NOTES FOR AUDIENCE DIVERSITY LECTURE

These notes go along with the lecture slides titled “Audience Diversity”, which you can find on my website.

This presentation focuses on differences in languages and cultures that will affect your writing choices. But first we will look at a style issue.

**Slide: What’s Wrong with These Sentences?**
The first three sentences all have examples of sexist language.

- Every doctor should have **his** own stethoscope. (Not all doctors are male.)

Possible solutions in descending order of elegance include

- Every doctor should have a stethoscope.
- All doctors should have their own stethoscope.
- Every doctor should have his or her own stethoscope.

Sometimes students want to say, “Every doctor should have their own stethoscope.” This solution is fine in casual speech, but in formal written English, it’s technically mismatched because “every” is singular and “their” is plural. Therefore the fourth sentence on the slide doesn’t quite work.

- Each **stewardess** should clear the trays in her section.

*Stewardess*, like *poetess, waitress, and sometimes even actress*, are considered old-fashioned and sexist language. The modern replacements are *flight attendant, poet, server, and actor*. Words like *fireman* and *chairman* have also been replaced by *firefighter* and *chair or chairperson*.

- While the **girls** swam in the pool, the **men** barbecued.

If all of these people are in the same age group, use **girls** and **boys or men** and **women**.

**Slide: Fix Sexist Language**
Here are some solutions to removing sexist language.

**Slide: Beware of the Ambiguous They**
The example on this slide shows what can happen if **they** is used to mean **he or she** or **them** is used to mean **him or her**. Am I being asked to watch one child or six?

**Slide: Consider Language Differences.**
The lesson of this slide is that carelessness in translation or use of non-native words out of context can cause some problems.
For example, a Pepsi ad campaign in China tried to say something along the lines of “Pepsi lifts your spirits” but mistranslated it as something along the lines of “Pepsi brings your dead ancestors back to life.” Oops.

Another example is the Chevy Nova, a 1970s muscle car. The legend (possibly untrue—but often cited in tech writing textbooks) goes that the Nova did not sell well in Spanish speaking countries because no va means “it doesn’t go.” Poor name for a car!

The poo poo platter is a non-English word that sounds funny in English-speaking countries. It’s a delicious dish you can find on menus in Chinese and Hawaiian restaurants, but try ordering it in front of an 8-year-old speaker of English . . .

Another fun example is Rabobank (pronounced “rob a bank”). It’s a Dutch company, so they may not have realized how it sounded in English. FYI, at least one Rabobank in San Luis Obispo County has been robbed. Just sayin.

**Slide: Consider Variety Differences.**

It’s not just non-English words that can cause problems, sometimes it is different varieties of English. In other varieties of English, “wrap it up” means “your fly is undone”, “bonnet” means “hood” (of a car), “pocketbook” (NY English) means “purse”, and “tanbark” means “wood chips”.

My favorite example is “knocked up.” I had a student who was visiting in England and met a nice young man in a pub. They hit it off, and at the end of the evening he offered to “come round in the morning and knock you up.” He was just asking if she wanted him to knock on her door in the morning to wake her up, he was not, as we might expect in America, actually offering to father a child for her.

**Slide: Consider Cultural Differences**

This slide is talking about cultural differences that can cause miscommunications across cultures.

**Time frames:** In the US, punctual means exactly at the specified time. In other cultures, they are much looser with time frames. If you are working with a client from one of these cultures, don’t be offended if they show up later than the appointed time. I’ve had students from cultures like these say they tell their relatives an earlier time so they can get them to arrive at the desired time.

**Proximity:** Americans have a very large space bubble. We often feel uncomfortable when other people stand “too close”. If you go to another country, just be aware of it—and don’t stand too far away from the person in front of you in line; it’s too easy for others to take cuts.
Getting to the point: In the US, we have the saying “Time is money.” Many other cultures consider this abruptness rude. You may have heard of the stereotypical Japanese business person’s lunch where they drink sake for a couple of hours before beginning to talk business. I’ve been assured this style is true of other Asian cultures as well. In these cultures, making a social, personal connection is very important. A good plan for American business people working with oversees clients is to wait until the clients start to talk business.

Check Please! In Europe, it’s considered rude for the server to come by and ask you how you are doing or if you need anything else. They see it as intrusive and rushing you out the door. Therefore, if you go to a restaurant in Europe and you want more water or your check, flag down the server.

Evergreen Containers Photo: Evergreen is a huge, international shipping company. You may have seen their big, green containers going down the highway or along railroad tracks. My brother tells the story of a meeting he and his team at Evergreen had with clients from Taipei (?). The Evergreen team had brought green baseball caps as gifts for their clients. The caps were the pretty green you see in the photo. My brother said he was very confused because the clients seemed unusually uncomfortable and quiet during the meeting. When it was finally over, one of the gentlemen from Taipei pulled my brother aside and told him that in China “wearing a green hat” is an expression meaning your significant other is cheating on you. Oops.

Slide: Consider Cultural Differences in Your Own Country.
Don’t forget about cultural differences within the US as well. It’s a big country.

Mr., Mrs. Ms. (honorifics): In some areas of the US, primarily the East and the South, it’s considered quite rude to use someone’s first name unless he or she has asked you to. You will also find people from older generations all over the US often prefer the honorific. In a business setting, err on the side of caution. Use the honorific until directed otherwise.

Hats: In some areas of the US, it’s considered quite rude to wear a hat indoors and especially at the table. So at a business lunch, take off the hat.

Direct Gaze: In some cultures parents will say, “Look at me when I’m speaking to you!”—particularly when you are in trouble. In others, looking directly at someone who is chastising you indicates disrespect. Find out which culture you are working with, and follow their norms.

Slide: Consider Gender Differences . . . Sort of.
This discussion is definitely stereotypical. Studies indicate common differences between men and women in their speech patterns. They say men feel more comfortable lecturing, but women feel better gathering a consensus and asking questions. One thing they say about women’s speech patterns is definitely true of
me: women are more likely to phrase a command as a request. For example, if I want my children to stop messing around and do their homework, I will say, “Would you turn off the TV?” Notice that I phrased it as a yes-no question, but did I really mean it as a yes-no question? Of course I also know men who phrase commands as requests. The lesson here: if your boss says, “Could you finish the report by Friday?” find out if he or she means it as a directive or as a request.

Slide: Consider Differences in Abilities.
This slide is a reminder that many people in your audience will have various vision challenges. Some applications will read a site out loud, so be sure to always give your visuals descriptive captions and appropriate <alt> tags. Also, use big enough font for older people who don’t see well. And don’t forget that the color blind may get stuck if you ask them to “click on the red button below” if there’s also a “green button below”.

Make Your Writing Easy to Translate
The following slides give tips for adjusting your writing so that it will translate more easily. With the easy accessibility of the internet, your writing has a much higher likelihood of being read by people who do not speak English as their primary language.

Slide: Avoid Idiomatic Expressions.
Just imagine a non-native speaker of English going to a translation dictionary and trying to look up “kicked the bucket”. Or worse yet, imagine what Google Translator could do with that phrase.

Slide: Watch for Mechanics Differences
Be sure to check how a culture you are working with handles the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These <strong>numbers</strong> are the same</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These <strong>dates</strong> are the same</td>
<td>3/5/2015 (March 5)</td>
<td>5/3/2015 (5 March)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It’s best to write out the name of the month as shown in the parentheses above.

Slide: Avoid Broad Words.
In English we can have a single word with many meanings. It’s better to stay away from words like *run* and *set*. Use the more specific equivalents instead.

Slide: Keep Terminology Consistent.
A non-native speaker (and sometimes a native speaker) may not realize that a *mister* and a *sprayer* are the same thing. Also they may think *click the link* and *click on the link* mean two different things.
**Slide: Use Active Voice.**
Passive voice can confuse non-native speakers of English because it uses a be-form, which has little meaning, and a preposition, which can be inconsistent, even among native speakers—*different than* is common colloquial English, *different from* is Standard American written English, and *different to* is the British English version). Passive also switches the common roles of the actor and acted upon, further confusing audiences.

**Slide: Use Section Blocks.**
As this slide shows, the amount of space used by text may change when it’s translated. Consequently, a visual that you stated was on page 10 may now be on page 7 or page 13. To avoid this issue in text that will be translated, use section numbers to number and refer to your visuals—1.0, 1.1, 2.0, 2.1, 2.2, etc.

**Slide: Consider Paper Size.**
Europeans use A4 paper. It’s a little thinner and a little longer than the 8.5” x 11” paper of the US. Remember that when you put together your resume—keep your margins large (at least 1”) at the right and left so the text doesn’t get cut off.