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BRITTANY: Welcome to WriteCast: A Casual Conversation for Serious Writers. I'm Brittany Kallman Arneson.

BETH: And I'm Beth Nastachowski.

BRITTANY: Today, we’re going to talk about expectations for writing in different rhetorical traditions. So we’re going to be talking a little bit about the expectations for writing here at Walden in the U.S. tradition and how that might differ from other writing traditions in other universities in other countries around the world.

BETH: But before we get started, I want to welcome back Brittany. You are back from your maternity leave, and we are very glad to have you back co-hosting with me. So, welcome back!
BRITTANY: Thank you, thank you! I'm very glad to be back and very glad to have a new co-host in you, Beth.

BETH: Thank you.

BRITTANY: We also want to thank you all for responding to our survey. We administered an anonymous survey on our social media services. It was linked out on our Facebook page and on Twitter. We're really pleased with the results that we've had on that survey, and especially, we want to give a shout out to a recent commenter who said, "I love this podcast system. Thank you for your brilliant conversation."

BETH: So thank you so much for that great feedback. It's always nice to know that the podcast is useful, and the survey is still out on our Facebook and Twitter page, and we encourage you to take a look. It's very short, just three questions, and anonymous, and we love to hear feedback and suggestions that you have for us.

BRITTANY: Yes, absolutely.

BETH: So here at Walden, we have a really diverse student population within the United States, but recently we've been getting a lot of students enrolled at Walden who are international students. So, they aren't from the United States, and they might be from Canada, or even from Europe, from Asia, Africa—I think really when I'm talking with students at residencies or in webinars, I see students who live all over the world, and it's really amazing to see that diversity that's represented at Walden.

BRITTANY: Absolutely. I think it presents such a really rich culture here at Walden.

BETH: Yeah.

BRITTANY: But one of the things that we notice as writing instructors is that it also presents some challenges with certain writing styles and what we call "rhetorical styles" or "rhetorical traditions."

BETH: Merriam-Webster dictionary has a pretty general definition of "rhetoric" that I think is useful just to make sure that we're all on the same page, and what it says is that rhetoric is the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion. And really when we talk about rhetorical traditions, we just mean the way that certain cultures and certain groups of
BRITTANY: It's maybe less about how we spell the word "color" with a "u" or not and more broadly about the way that people are learning how to formulate arguments.

BETH: Right, so the way that they learn how to bring together an argument and present that argument to the reader. I think one of the main differences that we can sometimes see in different rhetorical traditions is the relationship between an author and a reader, as well as maybe even an author and his or her sources. So, in the United States, we have a really particular way that we talk to our readers in academic writing, a particular way that we treat sources in academic writing, that can vary in other rhetorical traditions.

BRITTANY: Yeah, absolutely, and I think this change or shift in rhetorical styles across different cultures is never really explicitly talked about, right? So, a student might get a degree at a university in one country and learn how to write well and learn how to write in a way that gets them good grades or accolades from their instructors, and then come to a university in the United States and write in that same style and encounter a lot of negative feedback from their instructor, and that can be really confounding, I think, for students a lot of the time.

BETH: And I think one of the difficult parts of that, as well, is that from the faculty's perspective, they're teaching from the U.S. rhetorical tradition as well. So, the faculty is talking about things that are really common in the U.S. and academic writing that they kind of expect a common understanding with the student, and that isn't always the case just because of the different experiences that we can all bring to that table.

BRITTANY: Yeah, so, I think it was at the last residency that I was at--I was talking to a couple of international students who were encountering some push-back from their course instructors and not quite understanding where that push-back was coming from because they felt that they were writing well. They were experienced writers, they felt that they were doing what they had learned to do in their rhetorical tradition. And it was a little bit challenging to figure out what the problem really was, because, again, these differences in traditions don't usually get talked about very explicitly. And so, after some discussion and some unpacking we figured out really that the challenge was that the student was being expected in their Walden program to write in a linear style, which basically means a thesis-drive style, right? So, stating one main idea upfront and following through supporting that idea, not repeating yourself but instead sort of reinforcing that idea with a series of supporting arguments until you get to a conclusion. And once we discovered that that wasn't what the students were thinking that's what they were expected to do, it really helped those students make sense of the fact that there were different styles and that one style isn't necessarily better than the other, right? I mean, these rhetorical traditions all have merit, and they all reflect a certain culture and goal for the writing product. And once we've
nave merit, and they all reflect a certain culture and goal for the writing product. And once we're able to understand that our particular style or the style that we're trained in is just one style with one goal and can stand up against other styles with other goals, then you can kind of let your guard down, right, and start trying to learn a particular rhetorical tradition with a particular goal in mind, and using it to your advantage rather than feeling like somebody is telling you that the way you learned to do something is wrong.

BETH: It's easy to forget that there are those other rhetorical traditions because we're very focused on our perspective. I had an experience at a residency one time where I a student came up to me and was asking about the thesis statement, and they were a little confused because their faculty member was asking for a thesis statement in the introduction. And what I did was I was looking through the paper and I actually realized they had a really clear thesis statement in the paper, but it was just in the conclusion. And so I talked about moving that thesis statement and restating it in the introduction. The student's particular response was, "well, I didn't think I wanted to do that because I wanted to save the surprise toward the end, or I wanted to build up my point and show readers my points before I got to my main idea so that at the end, I'm kind of, 'Here's the big reveal--this is what this is all leading up to.'" And I think it's really important to remember that that's a really valid way to form an argument, and I understood what she was saying and how that would make a lot of sense. And I kind of explained that in the U.S. rhetorical style, it's less about the surprise at the end and more about showing your hand. I used the card analogy--show your hand at the beginning so that the reader knows what you're building towards right away and is kind of nodding along with you as you go through. So, both equally valid rhetorical traditions, one focusing on surprise and the other focusing on setting expectations right at the start. Both have thesis statements but just different ways of approaching and incorporating those thesis statements.

So, thinking about differences between the U.S. rhetorical style and other, different rhetorical traditions, what other differences do you see or things that might be different?

BRITTANY: One difference that I have noticed quite a lot is the expectation in the United States that analysis should be included in the thesis-driven essay. Right? And this maybe seems a little bit obvious, but again, probably only to those of us who are trained in the United States tradition. Because I think that there are several other traditions that are more about reporting information rather than analyzing that information. And we can even see this in different styles of writing here in the United States, for instance, a more journalistic style versus an academic thesis-drive style. So, here at Walden when you're writing your course papers and your capstone documents and whatever it is you're writing as long as it's thesis-driven, there's an expectation that not only are you putting information out there, but you're talking about the way that that information relates to other information in your paper. You're putting your sources in conversation with one another.

BRITTANY: Yeah, Brittany, I think that's where the thesis-driven part comes in, and that analysis. Thesis-driven writing requires your own critical input to connect ideas and further a
BRITTANY: Yeah, there's a lot of active engagement on the part of the author to present information in a particular way to the reader, and I think this gets at another really important component of the rhetorical tradition in the United States, which is that the writer is meant to do most of the legwork in terms of synthesizing ideas together for the reader. So, it's less about presenting the information and letting the reader figure out how that information relates to the other information in the paper, and more about really showing the reader how all the information in your paper relates and how all those sources support, again, that thesis or that argument. There's a helping relationship between the author and the reader, which I think in certain other rhetorical traditions doesn't exist. There's many more of an expectation that the reader is going to be doing the analysis and the, sort of, drawing of conclusions.

BETH: Yeah, I was facilitating a webinar a couple weeks ago and there was a really great question from a student, and the students said, "You know, but I don't want to draw conclusions for my reader. I don't want to presume that I know what the reader thinks or to talk for the reader." And I thought that was a really great point and just a different perspective on the relationship between an author and a reader. And it's one that we avoid in academic writing in the U.S. So, our rhetorical tradition focuses on making, really, the reader's job as easy as possible. We don't want the reader to misinterpret something or to have to put in any legwork, because we're afraid the reader won't put in the legwork and then won't understand or agree with your ideas. So, we do all that legwork as authors. And so that was an interesting conversation and just shows the different perspectives that can be out there.

BRITTANY: Yeah, I think that's a really good point--that the goal in the U.S. rhetorical tradition is to remove any potential confusion on the part of the reader. And part of the reason for that is because our goal as writers in this tradition is to remain really objective and not to color our arguments with emotion in any way.

BETH: I think you're right, Brittany, and I think actually one way that we can think about that, too, is that one of the values of the U.S. academic rhetorical tradition is objectivity and supporting ideas with facts, and numbers, and information, and research. In other rhetorical traditions, it might be more acceptable to really show your passion for a topic. I know that a lot of students come to Walden because of our focus on social change, since they're so passionate about social change and the issues that they care about, and it's important to remember in our rhetorical tradition that passion has to be tempered sometimes because we want to focus on that objectivity, which includes using research rather than just our own opinions, avoiding overly effusive language, I like to say, and not overly emotional language and things like that.

BRITTANY: Yeah, and I think also this is again another place where we should emphasize that
students of rhetoric know that the emotional appeal is a really valid tool in the rhetorical toolbox that can be used in certain styles of writing. So it's not that using that emotional appeal is wrong across the board. It just means that in this particular style, the expectations of the reader need to match up with the expectations of the writer. And part of what can be confusing for the reader is if they come in expecting you to take a more detached, scientific tone, and all of a sudden you're sort of writing with a lot of passion and emotion about a particular topic, the reader rather than interpreting that passion and emotion as something that makes you credible may interpret that passion and emotion as something that’s getting in the way of your objectivity as a scientific researcher. So, you can kind of see how something that's useful in one rhetorical style, where the expectations are set up in a certain way, can actually work against you as a writer in a separate rhetorical style where the expectations are different.

BETH: Yeah, I think that's a really good point, to bring the reader perspective in, because really what we're saying when we're talking about different rhetorical traditions are that we're talking about different expectations.

BRITTANY: Right. One other thing I think we need to talk about when we're talking about the differences between these rhetorical traditions is tone. We were talking just now about objectivity and that really feeds well into the idea of tone. So, in addition to not using emotional language, there's also an expectation that the tone is going to be a little bit more detached, a little bit more formal, but also really direct, I think. We don't want a lot of extra padding around the language that we use to describe our ideas, right?

BETH: Right. And that, I think, relates back to that idea that we don't want to ask the reader to do a lot of work. So the more circling around an idea, the more it might take for the reader to follow our ideas. And I think that relates to the use of evidence, citing sources, and things like that as well. That can be a little bit different because in the U.S. academic rhetorical tradition, citing sources is not assuming that the reader doesn't know how to access those sources. It's not a slight to the reader, saying that, you know, you need to go find this information or anything like that. The purpose of those citations is really just to show the reader where you're getting your information, and I think it's really important, particularly because the expectation in our rhetorical tradition, is that reader wouldn't necessarily have read what you're reading. You're going to be finding research and articles that maybe someone else hasn't read before, and so it's important to link back to those for your reader.

BRITTANY: Right, and I think also, even if you are citing sources that you could pretty reasonably expect that your educated audience has read before or is familiar with, it also doesn't undermine the authority of the author to use citations. I think that in other rhetorical traditions sometimes the author feels the need to claim all of the ideas in the piece of writing as their own, so showing that ideas are linked out to other sources may be seen as a sign of weakness in that argument. But that's not the case in this tradition. It's actually strengthening
your argument to show that you've done your research, you've done your legwork, and you're backing up your ideas.

BETH: The audience that you're writing for is going to expect that you use citations. So those missing citations actually tell the reader something as well. They're going to be looking for those and it might actually affect how much they accept or trust the argument that you're making, too.

BRITTANY: Right, exactly. So, the missing citations, rather than communicating that you know everything and you don't need to cite sources actually communicates to the reader with these expectations that you maybe haven't done your research.

BETH: So, again, we come back to that idea that really, it's about different reader expectations, and I think that really is something we can take away as one of the big differences between different rhetorical traditions.

BRITTANY: Yeah, absolutely.

BETH: So today we've had a general discussion about these issues, and there's a lot more that we could talk about.

BRITTANY: We are by no means presenting this as the end-all be-all list of differences between rhetorical styles and traditions.

BETH: Yes, definitely, I agree. So, we'd like to hear more specific feedback from you. What has your experience been like with rhetorical traditions? We hope that this is the start of a larger and longer conversation, and we really hope that you can help add to that conversation by asking us questions, giving suggestions, and providing tips as well.

BRITTANY: Right, and you can respond to this podcast episode in a number of different ways. You can comment on our blog, where you're finding this episode. You can comment on our Facebook page, you can tweet us, you can comment on YouTube if you're listening to this episode there. Also, if you're not a Walden student and you're listening to this podcast, we'd love to hear from you as well. So, please engage with us in any or all of those ways.

Thanks so much for listening, everyone!
WriteCast Episode 21: Writing Expectations at U.S. Colleges and Universities - Podcast Transcripts - Academic Guides at Walden University

WriteCast is a production of the Walden University Writing Center. This episode was created by me, Beth Nastachowsi, and my colleagues, Brittany Kallman Arneson, Anne Shiell, and Kayla Skarbakka.

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- Military Services
- Student Affairs
- Student Success
- Advising
- Writing Center

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- Center for Degree Acceleration
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- Center for Research Quality
- Center for Social Change

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- Form & Style Review
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