



Students who operate in English as a secondary language may need more support when writing

## Helping Multilingual Students with Writing

Writing can be difficult for any student, but writing in a language that is not one's first language poses some special difficulties. Here are some suggestions for helping students who do not have English as their first language. Note, however, that this advice is likely to help most other students, as well.

### 1. Content before grammar

Non-native English speakers are usually well aware that grammar can be a struggle for them, and that can lead them to edit their writing during the drafting phase. However, since your grading schema focuses on your course's content, strength of content is likely to be the element that you seek to prioritize. So, make sure to emphasize that students should devote their primary focus to solid content, and wait until a proofreading stage to engage in editing of grammar.

### 2. Write out difficult words

Complex terms might not be easy for multilingual learners unless they also see the term written down. Writing such terms on the board (or featuring them in a PowerPoint slide) can help such learners quickly know how these terms are spelled, which will let them better keep up with key concepts.

### 3. Offer multiple ways to contact you

Students who grew up in different cultures may not feel comfortable speaking up in class to ask questions. So, it will help them to have their concerns addressed if you offer several different ways to contact you. Those include:

“Teaching Spotlights” are small but impactful ways for professors to keep consistent pedagogical improvement at the forefront of their teaching practice.

## Additional resources

Alvarez, Sara P.  
“[Multilingual Writers in College Contexts](#).”  
*Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* vol. 62, no. 3 (2018): pp. 342-345.

Haneda, Mari and Gordon Wells. “[Some Key Pedagogic Principles for Helping ELLs to Succeed in School](#).” *Theory into Practice* vol. 51 (2012): pp. 297-304.

Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, Yale University.  
[Resources for Multilingual Writers](#).

University of Washington Center for Teaching and Learning. “[Strategies for Teaching Multilingual Learners](#).”

- **Office hours** – Make sure to explain what these are for (some students might think that these are only for remedial performers, so they might avoid office hours to avoid the stigma of being seen as low performing).
- **Digital discussion boards** – Using a discussion forum on Moodle, Wordpress, or another online site that is dedicated to student questions can draw questions from quiet or intimidated students.

### 4. Redundant information streams

It will help multilingual learners to have key information repeated, particularly if you can phrase ideas differently each time – some words may be more or less familiar, so different phrasings can help convey ideas.

Similarly, conveying information in not only spoken and written form, but (when possible) also through images or data visualizations will increase the likelihood that all of the students in the class – including those whose first language is not English – will understand the material.

### 5. Frequent writing practice

Help habituate students to writing by offering many different opportunities to practice writing. Assigning frequent low-stakes writing tasks (such as minute papers and short reflections) helps provide such practice. These assignments can be assessed by checking for completion rather than accuracy, or they can be tasks that you do not assess.

### 6. Remember the Farnham Writers' Center

All students, including multilingual students, can benefit by knowing that the tutors at the Farnham Writers' Center can be booked for consultations. But, as with the first tip on this sheet, it is good to remind multilingual learners that the most important parts of a written text (like a strong thesis statement, logical organization, and well-chosen support) should receive more attention than the text's grammar.