

# Crossing Academic Cultures: A Rubric for Students and Teachers

Mark T. Williams and Gladys Garcia

*ABSTRACT: Researchers use images of outsiders and insiders to distinguish basic writers from students more proficient with the demands of academic discourse and academic culture. For example, David Bartholomae examines how outsiders rely on unelaborated commonplaces to define their interpretations while insiders elaborate and work against their commonplaces. We underscore how the rhetorical topics are the basis of the commonplaces, how students can define, compare, relate, and cite their assumptions more successfully. We also describe a rubric to assess how students may move from outsiders to insiders in part by cultivating what Kenneth Burke calls a “humble irony.” This perspective may help students develop more critical viewpoints and may prompt teachers to better engage the dissonance and difficulties students bring to our classrooms.*

As writing teachers at California State University, Long Beach, where nearly 50% of composition students are the first in their families to attend a university and just 35% define themselves as “White,” we frequently see many of them struggle with academic discourse. In the communities surrounding our school, residents speak 33 different languages, an environment one journalist calls an “alphabet soup” (Simmons). And while faculty from the departments of Asian-American Studies, Black Studies, Chicano and Latino Studies, and English offer multicultural curricula to students from these neighborhoods and beyond, we assess students through the conventions of critical academic culture. They must analyze their own and others’ ideas, question “commonplace assumptions” while exploring new perspectives, and evaluate “all knowledge claims” (*Composition*). These goals are particularly difficult for the 50% of first-year students who place in remedial writing courses.<sup>1</sup> For a variety of reasons, these undergraduates may not comprehend

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the claims we hope they will critique, may recoil from reconsidering assumptions because meaning seems fixed, and may resist what they see as an oppressive world-view pushed by professors. Consequently, as researchers have noted in other settings, our campus manifests what Mary Louise Pratt would probably call “contact zones,” places where cultural groups “meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (34).

Mina Shaughnessy first identifies some repeating syntactic and semantic errors among basic writers new to academic culture, those “true outsiders” who have not yet “reconciled the worlds of home and school” (2-3). Patricia Bizzell reminds us to reconsider the off-campus circumstances that may influence basic writers, or “outlanders.” We should reassess how their “outlandishness” can be explained in part as a conflict between their home dialects and Standard Written English as well as between their world views and ours (*Academic* 164-66). Bizzell argues that we should recall how academic discourse seems mysterious to students new to scholarly conversations, and she contends that writing teachers should expose and demystify how knowledge is created and conveyed (108-12). David Bartholomae also acknowledges that although academic writing can remain “mysterious” even to those who compose it, students need to imagine themselves as “within” such a discourse (“Inventing” 590, 594). Students need to move from “outside” to “inside” academic language by discovering an authoritative stance, by taking risks with their syntax, and by resisting ordinary interpretations of the world to approximate more authoritative prose. They need to “imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’” (597-99).

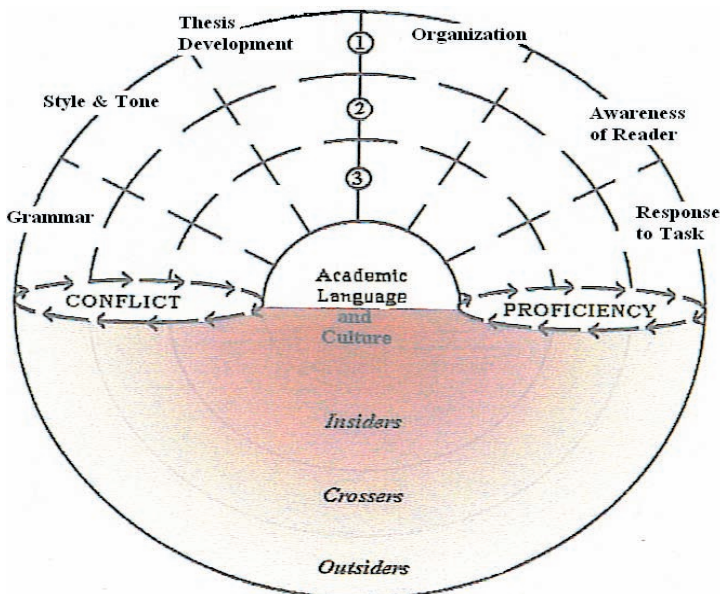
Some scholars criticize Bartholomae for overrating academic conventions, and the *insider/outsider* distinction may evoke static conceptions of language and learning that many hope to erase (Alford; Blake; Boyd; Lyon). Antonio Gramsci in fact disrupts hegemonic concepts of a *center* by lauding the transformative, centrifugal possibilities “organic” intellectuals can enact in social spheres (1-23). Paulo Freire critiques those who promote “banking” or passive pedagogies that reinforce ideas among the less literate that they remain “outside” of social structures. Everyone is already “inside” a given society, and we can potentially find agency to transform our marginal places through an active, critical consciousness that unveils and intervenes in the world (55-57).

Still, however, the *insider* and *outsider* distinctions help researchers locate student writing and teacher pedagogy (Brammer; Farris; Kutz; Rosen-Knill and Lynch). Bartholomae also adds rhetorical dimension to these spatial metaphors by updating Aristotle’s “commonplaces” to suggest the

concepts and statements we use to interpret the world. The commonplaces, or rhetorical *topoi*, are *places* in language where we define, compare, relate, and cite our potentially transformative views of the world. Bartholomae contends that students must locate themselves in academic discourse in large part by extending such commonplaces as “no pride,” “lack of incentive,” and “laziness” into more rigorous explanations of experience (“Inventing” 592). Basic writers need to “extend themselves” into the interpretive frameworks that comprise the varied fields of academic communities—as expert writers do when amplifying and elaborating ideas and assumptions through analysis and critique (600, 610). Aristotle of course identified commonplaces for the homogeneous Greek forum, and Giambattista Vico later defined the topics as a “primary operation of our mind” (*Science* 498-97). Vico contended that students could counter the increasingly powerful empirical sciences by simultaneously accommodating and critiquing the values and viewpoints that construe cultural environments (*Methods* 19, 34).

We combine the commonplaces with *outsider/insider* distinctions to locate student writing in the discursive sphere below. We use the rubric to characterize student writers who may be crossing into the more critical terrain of academic culture and to invite fellow teachers to reconsider the values and viewpoints that underwrite our position within the academy.

### A Process-Guided Rubric



This rubric is motivated by Kenneth Burke's claim that the rhetorical topics provide a means to shift between images and ideas (*Rhetoric* 86). We use this image to process the frequently ambiguous ideas that students put to paper. When Burke introduces the pentad of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose as resources to discern motives among people who use and are used by words, he offers an image of a solid earthly surface, where divisive ideas congeal, then give way to a molten core, an "alchemic center," where language and identity can recombine in "consubstantial" relationships (*Grammar* xix). We can potentially identify with others, but the ironic, consubstantial grounds of rhetoric always admit division as well (*Rhetoric* 22). These boundaries of unity and separation emerge each time we assess student writing: some passages place students within our communities, some passages keep them out. Moreover, the molten nature of Burke's core underscores our commonplace view that academic discourse and culture are constructed through argument, through the give and take that rhetoric allows. Ironically, too, the topics do not comprise a discrete category in the rubric; they are what Vico calls the primary operation of our minds at work during assessment, the taken-for-granted categories students use to write and we use to read their writing.

So, critiques of hegemonic centers notwithstanding, we see *insider* prose closest to the rubric's molten core, where students construct consubstantial commonplaces by defining their own and others' assumptions through comparisons, relationships, and sources. *Insiders* also demonstrate awareness of readers' expectations and partly reconcile ambiguity and conflict through the irony that Burke evokes. Student prose in the next category, *crossers*, is where writers begin to elaborate on their clichés by defining their own and others' assumptions through comparisons, relationships, and sources. They generally show some awareness of readers' expectations and recognize—but do not reconcile—conflict, contradiction, and ambiguity. The exterior sphere of the rubric suggests *outsiders*. Student writers in this category usually rely on stereotypical responses and clichés and miss defining their own and others' assumptions through the topics. They also tend to misunderstand or reject critical questions, show little awareness of readers' expectations, and avoid contradiction and ambiguity.

We are not here implying static categories of student writing or hard links between learning styles and language forms. To be sure, the two smaller circles marked "conflict" and "proficiency" on both sides of the rubric's center convey the recursive or looping nature of writing—how students will encounter varying levels of tension and success in virtually each piece

of prose. Many students in fact produce passages in each essay that demonstrate some elements of *outsiders*, *crossers*, and *insiders*. Their developing ability to traverse these boundaries underscores the transformative powers that language allows.

For example, one student crosses the conflicting terrain between home and college when she chooses to write about her father's violent drunkenness. Initially unwilling or unable to define him as an alcoholic, the student arrives at this definition after a first draft, but she ends with an unresolved contradiction characteristic of *outsiders*: she now sees herself as "a mature, independent and very intolerant person of abuse" (see Appendix A for the complete student essay). In contrast, another student analyzes published writers who "walk on thin ice" when arguing about school prayer. In a later essay he then both recognizes and partly reconciles contradiction: as an atheist, he feels excluded from the center of society. The first student approximates *insider* writing by developing a more detached, *outsider* perspective on "home"; the second student acknowledges how *insiders* can remain *outside* cultural comfort zones by maintaining contrary views.

These passages and others underscore the fact that as faculty who enforce academic conventions while also trying to nurture diverse student viewpoints, we need to discover and maintain an ethical stance to assess their writing. Burke is helpful here, because he identifies a "humble irony," a supple standpoint that emerges when we use the pentad to consider how we are not simply "outside" others as observers, when we realize how we contain others "within" us (*Grammar* xix, 514; his emphasis). Hopefully, as humble *insiders*, we aim for *places* in language and experience to reconsider *outsiders'* perspectives.

One strand of Burke's "consubstantial" stance may explain such work. *Insiders* can build a place for themselves in language that admits contradiction, can be at once with and against others. Gloria Anzaldúa deploys this *topos* when recalling how she learned the contradictory "territories" of her ethnic community and the world of the academy (Lunsford 8). Victor Villanueva also enacts this stance to explain his simultaneously *outsider* and *insider* status as a professor (*Bootstraps* xiii-xiv). Bartholomae too acknowledges how *insider* discourse is "not the world but a way of talking about the world" ("Inventing" 593). We consequently look for—and infrequently find—student *insiders* who decode texts and encode print in part by reconciling ideas seemingly *outside* their own immediate experience. We also look for—and frequently find—students who may be *crossing* from a relatively unelaborated stance to consider others' views more intensely.

In what follows, we first reintroduce definitions of “culture” and review practices of writing assessment that address cultural issues. We then examine sample student writing that corresponds with the categories of our circular rubric. We end by contending that Burke’s humble irony is a stance that might enable students and teachers to understand each other more fully. This view was expressed millennia ago when Cicero called for the topics to invent ideas before judging them (Book 2.159-66), to discover more about our worlds before critiquing them.

## **Writing Assessment and Culture Influences**

The word “culture” of course conveys an immeasurably large field of human experience as well as the particular life patterns of persons in homes and neighborhoods. “Culture” also carries immense ideological weight and essentialist implications, and we are wary of suggesting causal links between diverse student backgrounds and the writing they produce.<sup>2</sup> Tracking through “high” and “ordinary” conceptions of culture that Matthew Arnold and Raymond Williams introduce, we turn to Clifford Geertz, who defines culture as “webs of significance” that all people spin from their experience (4-5). We particularly value those writers who are willing to unravel some ideological networks that comprise the commonplaces of the cultural landscapes surrounding us.

Scholars have called for more research on how culture may influence writing assessment at least since conferees to the 1975 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) acknowledged that an increasingly multicultural society demands recognition of varied written dialects (Committee). Twenty-one years later, the CCCC’s position statement on writing assessment (CCCC Committee on Assessment) prompted many individuals and programs to develop unconventional rubrics and portfolios to better account for the cultural contexts that may affect student writing (see Kamusikiri; Holdstein; Hamp-Lyons). Increasingly, the relatively objective or scientific stance that assessment participants and projects had used to reach reader reliability has been replaced by more context-sensitive readings of student work (Broad; Huot; Yancey “Looking Back”). Scholars also question how traditional assessment rubrics tend to fix or reduce complex writing processes to a set of seemingly stable criteria (Mabry; Yancey “Postmodernism”). Ulla Connor argues for more sensitivity to cultural influences on assignments, rubrics, and readers’ interpretations in part by citing the traditionally situated nature of rhetoric. She asserts that writing

is an activity embedded in culture, that cultural factors influence how writers perceive their readers, and that patterns and processes of language and writing are culturally specific.

So, even though cultural issues manifest in many discussions about writing and assessment (Bean et al.; Bruna et al.) and individual teachers may enact strategies and assessments that are highly sensitive to the specific classroom cultures, rubrics for writing assessment generally do not foreground cultural influences. We know of no study that explicitly explores how cultural differences may be assessed—aside from the errors ascribed to students whose first language is not English (Cho; Crusan). The relative lack of culture as an explicit component of assessment rubrics is understandable because of the speculative links researchers might infer when questioning how cultural circumstances can sustain and constrain student writing. For example, Margaret Marshall identifies how the influences of class and culture can basically remain invisible to teachers and how our inferences about the possible effects of cultural forces can be wrong. Some Anglo students can struggle with writing as much as students from any other racial or ethnic group, and we should be wary of ascribing causal links when none may exist. White males, for instance, do not have a “unitary experience” that we can discern in their writing (235).

The difficulty of reading student writing is complicated by the critical demands that composition programs make of students new to universities—students whose home-based value systems may not generally accept cultural critique. In fact, Bartholomae’s suggestion for students to situate themselves in “a discourse that is not ‘naturally’ or immediately theirs” (“Inventing” 602) may defy some ideas of how identity, culture, and power are intertwined through language. Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky certainly provide students with multicultural readings, and they admit the difficulty for students to read both with and “against the grain” (11-12). Tensions nevertheless remain. Raul Ybarra (“Cultural”) cautions us to consider the dissonances that may exist between the cultural conditions of Latino students and the epistemologies at work in composition courses (38-39). Ricardo Garcia warns us that Mexican-American children are generally taught to respect elders and those who hold positions of authority, so they may expect a composition course to be a place for clearly representing ideas, not a place to also question ideas through writing. In addition, Ilona Leki reminds us how other ethnic groups display similar “reverence” for respected individuals in the community (64).



Some individuals resist the dominant discourse once they are proficient in it. When arguing against California's law to eliminate bilingual education programs in public schools, for example, Adela De La Torre asserts that "the dominant culture could have meaning in my eyes only with the remnants of my family language" (1). Claiming her right to nourish and sustain an identity through the language of her choice, De La Torre argues that "maintaining our language is a final act of resistance" (2). She contends that the language of childhood and home must have a place in formal learning. Other scholars explore the tensions they experience when alternating among the languages of several cultures to construct identities as writers. For example, when Ngugi wa Thiongo'o discusses the role of language in shaping his autobiographical identity, he asserts that language is "both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngugi 13), and he details his struggle against the damage that colonizing discourses can create. Other scholars examine how disciplinary bias complicates teaching and assessment (Faigley; Yagelski; White).

Keeping these complex cultural issues in mind, we next examine student writing that corresponds with *outsiders*, *crossers*, and *insiders*. We also look for writing that prompts us to reconsider the relatively safe terrain we occupy—how as *insiders* we may take for granted the cultural dissonance and difficulty students may encounter when entering our classrooms. We can perhaps learn more about them as they learn more about academic discourse by rigorously defining ideas, by relating experiences more fully, and by locating points of view through a conversation with sources beyond ourselves.

### ***Outsiders Caught in Unelaborated Commonplaces***

We begin examining student prose with a qualification. You will notice that the upper-half of the rubric denotes six discrete categories for assessment—Grammar, Style & Tone, Thesis Development, Organization, Awareness of Reader, and Response to Task. We admit that six categories are a bit overwhelming to consider when reading student writing, but we do want to capture the complexities of writing processes in our relatively simple rubric design. As the broken lines in the upper-half of the rubric are meant to convey, the six evaluative categories are molten, or intertwined: students define their theses by developing and organizing their main points as well as by acknowledging readers' potential responses. Nevertheless, a more solid or discrete sense of the evaluative categories might help students see the places where they need to improve.



*Outsider* prose is of course identified by relatively frequent grammatical and/or syntactical errors that obscure meaning. For example, the student who wrote the “Power” essay (Appendix A) should be praised for exploring a dysfunctional domestic situation. She nonetheless ends her work with unresolved syntactic contradictions that mark much of her writing as *outside* acceptable prose. *Outsiders* also generally do not realize the need to define their commonplaces because these phrases carry their own explanatory force—as Bartholomae suggests with “lack of pride” and “original sin” (“Inventing” 592). The writers do not generally compare how their beliefs might be constructed differently by others; do not relate their examples to other examples; do not cite voices in opposition to their own; do not locate an identifiable point of view in discourse. Moreover, the students have difficulty identifying with ideas presented outside of what might be called their own zones of cultural comfort. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, for example, a Latina was asked by the media why she watches television news in Spanish rather than in English. She answered by praising the Spanish-speaking journalists: “They know people like me, they come from where I come from, they think the way I think” (“Bringing”). She acknowledges difficulty in identifying how the English-language media present the event and so returns to media which better represent her culturally-informed views.

Of course, we all gravitate to familiar media to process traumatic events. When students are trying to learn the discourse of the academy, however, an over-identification with home culture may translate into resistance and/or rejection of academic tasks. When not explicitly rejecting our prompts, students may discover additional dissonance and difficulty by falling back on stereotypical reasons for their ostensible analysis. For example, a student who immigrated from Vietnam as a young teenager was asked to explain some of the possible causes and effects of poverty in the United States. As part of her response, she acknowledges how “a competitive society” requires everyone to work. In the U.S., though, “poor people are too lazy to work. They have no expectations in life.” Here as elsewhere in her essay the student mimics the commonplace that laziness equals poverty. She does not define this phrase through comparisons with her experiences in Vietnam or with published sources, as she was asked to do. Later, she does examine some possible causes of poverty, but these causal relationships are reduced to a simple rationale. Economically impoverished people, she writes, “like to live in the street because they don’t have to worry about paying any types of bills every month. . . . they prefer to be poor instead of working their life off just to get out of poverty.”

In the final sentence of her essay, the student does mention the possibility that the “unequal opportunity to succeed in life” is a potential cause of poverty. This idea could be a central part of her essay—as many experienced readers would probably contend—but she does not develop or support the concept. She probably encountered a level of poverty in Vietnam much worse than that of the United States. She nonetheless does not relate examples of Vietnamese poverty and its causes to the phenomena she encounters here. It is understandable that she would hesitate to compare such diverse cultures, but it is our responsibility to encourage her to do so. She may not realize that her foreign experience can be defined, compared, and related to her experiences here as she develops proofs to support her claims. She can tap experience-based *topoi* to *cross* into more critically informed writing.

The next samples emerge from an essay written by a Latina student who, when analyzing arguments for and against allowing women combat positions in the military, reverts to stereotypes typical of *outsiders* to the academy. She reviews how two authors—Margaret Thatcher and Nicholas Coppola—offer contrary views of allowing women to serve in military combat units. After briefly introducing the authors’ main claims, the student puts forth her ostensible thesis: “In either case there are many ups and downs of women being in combat” (see Appendix B for the complete student essay). This pat phrase begins to suggest the complexities of the issue—complexities that she generally neglects in the ensuing prose. And while clichés such as this can help students maintain a sense of self when trying to approximate academic discourse (Skorczewski 230), we see this phrase provisionally marking her as an—*outsider*. She later laments how Thatcher “does not use any statistics to back up her claims . . . and causes her to appear much more opinionated.” Here the student does not seem to recognize that opinions can be validly put forth without statistical information; she does not yet seem to recognize that our discourse community admits appeals other than the sheerly empirical.

She then identifies the ethos that Thatcher embodies as a former British Prime Minister to acknowledge a stereotype in the politician’s writing. Thatcher “claims that ‘[women] are better at welding [*sic*] the handbag than the bayonet.’ This claim is very general and not only goes out of the boundaries of her argument, but it has absolutely no proof supporting it.” With her characterization of Thatcher writing “out of the boundaries,” the student does not acknowledge that Thatcher might be deliberately mocking others’ arguments—a point she could analyze through Thatcher’s style. The student, in short, does not infer any ironic elements in Thatcher’s work—an

awareness fundamental to recognizing and perhaps countering the commonplaces that give shape to intellectual landscapes.

Christine Farris offers helpful explanations of writing we would classify as *outsider*. Detailing how she encourages teaching assistants and members of writing programs to reconsider and revise how they teach writing when she introduces cultural critique to first-year writing courses, Farris acknowledges dissatisfaction with student writing that is not related to error. Many students “cling to unified worldviews” when asked to critique popular culture. Many of these students, who seem to believe that “experience is universally the same for everyone,” cannot seem to “get beyond” their initial retorts to social issues, “beyond merely agreeing or disagreeing,” repeating commonplaces and “ventriloquizing” already published positions (97-98).

In the examples above, the students seem unwilling or unable to define a stance that could take them *beyond* the commonly expressed phrases about the world. As one graduate student wrote, many first-year composition students do not yet seem to realize how cultural consciousness is “unconsciously imbibed” and how an academic sense can be “consciously cultivated” (Jones 1). We believe students can discover a more critical consciousness by developing relevant comparisons for their discussions about poverty and equal opportunity, by discerning more of the causal relationships that may complicate and/or contradict their original views, and by cultivating sources to elaborate upon their pat phrases.

### **Crossing into Critical and Elaborated Discourse**

The middle sphere of the rubric suggests the prose of *crossers*, writers who seem to recognize the socially constructed nature of belief sets, who begin to question commonplaces, and who organize and support previously undefined and unelaborated clichés. They respond to assignments by exploring some probable relationships among multiple causes and effects, by comparing apt realms of experience, and by citing sources with increasing deftness to locate their analysis in conversation with others. Their writing nonetheless remains marked by a tendency to under-analyze, by not adequately supporting an idea, and by not defining or locating a point of view that suggests some of the cultural dimensions informing their perspectives. They also seem frozen by an increasingly sensitive rhetorical consciousness: aware of readers’ expectations, they are unsure how to engage them. In the “Power” essay (Appendix A), the student has the confidence to write about embarrassing family experience, but her syntactic contradictions suggest she

is still processing the event for herself. She has not yet discovered how to effectively translate the powerful event for readers who may empathize with her trauma but who expect more coherent, developed explanations of it.

Another Latina student exemplifies difficulty with readers' expectations when reflecting on how she wrote a paper for her peers to review first. The assignment required her to describe an event or experience that had changed her life. She recounted working at a store and how, over time, she realized that many North Americans are "self-centered" and overly influenced by "greed and corruption." She later wrote in her journal that she did not want to offend her peers with these characterizations, so she stopped examining these potentially offensive views. Her reluctance is understandable. Nonetheless, she can be encouraged to realize that her critiques can be valued; many readers would certainly accept her critique of the harried, sometimes abrasive quest for more money to buy more stuff—if she developed this commonplace through definitions, comparisons, relationships, and sources.

She also explains how her fellow employees and customers were frequently "extremely inconsiderate" when demonstrating their materialist values, and she recounts how she eventually understood that she "did not want to be a product of that type of society," a materialist, U.S. society. She is here writing against commonly accepted assumptions, but she can do more to relate her own experiences to what she sees happening around her. She could compare the worksite to values perhaps enacted in her home. Moreover, she does not admit the fact that as an English-speaking student at an American university, she is and continues to further become a product of the dominant culture. She defines herself in opposition to U.S. culture without yet realizing a productive place for herself within this society. A skilled teacher might encourage her to imagine a more nurturing workplace by reading about and citing sources that document such environments, might challenge her to define an oppositional—*topos* that need not offend. The student could, for instance, appeal to readers who may have experienced similarly material attitudes. She could imagine how others, seemingly *outside* her world, in fact populate it too.

Another Latina student, the first member in her family to attend college, praises her parents for helping her attend a university while also admitting the unknown terrain found here. "My parents have supported and guided my path throughout my education," she writes, "even though they were not sure what exactly it entailed." Most of her experiences on campus will be novel because she does "not have the fortune to have someone show

me the steps to take.” Her writing has clichés, but she defines a point of view that admits the unknown. She also acknowledges ambiguity: her parents “were not sure what exactly [college] entailed,” but she was encouraged to attend school nonetheless. She is simultaneously affirming her home environment while also acknowledging how she is entering into a relatively unknown academic culture. Conflicts remain unresolved, but she can be encouraged to define some of the ambiguity that attends to these tensions. We could support her elaboration of values from home that may help her negotiate the conflicts she encounters on campus. ”

We examined above an example of *outsider* prose when a student analyzed whether or not women should be allowed in military combat. In some sections of her paper, the student is *crossing* into more successful academic discourse. For instance, when reviewing Thatcher’s dismissals of a woman’s overall strength and martial abilities, the student counters with the comparison that many women have earned high marks as snipers. Moreover, the student defines as deficient Thatcher’s credibility on the matter. The former politician “has never served in the military nor has she experienced some of the trials that women must face in today’s military” (Appendix B). Such a stance may result from Thatcher trying to imagine herself in such a situation, the student writes. But “she is not putting herself on the side of women that may have the capabilities to perform well in combat.” The student defines Thatcher’s apparent antipathy to other women; she acknowledges Thatcher’s ethos as a political leader, and she criticizes Thatcher for not supporting her claims. Still, this student could *cross* more effectively into *insider* writing by elaborating more about “the side of women,” the experiences that perhaps inform other women’s views.

In another example, a Latina student questions the value of affirmative action programs in college. While her writing overall is quite strong, she lapses into some unelaborated definitions, some underdeveloped relationships, and some potentially faulty comparisons. For example, when summing up her rejection of affirmative action, the student writes that merit—not skin color—should solely be considered when students apply for college: “The admissions process is only taking into account generalizations and forgetting to look at a person as an individual and not as a Latino or African American.” She continues by contending that “society should aim for a colorblind society and affirmative action is only hurting this goal.” This student should perhaps be applauded for criticizing a program that some might contend has helped her. And, while she writes relatively error-free, well organized prose that marks her as successful in a composition classroom, she offers a

relatively reductive definition of affirmative action—how the program is “only hurting” the objective of a “colorblind” society. She relies on commonplace ideas of a “colorblind” culture and the power of the “individual.” In addition, she does not yet make any comparisons with the past that might complicate her claims. Nor does she explore any of the causal relationships that might affect the attainment of “merit.” Moreover, she does not seem to consider *the other*—the humble awareness that some students grow up in circumstances that may basically preclude academic success.

The writing of *crossers* is perhaps best evoked by assignments that challenge students to discuss satire and irony in contemporary life. For example, one African-American student analyzed media accounts of Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* to evaluate the success of the film and to consider Stone’s possible culpability in copycat crimes. After concisely and effectively summarizing the film and two arguments about it, the student first lapses into relatively awkward sentences and clichés typical of *outsiders* and *crossers*. “One’s outlook on society will probably differ from another’s,” he writes. “Everyone will not conform and believe what others believe.” He then moves toward a more *insider* view: “The media has been more than eager to capture scenes of violence and exploit them to the world.” He begins to question cultural commonplaces, but he continues to rely on conventional *topoi* such as individual responsibility.

### **Becoming *Insiders* to Academic Culture**

The *insiders*’ place on the rubric is populated by students who are able to define cultural contradictions succinctly, compare relevant experiences when exploring these contradictions, and express with effectiveness the sometimes competing belief sets of home and school in part through an ironic consciousness that admits the influence of others. Anzaldúa offers a professional version of such a stance when she defines her experience on the Mexico-United States border to critique the effects of the political boundary. Borders are set “to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (3; her emphasis).

*Insiders* seem to negotiate the material and conceptual boundaries that sustain and constrain *us* and *them*. For example, we identified above how a Latina student exemplified a *crosser* when criticizing her co-workers and customers as overly materialistic and rude. In some passages of her writing, we also see an *insider* stance beginning to emerge. When reflecting on her relationships with fellow employees, she states how she had “grown to a state

beyond material possession and conformity.” The student is here perhaps traveling towards the ability to embrace ambiguity and contradiction: she is “moving beyond” materialism. While still undefined and itself a cliché of sorts, the *topos* of “beyond” suggests a willingness to enter into the relatively unknown, a move toward a molten world where values can perhaps be reconsidered and reconstructed. She might craft a more *insider* stance by complicating her oppositional view of others with the notion that she also contains others’ views inside of her. How, for example, might materialism manifest in her home, and how might she productively integrate these contradictory influences?

We identified above some elements of a *crosser* when a student explored and exploited some of the contradictions attending to affirmative action. We also see her writing as an *insider* when she questions how affirmative action is carried out. “Somehow the supporters of affirmative action have convinced themselves that a diversity of colors and physical features will somehow benefit the college environment.” She then challenges this assumption: “The simple fact that people are from different races does not automatically produce a diverse environment. People may all be different colors, but hold the same ideas and opinions. Where is the diversity then?” Although this critique might be considered predictable—diversity of skin color does not equate with diversity of thought—she seems to convey a humble irony. Social Darwinism notwithstanding, she argues for intellectual diversity, for complex interpersonal perspectives invigorated through an engagement with others.

We mentioned at the beginning of this discussion a student who investigated prayer in school, and we now end with more analysis of his work. This Asian-American student first analyzes two arguments about school prayer to later write an argument against the increasingly commonplace appeal to God in U.S. culture. Challenging the beliefs of many readers, he first analyzes a controversy about the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Defining the patriotism resulting from the attacks of September 11, the student writes how some citizens responded to the violence in New York and Washington through bigotry, and he goes on to argue that Americans turned to religious views to justify the war in Iraq. Recalling how one California man successfully challenged the Pledge before the U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals, the student later states why many people accept its recitation: “With most of this nation believing in one God or another, it is no wonder why the Pledge has not been protested: the majority of the public are comfortable with the Pledge as it is.” The student argues, however,



that the U.S. Supreme Court should consider historical facts when reviewing the Circuit Court's decision: "The Founding Fathers hoped the nation could be a place where every man and woman could live in peace." Noting how the government has nonetheless traditionally relied on religious values for expedient ends, the student contends that politicians exploit religion "because it gives the impression that they have a set of values, morals, and beliefs. While I agree with the power of this tactic, I do not believe it gives the power to force us to believe in God."

The student then historicizes the reference to divinity in the Pledge, noting how the phrase was inserted during the Eisenhower administration to reinforce differences between the U.S. and the "Godless" communist nations. He goes on to briefly define his own atheism. We see *insider* passages here because the student clearly defines a contentious issue and he critiques the commonplace by developing relevant historical sources. He notes the irony of America as a "place" initially defined as free from religious constraint, but this place nonetheless remains significantly bound by religious dictates. Most importantly for us, the student seems to cultivate the "humble irony" that Burke defines as fundamental to rhetorical consciousness. He admits how religion fosters both good-will and bigotry among those around him, and he cites the power of the Pledge to *both* unite *and* divide people—what Burke defines as a consubstantial stance.

*Insiders* can admit and express the irony of being at once with and against others. Burke addresses this *topos* when recalling how rhetoric is for Aristotle a means to "prove opposites"; rhetoric is a method to identify with and oppose others in any given case (*Rhetoric* 25). We see Villanueva offering a variant of this consubstantial view when he realizes that his *insider* status is simultaneously strengthened and weakened by his racial stock, by his markings as *outsider*. He has "succeeded in all the traditional ways. Yet complete assimilation is denied—the Hispanic English professor. One can't get more culturally assimilated and still remain other" (*Bootstraps* xiii-xiv).

Although this complex discursive balance is perhaps *beyond* most basic writers, we end with some suggestions for working towards this molten, rhetorical stance in the BW classroom.

### ***Crossing from Outside to Inside through Writing***

When teachers encounter writing from *outsiders* to academic culture, we might help them cross into more effective composition by considering what Eleanor Kutz calls "interlanguage." Kutz develops this category when

detailing how students produce awkward and convoluted syntax as they encounter “new or stressful discourse demands” (392-93). She argues that we can build on the verbal abilities students bring to the classroom as well as on their earlier success when they progress through increasingly difficult texts and tasks. Moreover, when Bizzell details the “hybrid” writing that emerges in the “blurred” borders between academic and home discourses (“Basic” 7), she recalls an earlier essay in which she contended that we can encourage students to develop their own hybrid discourses. Such language would include “variant forms of English,” surprising references to cultural sources, and irony among other elements (“Hybrid” 7).

We can encourage students to see irony and hybridity at work among successful writers from cultural backgrounds similar to their own. We can also encourage students to take more risks—particularly in the drafting stage, when we introduce the rubric to them to suggest how their writing remains *outside* the expectations that readers of academic writing generally have. We can see clichés as productive points for further elaboration, as Farris contends. Students can complicate their clichés, amplify the pat statements with reference to their own and others’ experience as well as to ideas encountered in texts. In the “Power” essay, for example (Appendix A), the student may be *crossing* necessary contradictions as she processes her experience. We can remind future students that they too may encounter ambiguities that may not be immediately resolved, but such intellectual conflicts mark the very terrain that academic writers must traverse.

We suggest that the process-guided rubric may help students cultivate a more fluid understanding of how writers travel through the contradictory and molten language that stretches between home and school, between writers and readers. Ideally, home languages would receive equal consideration in the classroom, allowing students traditionally *outside* of academic success to define their home culture in a meaningful way for readers on campus. Such meaningfulness is created in part by elaborating commonplace statements into critical assessments through detailed causal, temporal, and other relationships, through apt comparisons across experience, and through a deft use of published sources. The optimal result would be writers who can bring their *outsider* identity to an *insider’s* stance, a place where they can more effectively acknowledge the culturally plural nature of knowledge. Such positions are inherently multicultural because we must understand how the commonplaces of others help construe the discursive landscape we *cross* in the classroom and in the world. And such positions require teachers to listen to students as carefully as they often try to listen to us.

## Notes

1. Placements are made by combining students' SAT/ACT scores with their performance on the English Placement Exam, which they take during their junior or senior year in high school and which is assessed by readers independent from any one California State University campus.
2. We consistently encourage students to explore and express the experiences that might influence their writing, but we do not in this paper question the actual off-campus situations that may influence their academic performance. Ybarra presents a powerful example of how Latino students may experience cultural dissonance when traveling from the home to campus (*Latino*).

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Student Essay**

#### **The Power of a Fist**

The best time possibly for the majority of people is when the holidays start approaching because it is a time that brings the family together to celebrate a joyous time: This was the feeling surrounding my family as well. Thanksgiving was the only time throughout the year when my dad joined the girls to help with the cooking and cleaning. By now my dad had already begun feeding his unhealthy habit. It was not an unusual occurrence when my dad would drink excessively, but when he would drink too much the outcome was always a nightmare. I was beginning to worry, but I hoped that since it was Thanksgiving it would be different. The day progressed and the later the day became, the more our stomachs growled desperately in hopes of being stuffed with the delicious smelling food. My worrying had not been in vain, my father abused my mother that night. What I witnessed that night on Thanksgiving four years ago has created a strong feeling of intolerance for this type of behavior.

The perfection of that day was simply magnificent. Everything was going according to the way it had been planned and nothing seemed to be able to ruin it, except for maybe my dad and his unnecessary drinking. The moment we had all been waiting for was slowly approaching, dinner. My aunts and uncles were all arriving with smiles, hugs and hungry stomachs. As soon as they walked in I could see their mouths beginning to water from the smell of my moms famous cooking. The day could not be any better. It was not too hot or too cold. There was a light breeze swiftly running through the trees and making everything look as if it came straight out of a fairy tale. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, my mother began serving our dinner. We all gathered around the dining table, like ants on a piece of candy. We sat down and said grace and devoured our food.

The night continued on, we were all laughing, singing and dancing to a wonderful year and Thanksgiving. My mom and dad looked happy, despite the fact that my dad was intoxicated with alcohol. He could still walk on his own, but he would sway from side to side. His eyes were beginning to lose their focus. My dad was going overboard with his drinking. I tried my hardest to stay up and celebrate the rest of the night with my family but my eyelids



could no longer stay open, and it was impossible for me to stay awake. As I said good night to everyone, and went off to my room, I prayed that my dad would not go through with his usual show when he became drunk. It was extremely embarrassing for my family and me to watch our dad when he was intoxicated. He would start rambling about work, Mexico, and start dancing on his own or cling to people he did not even know.

My prayers were not answered, instead my dad's outburst was the worst I had ever seen. I jumped out of bed with sounds of screams. I ran out of my room and into the kitchen. I could not understand what was going on; my dad was yelling at my mom who was down on the floor crying and holding a hand up to her face. I looked around and the expressions of disgust on my relatives faces gave everything away. My dad was beating on my mom. I had never seen my dad behaving in such a manner before. He had been drunk before but he was always sure of what he was doing. I also clearly recall him swearing never to beat on my mom. I could not understand how a person could do this to someone they know is weaker and defenseless when put up against them. By now my mom was trying to pick herself up from the floor, but my dad grabbed her by the hands and threw her on top of the kitchen table, where just a few hours ago we had all been eating a fantastic dinner in peace and love.

I wanted to move and help my mom who looked in pain down on the floor. When I tried to help her my legs would not budge from the floor. He kept on yelling and swearing at my mom horrific words and he would try to talk but his words were only slurred. Out of nowhere my dad grabbed the kitchen table with my mom on top of it and flipped it over. My mom yelled and along with turkey, rice, beans, drinks, salsa, bread, and everything we had only a while ago had for dinner flew from the kitchen table and onto the floor. I had never seen such a spectacle. There was a feeling in the room of severe disgust and disbelief. I felt as if I did not even know this man who was my father, although I had been living with him all fourteen years of my life.

My uncle finally fell out of shock and grabbed my dad, pushed him down to the floor and helped my mom up from it. When my dad looked up from the floor, the crazed look in his eyes suddenly disappeared, and a look of confusion came his face. He then looked at my brother, my mother, all our guests and me. He looked around the kitchen, towards the floor at the chaos he had created and slowly with his head down, lifted himself up from the floor and walked to his room. My mind was not registering what had just occurred. These sort of things were only supposed to be seen on T.V. Too

much had happened for me to process everything at once, and I fainted.

When I came to, almost everyone had left, except for my aunt and uncle. My aunt, my mom's sister, was with both my mom trying to comfort her the best she could. My uncle, her husband, was with my dad, questioning him and at the same time trying to understand what had just happened. My dad was crying and apologizing to everyone, especially my mom. I tried standing up, but my legs could not support me, they felt like jelly, and I thought I was going to fall, my arms were shaking, and I could not look at this man which I had to call father, because of his actions. At this point something inside of me was triggered something I thought would never develop. It was not hate, because after all he was my father. Instead it was a very strong' grudge, because he should have never done what he did.

Spousal abuse is not a recent phenomenon or something that happens occasionally. There are cases upon cases of this nature, where the male beats the female so severely she has to go to the hospital and stay in bed rest for weeks. Many children become traumatized when witnessing one parent abuse the other. These acts are forever imbedded in children's memories, possibly affecting the way a child views opposite sex relationships. There is absolutely no excuse for a man or a woman, despite their anger, to hit their spouse, and there should not be a single person putting up with any sort of abuse. Through witnessing the abuse of my mother, I have become a mature, independent and very intolerant person of abuse of either the male or female in a marriage. This was a very important lesson for me, as it should be for everyone, whether a victim or not of abuse. No one should put up with being abused even if the person says they love you, because if in reality they did, they would never harm you, especially in such a way that would send you to the hospital.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Student Essay**

#### **Women in Combat**

In today's military, women are allowed to take on numerous jobs of great importance. However, women are not allowed to fight in combat. Some people like Margaret Thatcher, Author of "The dangers of Feminism Damaging our Armed Forces", would like to say that it is wrong to allow

women to fight in combat. On the other hand Army Major M. Nicholas Coppola, author of “The Female Infantryman: A Possibility?” would disagree by saying that women should be allowed to fight in combat. In either case, there are many ups and downs of women being in combat.

Margaret Thatcher wrote her article in 2003 for a larger piece named “statecraft”. Thatcher appeals to the adult readers by beginning her argument saying that “soldiers generally need to be physically strong” (p.3). This argument would imply that women aren’t physically strong enough to do the tasks that males in combat do. Thatcher shows logic to this when she tells about how the military had to change the lethal capability of a grenade because women couldn’t throw the heavier, more-lethal grenades as far as they needed to in order to avoid being caught in the explosion. However, Thatcher does not use any statistics to back up her claims and in return it causes her to appear somewhat unresearched and much more opinionated.

Margaret Thatcher has a great deal of credibility piled up in her past. Her most widely known achievement was her role as the British Prime Minister from 1979-1990, the longest run for a British Prime Minister in the twentieth century. This would put her into the position of having to deal with many political issues. She is also the first and only woman to run a major western democracy. Thatcher associates herself with the subject by saying that “women have plenty of roles in which they can serve with distinction: some even run countries” (6). This claim shows that she is one of those women that is content with one of the roles that women can serve with distinction. Thatcher makes another claim by saying that “the fact that most men are stronger than most women means either that women have to be excluded from the most physically demanding tasks, or else the difficulty of the tasks has to be reduced.” She creates credibility by showing an example of how the US Navy had to ‘reconfigure’ their warships to accommodate the facilities the women needed that men do not. She says that the USS Eisenhower had to spend million dollars on their ship alone for renovations. This fact causes her argument to be more persuasive and causes the reader to think of women as being an inconvenience to the military’s warships. Thus, causing the reader to further agree with her. Even with all of her political background as a woman in power, she still feels that women should be excluded from combat.

Thatcher makes a claim that in my opinion might evoke anger if those that were supporting women in the military had read it. Her claim is that “[women] are better at welding [*sic*] the handbag than the bayonet” (6) This

claim is very general and not only goes out of the boundaries of her argument, but it has absolutely no proof supporting it. There are many women that have been rated as snipers in marksmanship. Thatcher might have been a woman ruling a country, which would leave her opinion regarded as high and superior. However, Thatcher has never served in the military nor has she experienced some of the trials that women must face in today's military. She might have this opinion because this is how she feels she would perform if she was put into a combat situation. She is not putting herself on the side of women that may have the capabilities to perform well in combat.

Coppola wrote this article for the December-November 2002 edition of the *Military Review*. Coppola began his argument to the adult public by stating the fact that it is public policy and federal law that women can't be in combat. He does this to give background information to the reader. This makes him seem well informed.

Coppola brings to mind the logical fact that "not allowing women to serve in combat units runs counter to trends in American society that show that women can perform equally with their male counterparts in law enforcement, firefighting, and other civilian occupations"(1) This statement shows a trend that is very persuasive in leading the reader to agree with him. Coppola claims that "until women are given the opportunity to fail as infantrymen, there will continue to be criticism of an exclusionary policy"(4) Coppola backs up his claim by warranting that "females in law enforcement and firefighting have been successful when given the opportunity"(4).

Coppola tells about the women in America that disguised themselves as men and successfully fought in combat in American wars. He tells us that "Japanese women died in hand-to-hand combat during World War II"(2). He includes this fact in order to evoke sympathy from the reader. Coppola claims that "despite documented, tried, and proven examples of successful females into combat and infantry units in foreign countries, current U.S. policy continues to exclude females from similar opportunities"(2) This claim is very persuasive, however it seems to be opinionated and might be easily contradicted because he shows no statistical proof that these women were successful. Coppola only provides dialogue from men that responded positively to seeing these women fighting for their country in World War II.

In Coppola's argument, he isn't just arguing for an argument's sake. He actually suggests a solution called Advanced Individual Training (AIT). This program would train the women that would voluntarily join AIT and help integrate them into infantry units. Voluntary is his way of surpassing the argument of what women should or should not be allowed to do. Having this program be voluntary makes sure that these women are consenting

and aware of what they are signing up for. This idea causes his argument to be much more ethical and effective because it shows that he actually wants a solution. This gives him credibility to his audience along with the fact that he shows proven facts and trends in his argument. For example, he tells us that in the United States Marine Corps and United States Army training programs, “current graduation rates suggest there is no difference in success for either male or female United States Army or United States Marine Corps candidates” (1). Coppola also has a very persuasive argument simply because he is an active member in the United States military. He has inevitably been around women or has been influenced by them. Coppola obviously has generated his opinion that women should be allowed into combat through his experience with the women he sees every day working in the military alongside him.

Coppola’s argument is strongly supported by Retired United States Air Force Captain Barbara A. Wilson. In 2002, she wrote “Women in Combat: Why Not?” She informs us about a research project done at the US Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. This research project tested the woman’s ability to become as strong as a man. This project concluded that “when a woman is correctly trained, she can be as tough as any man” (1). She talks about the fact that it would be too much of a hassle to have women facilities put into certain male-dominated military units. However, she retorts the issue by saying that “Military units of mixed sexes have quietly maintained order, accomplished missions, and passed operational readiness inspections with flying colors. They’re too busy doing their jobs to worry about who uses which latrine” (3). Her final claim is that “The pure and simple point is that all jobs should be open to women and men - if and only if - the women and men are qualified, capable, competent, and able to perform them. Nothing more, nothing less” (7).

In the end, the question posed is, should women be allowed in the military? To answer this controversial question, Margaret Thatcher and Nicolas Coppola both wrote pieces on them. Coppola argues for women in combat simply because it is not fair to say that women can’t fight in the military when they haven’t been given the opportunity to do so. Thatcher argues against women in military, saying that it is ethically wrong and would be a burden to our military. Both of these arguments came from very intelligent and well-informed writers that have credible experience with the military’s infrastructure. One can only hope that a true answer to this question will finally be decided. Until then, the law will stand that women will not be allowed fight in combat in today’s military.