

TRANSCRIPT LEVEL 5



Tip 4: **WRITE WITH INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN MIND.**

Culture Tip Number Four is to write with intercultural communication in mind.

According to a recent study, 58 percent of small businesses have international customers and 72 percent plan to grow their international customer base. As more and more business communications cross geographic borders, we need to take the time to educate ourselves about the cultural differences that will impact our language choices. Language is culturally coded. It reveals both the realities and the preferences of the environments where we live and work.

We want to share an example that's been highly debated and somewhat controversial. In a speech where he declared his solidarity with the Cold War city of Japan JFK in 1963 said, "Ich bin ein Berliner," and in certain parts of Germany, the word "Berliner" actually means a jelly donut. This grammatical moment has led to so much international debate. A lot of people have called into question, "Did JFK just call himself a jelly donut?"

It turns out that about 50 years later most linguistic scholars say that he actually wasn't grammatically incorrect--that to leave out the article, "ein," which in English means "a" would have meant that he said, "I am of Berlin" and because he was not born in Berlin, it was the appropriate thing for him to say, "I am a Berliner." So, although there has been quite a lot of debate about whether JFK is or is not, in fact, a jelly donut to the point where even just a few months ago, Huffington Post updated an article titled, "Did JFK Say He Was a Jelly Donut?" The point here is that international contexts absolutely shape the way that our messages are communicated, understood, and translated.

Let's think back to the cliches that we discussed in Level Two, which was all about writing clearly. At that time, we encouraged you to avoid cliches and to find the more precise word instead. Avoiding cliches is especially important in intercultural communication where commonplace cliches are actually colloquialisms that fail to translate for audiences who don't share our same cultural traditions and context. Listen in to these colloquialisms

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that often show up in the business world and notice how many of them actually harken to the American pastime of baseball: "Let's give it a ballpark estimate," "I'll touch base with you next week," "That idea is really out in left field," "This task should really be off the clock." Other English-based colloquialisms include sayings that would sound very strange to other cultures--saying something is "off the clock" or that a person is "sick as a dog," "taking a rain check," or saying this is "on the house"--all of these sayings reflect our shared cultural connections. But if you're using them in intercultural contexts, they're a sure way to alienate or confuse your audience. It's important to take time to pause and ask if a phrase will translate to a reader from a different culture and it's also equally important to consider bigger questions like, "How should I structure information so that it meets cultural expectations?"

Edward Hall wrote a book in 1976 called *Beyond Culture*, where he differentiates between high and low context cultures. This concept is really helpful as we recognize differences in discourse patterns across contexts. Okay, so in low-context cultures, that means groups don't often have a shared context and they expect to be offered more thorough, detailed discussions and explanations for the items they discuss. In high-context cultures, alternatively, readers rely more on non-verbal cues to communicate information because a lot of assumptions can be made. For that reason, in high-context cultures, you want to offer less details because by going into too much explanation, you can actually insult your reader's intelligence or their familiarity with the context.

Let's take a closer look at what this looks like in practice. In high-context cultures, people assume a high-saturation and contextual understanding. Usually, their context is built on long-term relationships. So, in these cultures, business transactions especially need to begin with trust. A strong group dynamic and social structure are keys to productivity and for that reason communication relies more on non-verbal cues and unspoken understandings--people prefer to communicate face-to-face. Because high-context cultures are more tight-knit, it can be more difficult for an outsider to navigate and to understand what people are talking about.

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Let's look conversely at low-context cultures. In low-context cultures, we assume a low-saturation and contextual understanding. Relationships tend to form not so much because of a deep connection, but more so because people are coming together to reach a certain goal. In these settings, individual motivation is oftentimes key to productivity and success.

Communication is highly verbal, detailed, and direct and people prefer things to be written out more so than verbally or non-verbally communicated. Low-context cultures are also easier for outsiders to navigate within because people are providing a lot of contextual information all the time to make sure that the group stays on the same page.

Here are ways that you can respond in your writing to ensure that your communicating well in cultures that are low-context versus high-context. In low-context cultures, you should aim to give more detail. Explain yourself. Use direct, verbal, detailed cues. Favor electronic or written communication and embed a lot of meta-commentary to help contextualize what it is that you're saying. For low-context cultures, you might also check-in regularly, whether that's by saying, "Is everyone on the same page?" or by texting or communicating with your team members. All of those actions could be considered annoying or even insulting in high-context cultures.

So, when you're operating in high-context cultures, you want to give less detail. Don't go into long explanations. Be sure to use non-verbal cues where possible. And if you have the chance to communicate face-to-face instead of writing something down, that tends to be more preferred in high-context cultures. If you are going to justify something or give an explanation, you may want to include a qualifier or meta-commentary to help someone understand why you're doing that and as a result to avoid them feeling offended by the level of detail that you're sharing. When you're operating in high-context culture, you should also be aware when outsiders are present because again, it's a lot harder for someone to come in as an outsider and understand what on Earth is going on in a high-

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context culture. When it comes to a global view of the world, there are certain countries and cultures that are more likely to be lower context versus higher context. Asian countries tend to be higher context, where they prefer face-to-face interaction and fewer details in their communications. The U.S. is actually a lower context culture because so many different people have migrated into the United States and we have so many different cultures represented here. Historically, America has been a place where more explanation is given even in business settings. One of my favorite ways to understand whether I'm working in a lower context or higher context culture is, Yes, certainly--do some research on the international audiences that you could be collaborating with or speaking to, but also pay attention to how your business experiences in your internal workplace can actually be lower context or higher context.

A higher context project team, for instance, may have been working together for a long period of time. All of the team members know each other really well. They may have even developed some inside jokes or ways of talking and communicating. If you're someone new to that project team and you're coming in halfway through a project, it can be a lot harder to catch on and become part of the team. In a lower context culture, perhaps people are working in an organization that allows for cross-teaming and interdisciplinarity. In those cases, it's more important to share insight and detail into how you think the way you think and why. Keep in mind, of course, that no culture is completely low-context or completely high-context. Generalizations like these are just a place to get started.

In real time, it's important to take the time to research the culture where you're doing business. Keep in mind the cultural rules, both written and unwritten, offer you clues that you need to communicate effectively. Here are just a few recommended readings that you can use to dive-in to this topic further. I love Culturocity's Learning Center. They have a lot of good intercultural resources, especially related to low and high context cultures. I also really like Quintessential and Wiki-books and their takes on professional and technical writing etiquette, ethics, and culture.

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Now that you're becoming a more global thinker, it's time for your final lesson in Wordsmith. Move right along to tip number 5.