This assignment focuses on creating awareness that the concept of “good” academic writing/rhetoric is culturally determined. Students read French essayist Michel de Montaigne’s “Of Thumbs” (ca. 1580), and do a peer edit as if they were consultants at K’s Writing Center. Usually, they identify the lack of a clear thesis statement, the absence of identifiable topic sentences and transitions, a seemingly random progression of ideas, and a lack of citations. We discover together that two American values – clarity (in the U.S. the writer is almost entirely responsible for making meaning) and efficiency (“Don’t make me read this twice!”) – strongly influence what is considered “good” writing in U.S. American academic culture. Students then work together to make sense of Montaigne’s essay and to rewrite it in an acceptable American style. We then discuss what other cultures view as good/appropriate structure, style, evidence/examples, transitions, voice, documentation of sources, and reflect on what is lost and gained as a result of the American definition of “good” writing. This exercise is often the prelude to reading Montaigne’s remarkable essay, “Of Cannibals,” which brilliantly introduces the concept of cultural relativism in ways that students are now better equipped to appreciate.

—Jan Solberg Romance Languages and Literature