowed me to improve both technique and speed. **In comparison**, those who do not continue to practice frequently and find ways to swim better and faster do not make the times I do.

由于坚持不懈地练习，我的技巧不断改进，速度不断提升。**(相比之下，)**那些三天打鱼两天晒网、不努力超越自己的人，最终成绩都比我逊色。

Activity 1.3

Chinese writers are often advised to *kaimen jianshan* (开门见山). Check the appropriate box "Yes" or "No" to indicate your understanding of this strategy of writing.

Yes No

- 1 The first paragraph should not contain sentences which are unrelated to the topic.
- 2 The first sentence of the introductory paragraph should indicate the topic of the essay.
- 3 The first paragraph should always include a sentence which expresses the main idea of the essay.
- 4 The first sentence of a paragraph should express the main idea of the paragraph.
- 5 The advice is more about the essay topic than the central idea.

Activity 1.4

In his book *Writing Around the World: A Guide to Writing Across Cultures*, Matthew McCool (2009, p.2) has summarized major differences between what he calls the reader-responsibility culture (such as Chinese and Japanese cultures) and writer-responsibility culture (such as American and Australian cultures). We have already explained some of them. Discuss with your partner(s) whether you think he is right.

Writer-responsibility	Reader-responsibility
clear	flowery
concise	ornate
action-oriented	subject-oriented
practical	theoretical
deductive	quasi-inductive

1.3 How to write better in English?

As native speakers of Chinese, you have a keen understanding of how the Chinese language works, but your language skills may be different from those of a native English student. As you have had extensive English grammar training, your primary writing problems typically involve difficulty in dealing with competing cultural expectations. The following suggestions may help.

Firstly, you have to unlearn what you have learned about “good (Chinese) writing.”

As you now know, “good writing” varies from language to language. To learn the more “English” way of writing, you have to start from scratch. This means, when writing an English essay, it would be unwise to conceive a Chinese one in your mind and then translate it into English. Remember, a “good” Chinese essay is not necessarily a good one when translated into English. Instead, you have to write in English right from the start.

This also means that it is a better idea to practice only what you have learned. For example, you do not write an introductory paragraph until you have learned how to write one. This helps you prevent what you have already known about “strong (Chinese) introduction” from interfering with your writing process of an English essay.

Secondly, follow the generally accepted ways and avoid being too “innovative” as beginning writers. English essays tend to be more formulaic (and simpler) than Chinese essays. Native English essay writers have relatively less “freedom” than their Chinese counterparts. Instead, they follow some generally accepted conventions at the levels of organization, paragraph, and sentence and vocabulary. For native Chinese speakers, to learn to write in English is to learn to use these ways. As beginning writers, you are advised to choose from the methods introduced in this book and try to employ them when you write.

Thirdly, reading helps you learn how to write. Though knowledge of grammar is demanded in essay writing, reading winning essays by other writers widens your ideas of essay structures, sentence flow, and vocabulary usage. The more you are exposed to different varieties of writing styles, the greater chance you can encounter the usage that fits your writing preferences. Additionally, this adds up to your schema which will help you write about different topics in the future.

Therefore, when you are reading an essay or a paragraph, take some time to learn how the writer arranges information, varies sentence types, connects sentences or ideas, and chooses words. This helps you understand what you have learned about “good English writing.”

At the same time, visit English-language websites from time to time for news and competing ideas about what is happening around you, especially issues that present global challenges. This helps you think more rationally. Remember, your opinion is always required for a persuasive or an expository essay prompt.

Here is a list of writing topics, some of which you may be asked to write about in your college career, especially for the CET-4 / 6, IELTS, or TOEFL.

Moral issues

experiments on animals	responsibility for old people
nuclear weapons	television violence
school violence	personal privacy

Social issues

changing careers	leisure industry
competition or cooperation	mandatory seat belt use
cultural contact	non-smoking sections
crime control	sport promotion
environmental protection	television advertising
extended family	television watching
generation gap	traffic congestion
health care	traveling abroad
healthy balance of foods	public museums
housing problems	public transportation
international aid	unpaid community service
international tourism	working women

Technological issues

computer communication	human cloning
computer games	mobile phone
clean energy	surveillance cameras
genetically modified food	space exploration
artificial intelligence	industrial robot

Educational issues

child education	general education
college education	learning another language
extracurricular activities	school uniforms
fiction reading	single-sex schools
online courses	

The last, perhaps the most important, advice is that writing is learned through writing. To know how to write is one thing, but to be able to write well is another. When you are shown several methods to write, for example, an introductory or a concluding paragraph, you need to write one or two of your own using each of the strategies and keep revising them until you (and your professor or partner) think they are effective enough.

Other than the structured writing exercises, a more personal account of things you do in your lives recorded in a journal can be a good way for you to track the types of mistakes committed, the words learned, or the structures adapted.

Unit review

In this unit, you have learned that good writing varies from culture to culture. Differences between English and Chinese writing include:

English writing	Chinese writing
formulaic in structure	less rigid in structure
direct	indirect
varied in sentence structure and diction	repetitive in sentence structure and diction
ideas linked with formal devices	linking devices optional

We have also suggested some strategies for better writing skills:

- Unlearn what you have learned about “good (Chinese) writing;”
- Follow the generally accepted writing methods;
- Learn how to write through reading; and
- Put what you have learned about English writing into practice.