

These samples are from students in mixed L1/L2 composition courses. The first four are from non-native speakers, and the final two from native speakers. They are presented without any editing on my part. Students have given permission for their work to be shared.

STUDENT SAMPLE 1

Dear John Berger,

After reading your article that was published alongside mine in “Reading Context,” I have become troubled with one of the points that you make. Near the beginning of your paper, you make the claim that images are a more powerful medium than words. You state that words are not capable of representing all of the ideas and emotions that paintings can. This assertion is absurd! Simply put, images are much too ambiguous. You state yourself that different people interpret the same image differently, stating “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger 155), so how can you possibly expect to deliver a consistent message if you can never be sure that the image was interpreted correctly by the viewer? Words on the other hand, are a much more precise method of communication. There is less confusion with a carefully constructed sentence, then with even the most carefully planned painting. ...Well, I think I’ve rambled on for a bit too long, so I’ll end my message here. I look forward to hearing back from you!

Sincerely,
Alan Gross

To Alan Gross,

What a surprise to hear from you! It’s quite flattering that you’ve chosen to write me regarding my essay. I have always respected your work, and to hear from such an esteemed colleague is quite an honor! And, I must admit, your timing is impeccable, as I was actually about to write to you, regarding my most recent work.

Before I go into that however, I must present my rebuttal to your argument against my claim regarding the “images vs. words” debate. I must remind you that what I said was simply my way of viewing the subject. If you take my background into consideration, I would imagine that you would agree that my ideas are probably biased. It should be obvious that I would hold images above words, for that is that is the very reason I’ve chosen to write about art! I understand your point in regard to the potential confusion of images, but I must admit that I believe that in itself is part of art’s power.[...]

I have found that some of your ideas are actually quite relevant to my argument. For example, your discussion on ethos-- “the burden of authority,” as you call it (Gross 369)—was especially appropriate. Quite a bit of great art is labeled as so simply because the artist is well known: the artist’s ethos is well established, if you will... the reputation of the painter is what carries the painting to fame. I hope you see the relevance between our works, and I hope to hear back from you, to hear what you think of it all! I wish you well!

Sincerely,
John Berger

STUDENT SAMPLE 2 (Excerpt)

Berger: I agree with you that the power of persuasion is build up of various sources, for they offer different perspectives to what science claims. These various perspectives are the most effective way to connect science to the human world. In art as well, I believe in having multiple points to support a concept that I am delivering; this includes charts, quotes or passages of a renowned individual and/or graphics. However, I do not fully acknowledge that language is the only effective way to persuade.”

Gross: Oh? How is that so?

Berger: Well, first of all, there is simply more to language than just manipulation of words to make people believe in what you say. Personally, I believe images leave a stronger impression. Because people can actually relate what you say in words to that of the image and derive some sense out of it, but words cannot fully describe what the image expresses. Would you not agree?

Gross: From my point of view, both the image and the language are their own enterprise when it comes to persuading. The reason I believe language prevails in this case is because images create bias.

Berger: How do images create bias? Images are independent. They consisted of colors, shapes and lines. Spectators can think freely about the images that are presented in front of them.

Gross: That is where bias appears. When people look at a painting, they could have various interpretations of it when there are no words to guide them. Thus, the meaning of the painting could be altered depending on the spectator’s mood, the environment or other people’s opinions. With language, it is less likely that the meaning of it could be diversified.

Berger: Please, go on.

Gross: Well, for most of the parts, a word along with combination of others could only be interpreted in one way, which usually is the one that sounds most logical, and credible. An author or a speaker has the opportunity to pick out words that best describes their thoughts/ the words are arranged in a way that delivers the correct message. Therefore, language does not create bias unconditionally as image does.

Berger: I have to admit, you surely do use language effectively to persuade me about the power of words.

Gross: Haha [...] you know Mr. Berger, please do stay positioned with your belief on the persuasion of image. I do not think that everyone should agree with what I believe; otherwise, there is no point for the existence of rhetoric and there would be no amusement in publishing my thoughts. [...]

STUDENT SAMPLE 3

From: Gross’t_Writer@msn.com
To: BergerKing@gmail.com
Subject: Better than lit?

Hey John,

How’ve you been, old buddy? I was reading part of Ways of Seeing when I noticed you argue that “images are more precise and richer than literature.” What’s that all about? ☹ You know I’m a firm believer in Aristotelian rhetoric and the power of words as a tool of persuasion. Are you trying to tell me that the written word is irrelevant and that images alone are more persuasive than good, old, ancient rhetoric? How would you transition between images without the written word? More importantly, the written word is far more efficient in a persuasive approach. However, politics might be a lot more interesting if candidates were limited to using images...

-Alan Gross

From: BergerKing@gmail.com
To: Gross’t_Writer@msn.com
Subject: RE: Better than lit?

Hey Alan,

Haha! Debates would be rather peculiar, I suppose. Point taken, my friend.

Although the written word is easier to manipulate and describe or state the author's point of view, I don't believe that images are less efficient. My mother always told me, "A picture is worth a thousand words." And how true she was. Rather than having to describe a situation or metaphor, thanks to reproduction, images can instantaneously present a situation for the onlooker to analyze. In fact, I just got a new printer last week, and rather than reading the directions, I followed the step by step picture instructions. Not only that, but the plugs were color coded. What's more efficient than that? ☺

I read your article on rhetoric in science and I think there are many similarities between the power of images in my book and the power of your rhetorical approaches to science. In particular, 'pathos' is a huge part in making images as powerful as they are. Images are superb at evoking certain feelings in the observer and this is easy to harness and unleash.

-John Berger

STUDENT SAMPLE 4

This is the record of Michael Moore's press conference after the release of Fahrenheit 9/11. On the press, there are Noam Chomsky, Rick Caine (producer of 'Manufacturing Dissent'), and John (ardent follower of Moore)

Moore: Thank you for coming today. I have worked so hard to make this documentary. This one addresses political problem America is facing at the moment. War is not necessary AT ALL, Bush administration should have sought for peaceful measures.

John: I really love your documentaries. I think your way of presenting ideas and finding relevance in many areas of politics is just superb. The way you present your idea is always nicely done with humor!

Moore: Thank you, I have always worked hard in order to provide the public with a new perspective on the world. All my documentaries are based on primary sources that are collected through extensive research I have conducted for a long time. By arranging these pieces of information in cohesive manner, with my humor, I could produce a successful documentary that is fun and educational at the same time.

Caine: Speaking of research and sources, I do not see how you find relevance between Bush's failure as a businessman when he was young, and his war policy. Also, it is true that Bush's family has been in a good relationship with Saudi royal family, how is that relevant to Al Qaeda.

Moore: What I wanted to show was that war is not necessary, and Bush administration is pushing for it. The war on Iraq killed countless civilians and the U.S. militants. It is just not acceptable in terms of humanitarian standpoint.

John: Yeah! Bush is WRONG! He was not even properly elected anyways!

Caine: See? You sneaked out of my question! My question was to explain relevance between Bush himself and the war, however all you said was that war is not acceptable, which is a universal agreement for humanitarians. Like in your documentaries, you just present clips that are highly irrelevant to the actual idea of your documentary. Most of your sources are not 'prudent'; how his ability as a businessman is related to his role as a politician. He was not even old! [...] Also, your sources are totally out of the context! For example, when you showed Bush making jokes light-heartedly and him at vacation, those are not relevant! The scene when he makes jokes, he was supposed to make jokes at that Republican event. Also, the narration does not have anything to do with the clip!

Moore: Well, I did not say anything that is related to the clip, so I did not make any comments didn't I? I simply showed his social event.

Chomsky: “The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda”, how do you think of this comment?

Moore: This is exactly what I want to address. For example, Al Goore lost the election because Fox news channel reported that George Bush won Florida even before the poll was confirmed, before other broadcasting bodies. Coincidentally, the one who predicted that Bush was going to win Florida happens to be George Bush’s first cousin, John Ellis. Also, the governor of Florida at that time was his brother. That election was not a fair procedure of democracy.

Chomsky: Do you believe Fox news has been trying to “serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance it”? In this case, Bush family?

Moore: I saw a strong relationship between those two, media and politics. As I have seen in the documentary, I revealed this and tried to inform the public.

Chomsky: However, you are also a part of media culture and you had founded the film distribution company called “Dog Eat Dog Films”. I am just wondering how could you be objective about media culture when you are in part of it.

Moore: I am simply doing what I want to do, and if the public finds my documentaries informative and educational that the masses can see the world in slightly different new way, I am happy. That’s all I can say.

Chomsky, Caine: Thank you

John went to back home and thought over the conference. He watched documentaries produced by Michael Moore again, and realized that it was not as insightful as he felt on the first time. He was watching Moore’s works in critical and analytical perspective, not the blind one he used to be. He also thought of implications of his works and found out that he has been deeply involved in political campaigns as public speaker. Although he could not find out whether Moore is looking forward to run for any position at the parliament, he was sure that his works were also strongly related to Moore’s politics.

STUDENT SAMPLE 4 (excerpt)

Marty: ...I saw on an online magazine that gay marriage is going to be legal here in New Hampshire starting January 1st.
[...]

Jane: You should watch a video of O’Really of Fox News online, that guy puts gay marriage completely out of the place! He compares it to marrying human beings to turtles and ducks. He made me laugh.

Jesse: That’s just a way of dismissing gay marriage. He uses that to misguide the audience. That’s what the media does any way!

Jane: (Laughing) that is very true. The media is turning into an entertainment source rather than informative.

Marty: Wow, that sounds interesting, but Jane is right – it’s hard to tell when to rely on the media these days. On the other hand, there are a lot of online postings on gay marriage and such debates lately; both on video and magazines. They all have some truth in them!

Jesse: I find those very educative. See, same sex marriage is all over the media now. That’s an efficient way of educating the public.

Jane: Yes. It feels funny when they are discussing the issue on TV and I am seated with my grandparents because they think attempting to discuss it is all a waste of time. They don’t listen to it at all. Unless it’s a preacher dismissing gay marriage.

Marty: I bet you that is age. There are many things that elderly people are just not open to. To them the world is better if nothing was changed.

Jesse: Ben and his partner follow all the debates across all the states on TV. They even read books. I always feel like they know too much about gay marriage and they should just stop trying to learn more.

Jane: I would never get down to reading books on gay marriage. I find it even difficult to read my class assigned books!
[...]

STUDENT SAMPLE 5 (excerpt, native speaker)

(Chris) Me: As I have conducted research on ecotourism, I have found a lot of debate on whether or not it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for an area. My research is focused on the Amazon Rainforest. What are your experiences with ecotourism in this area, and the effects of ecotourism in general?

Stronza: Okay—I know I am going to cause myself a lot of grief by saying this—but I have seen several instances in which ecotourism has played a very positive role in teaching people about the values of forest conservation. The positives of knowledge gained by the people far outweigh the proven miniscule negatives of forest lost caused by ecotourism.

Hutchins: I beg to differ. What you are failing to account for are the indigenous people who live within these places that are toured. The money and industry of tourism causes a lack of genuineness amongst the indigenous people of an area. People are often dressed up and certain characteristics of these people are over-emphasized to make the whole process more tourist-friendly.

Ingles: I must say, Hutchins has brought up an interesting point. So very often, ecotourism fails to recognize the indigenous people at all. Naturalists are hired to run the eco-tours and are not trained to teach the tourists about the cultural aspect of place that they are visiting. I believe that there should be a stronger push for anthropologists to be hired to work for these tours.

Wallace: We can go back and forth all day about whether ecotourism is good or bad—and that is exactly why I feel that there is not a concrete ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to this issue. There are documented cases of ecotourism being good for an area and it also being bad. I have seen communities become more eco-friendly and I have also seen hotels built in the middle of rainforests for eco-tourists. It is important for us to remain open-minded about this issue.

Me: There is almost always a positive angle to take towards a negative issue. The fact is that ecotourism needs to focus more on the “eco” than on the “tourism.” How many true conversationalists or “nature-minded” people are really going on these tours? The truth is, these people use these tours under this name as a way of going to a place that they might otherwise not be able to reach. What role do you think anthropologists can play in enhanced the positive.

[...]

Me: Decision time. Should we throw ecotourism out the window completely, or continue developing it?

Everyone: Keep it.

Hutchins: Sure, ecotourism has several flaws. What people really have to learn is that not all cultures are the same and not all of them will treat ecotourism the same way. We have to learn that there will be disparity between people of a culture and learn to embrace it.

Me: Kind of like the way anthropologists have learn to embrace the constructive chaos theory.

Ingles: The main thing that needs to happen is the integration of more anthropologists into the development of ecotourism. There is clearly a road that ecotourism can take to bring conservation to new heights. Ecotourism is a growing industry, large enough to become an entire field of study for anthropologists, and new studies need to be done on the impact of ecotourism on communities.

Stronza: Not only does ecotourism provide a way for tourists to learn about the indigenous members of a community, it helps the indigenous people learn more about the tourists. There is a lack of recognition amongst anthropologists that it is important for us to teach the people of a certain region about us—the so-called intruder! There is room for knowledge to be built amongst all those involved directly and indirectly with ecotourism.

STUDENT SAMPLE 6 (native speaker)

Senator Ben: I am sending this email out to all senators to see what the opinions are out there on President-elect Barack Obama’s Rural Plan to help family farms and encourage organic and local agriculture. I have my own opinions that I will share with you all as this discussion progresses.

Senator George: After reading Obama’s Rural Plan, I see that he is interested in supporting both local and organic agriculture. Purchasing and consuming organically grown food is something that I have never understood. At most supermarkets, organic food is twice the amount of money as conventionally grown food. For example, the other day at Safeway when I was buying milk, I noticed that the milk I was buying was \$1.50 and the organic milk was \$3.00. It doesn’t make any sense that someone would spend twice the amount of money on food products with the economy the way that it is today. Not only is organic food much more expensive, but it isn’t any more nutritious or environmentally sound. Norman Bourlang, a “green movement” activist, points out that organic farming requires about three times as much land and produces smaller yields. Plus, there is no concrete evidence that organic food is any healthier than any other foods. So, from what it sounds like Obama is promoting, I don’t agree with and don’t understand why he is putting an emphasis on supporting this when our economy is in need of so much help.

Senator Ben: Interesting thoughts you have on organic food, Senator George. When you say that there is “no concrete evidence that organic food is any healthier than any other foods,” I’m not sure where you got this information. A study on Organophosphorus pesticide exposure printed in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, shows that consumption of conventional food leads to high levels of this pesticide. While, when compared to an all-organic diet, there is no sign of this. This makes it clear that this pesticide is ingested through food and since it can be harmful to infants and children, this is important to consider. Obama’s plan to support and encourage organic farming is great. It’s important that the children of today and healthy and developing correctly—the consumption of organic food will do this.

Senator Lily: I can see where you both are coming from—the health benefits of organic food vs. the “unnecessary” high costs of it. I am just glad that Obama’s plan is supporting local agriculture because that seems to be more important than buying organic. Organic food has always been known as being environmentally friendly. With the growing market for this food, stores like Wal-Mart and supermarkets are carrying organics now. Ingredients for these products are being brought from all across the world, making a huge ecological footprint and wasting many resources. It is not necessary to purchase organic food when it is being shipped from half way around the world. Buying local alternatives from within the state is an important part to play in the “green movement.” I support what Obama stands for because he is supporting more than just organic foods, but also locally grown foods.

Senator George: I can identify more closely with where Senator Lily is coming from than Senator Ben because locally grown food is often similar in price to food grown far away. I still cannot stand behind Obama’s plan because he supports organic food, which doesn’t make sense to me. Senator Lily, if something is going to have to be purchased far away, would you choose the cheaper conventional food or the more expensive organic food?

Senator Lily: As far as something that is going to be from far away regardless, I would go with the more expensive organic product. If everything was produced locally and I had to choose between organic and conventional, I would choose organic. The only reason that I usually go with the non-organic and local food is because I want to reduce the amount of resources used to get the food to where it will be consumed. Just trying to do my part to conserve both fuel and energy. According to Rebecca Roth of *Serendip*, organic food markets are growing by up to twenty percent each year. This means that more and more ingredients are being certified organic and some of the resources for these ingredients are from places that aren’t local. Since this is becoming the case, I am more in favor of buying locally than organically. Obama’s plan supports both so I’m happy with him as the newly elected president.

Senator Ben: Sounds like we all have very different opinions but I guess that’s what makes the world go around. Personally, I think that organic food is better for the environment and our health than conventionally grown food and it shouldn’t matter where it comes from. [...]. Thank you both for your participation and quick responses to my first email. It has been great to hear how you both feel on this issue.