

3 WRITING COUNTERSTORIES: WAYS TO CHALLENGE DOMINANT NARRATIVES IN FYC

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OVERVIEW

This chapter draws from Aja Martinez's concept of counterstories as a rhetorical research methodology in rhetoric and writing studies and encourages you, a first year writing student, to draw upon your experiential knowledge to both challenge and reframe master narratives that are accepted by the majority.¹ In first-year composition classrooms, you can use counterstories to give legitimacy to your diverse background and varied lived experiences by interrogating and challenging the master narrative. Counterstories foster agency, which first year writing students use to build navigational capital as undergraduates. This chapter begins by explaining what counterstory is, followed by an example of a counterstory. Then, you learn the importance of counterstories and how they help you interrogate your own rhetorical decisions in writing. Afterwards, practical applications are provided to understand how counterstory, as a rhetorical approach, helps multilingual learners achieve linguistic freedom and justice.

WHAT IS COUNTERSTORY?

Coined by Aja Y. Martinez, counterstory is a rhetorical device that uses narrative and anecdote to present an alternate perspective to a commonly held belief, otherwise known as a stock story. For

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Martinez, counterstory offers an opportunity for students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds and multilingual, to become voices of authority. We grow up with a lot of stock stories; these are stories told by the dominant group and reinforced through oral and written traditions and history. For example, as a South Asian Muslim woman who covers her hair with a *hijab*, or head covering, people oftentimes assume I am oppressed or was forced by my family to cover. This is an example of a stock story; it furthers a myth that does not reflect nor is inclusive of everyone's lived realities. For Martinez, stock narratives wield significant influence; they burden societies with unexamined practices, policies, and behaviors while simultaneously negatively impacting those affected by such norms.

As you brainstorm for ideas related to counterstory, I encourage you to first think of stock stories and why they exist. What stock narratives have you come across based on your unique background? What do you think is the apparent rationale behind these common narratives or tropes (i.e., a reoccurring idea in the form of clichés)? Then, use your counterstory to deconstruct and challenge the so-called rationale behind the tropes that serve as the basis of stock stories. Use your identity to become a voice of authority.

Before you read the counterstory below, I want to share a stock story with you. America is founded on the 'American Dream,' the idea that equal opportunity is available to everyone; if you work hard and put in enough effort, you will achieve upward mobility. However, this is not most people's lived reality, especially if they do not belong to the dominant culture of being English-speaking and of European ancestry. My positionality is as follows: I was raised and educated in southern California, but English is not my first language. My mother tongue is Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, and it is the only language my parents used to communicate with me in an effort to retain our cultural heritage in a country that was foreign to them. As a result, I did not learn English until I was thrust into the American education system at five years old. I have worked hard and struggled, but I have also experienced many, *many* instances of exclusion. The following is a counterstory of how the 'American Dream' does not provide affordances for everyone to have access to equal opportunities because oftentimes there are barriers and feelings of marginalization that dominate.

A DROP IN TIME

I was 20 years old when I started graduate school, working towards a master's degree in English. One of the courses I took my very first semester

was a literature course titled Realism and Naturalism in American Literature. Our culminating project, a 25-page final paper, had been approved and worked on in stages. Always working ahead of schedule (I am a total Type A personality), I finished my paper almost a week in advance just so I could have my professor give me one last final round of feedback. As she went through the printed pages one by one, her right index finger resting on the front of her chin and her thumb right below it, I sat in anticipation watching her read, hoping she would like and approve of the words in front of her. She finished reading, and acknowledged that I had implemented all of her previous suggestions into this draft. However, now that she had spent more time reflecting on this latest version, she felt it would be better if I broaden the topic by adding another book external to the class syllabus as comparison (for anyone curious, it was Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). Acknowledging that I already had a complete draft in terms of page count but would need to rework this suggested book into my paper, she proceeded to throw 12 of my 25 printed pages (of what I thought was a final draft) into the trash bin that was placed under the left side of her desk. Beside the left side of her desk was me, in a chair.

Never wanting anyone to see me in a position of weakness and (in this case) utter defeat, I took my remaining pages. I thanked her for her feedback and left. Then, I burst into tears. This was not the first time she had made me feel this way, but somehow I could no longer contain my feelings. I cried all the way down the elevator ride to the bottom of the building where the English department was housed, I cried all the way to the far reaches of the student parking lot since all of my classes began in the late afternoons and undergraduate students had already occupied the prime parking spots, and I cried all the way home. Then, I spent the next six days reading, writing, and editing. Two weeks later I received my graded paper in a self-addressed, stamped envelope through the mail. On the cover page, the only place where she had bothered to write anything, was a big, red letter "B" reflecting both my final paper and course grade. Next to it were her comments, words that have been burned in my brain since reading them more than twenty years ago: "This is a gift. I encourage you to take a course in speech communication so that you can speak clearly and articulate distinctly." To state the obvious, it did not feel like a gift; rather, it was a slap in the face that shook my confidence and made me question my place in academia. It hurt. A LOT. I had worked so incredibly hard to earn this "B," and the one comment she had left on my final paper was a reflection of who I am as a person. I do talk fast, which is why she told me to take a class in speech communication. However, her feedback

should have been centered on the content of my submitted coursework. The irony is that I had taken a speech communication course as an undergraduate student, a fact she would never know (and probably did not care to). I had already experienced an awkward conversation with her during office hours earlier on in the semester of how graduate school was not for everyone, and she told me that my goal of pursuing a teaching position in higher education was probably not the best fit for me. I was standing in my living room, the graded paper in hand, and a part of me was pleased to know that I would never have to see or deal with her again. The class was over. At the time, I decided to compartmentalize the worst 16 weeks of my life in a part of my mind I chose not to revisit. In 2010, eight years after I had taken her course, seven years after I graduated with my master's degree, and five years into my teaching career as a first year composition instructor, I looked her up on ratemyprofessor.com. I cannot remember what prompted the search, but the first comment I read was all I needed: "she is the exact opposite of Jesus." I laughed. I laughed harder than I had in a good, long while and this was it. This was the moment she no longer had a hold over my mind and who I was. I knew in my mind and my heart that I belonged in higher education.

This is my counterstory to the stock story of everyone having equal access to the 'American Dream.' This is my counterstory to people who create barriers to higher education. This is my story, one that challenges the status group and calls for fuller participation by all voices who belong in higher education.

WHY DOES COUNTERSTORY MATTER?

Remember that counterstories use students' experiential knowledge to both challenge and reframe master narratives that are accepted by the majority. As a first year student in a composition classroom, use counterstory to give legitimacy to your diverse background and varied lived experience by interrogating and challenging the master narrative. I am sure when people hear the word 'professor,' the stereotypical image conjured in their minds is not of a 5'1, Pakistani American woman who wears the hijab. Freedom and opportunity are two of America's dominant narratives, but people's lived realities demonstrate that not everyone has the same access to those freedoms and opportunities. I know the barriers that stand in my way as a woman of color in academia, whose physical manifestations of dress convey very distinct assumptions by onlookers. As a woman, I do work much harder on my physical appearance because I know it is necessary if I want

people to take me seriously. Other markers of identity that further mark me as ‘other’ make this effort of being taken seriously even harder. People in positions of power are gatekeepers; they grant access to a category or status. In the counterstory above, my professor was a gatekeeper because she controlled my access to professionalism in higher education.

In the counterstory I provide, my professor is not named. I use this as a strategic move because the story is about me, and how I found my identity, place, and sense of belonging in higher education. I am the center of my story, not the woman who told us during class one day that she had attended grade school in America when segregation was still legal. In 2010, when I read the *ratemyprofessor.com* post, I had already been teaching in higher education for five years. However, the imposter syndrome consumed me as I questioned my place and legitimacy in the faculty position I had worked so hard to achieve (and was good at).

This is why counterstory matters. Counterstories foster agency, which you can use to build navigational capital as undergraduate students. For my professor to make me feel that I did not belong, through her unjustified means of making my life more difficult so that I would feel excluded, I believe in hindsight made me unconsciously even more determined to finish a master’s degree in English. By successfully completing her class, finishing the graduate program, obtaining teaching positions in higher education, having my feelings validated through a *ratemyprofessor.com* post, and then writing a counterstory, I reallocate and center power back to myself and establish agency. I also heal.

Feelings of inadequacy are common for many students who enter college for the first time, especially when they are first generation students and have external struggles that their peers do not always share. Counterstories provide a platform for unheard voices and differing perspectives that enrich, diversify, and challenge a master narrative. They also serve as a methodology; a way of knowing, thinking, and making knowledge. Through storytelling, counterstories help you interrogate your rhetorical decisions in writing; why you make certain choices when writing and why. Aristotle provides the rhetorical appeals of *logos* (logic), *ethos* (establishing credibility or trustworthiness), *pathos* (emotions), and *kairos* (timeliness of an argument) as the basis of how to persuade an audience, and counterstories provide you with the opportunity to practice these classical rhetorical skills and learn how to apply them in everyday activities related to speaking, reading, and writing.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF COUNTERSTORY

Begin by identifying a stock story, a story told by the dominant group and reinforced through oral and written traditions and history. For example: “Everyone who works hard can achieve the American Dream,” “Americans are ignorant about the world,” “Americans are entitled,” or “Americans are obsessed with work” are all examples of a dominant belief or narrative of how the global world perceives America and Americans. Now, think of a counterstory that investigates and questions each trope. For example, to counter the stock story that Americans are entitled, you could provide a specific experience or extended example that illustrates and exemplifies how Americans have humility, which would be centered in the story. “Arab women are oppressed” and “Arabs are rich” are stock stories about Middle Eastern cultures, often perpetuated through western media and entertainment. What is a story that challenges this dominant narrative? By offering a glimpse from an alternate perspective and position, a new way of ‘seeing’ comes forward and into being.

As undergraduate students, you cannot relate to my specific experience of being in an English graduate program in 2002. However, maybe you can think of a similar situation when someone made you feel like you did not or should not belong. If you cannot think of a relatable situation, it is okay. If anything, you now have a widened or different perspective of educational access based on my individual story and experience. I want to be clear: we do not have to relate to everyone’s experiences; rather, we should look at stories for the perspectives and vantage points they offer so that we can be more empathetic and understanding of other people’s lived experiences. By writing, reading, and hearing about them through counterstories, we broaden our own understandings of how the world functions. We discover alternative perspectives that foster understanding, encourage dialogue, and have the potential to enact change. Rather than consuming a stock narrative, a mythic trope dispersed by those in positions of privilege and systemically disseminated through laws, educational institutions, and the media, we demonstrate how individual stories and lived experiences matter, and how they can empower, humanize, and repair. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie aptly says in her July 2009 TED Talk, “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” This is the power of a counterstory. They are places of self-expression, they validate students’ experiences, and help students build confidence as they navigate their identities as writers in first year writing courses.

MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS AND COUNTERSTORIES

Higher education is often a place where you come into being as a student; you locate and pursue a field of inquiry, set life goals, and learn to balance various roles and responsibilities which in turn shape your sense of self and identity. Students bring an array of rich and varied cultural, linguistic, ethnic, age, and sexual backgrounds to educational spaces in general and composition courses in particular. Multilingual learners, those who speak two or more languages, constitute the majority of students enrolled at higher education institutions globally. Often these students' experiences are never brought to the forefront to inform and enrich classroom experiences. One reason is because of stock stories that surround multilingual learners, such as accents determining your proficiency level or the uncritical trope that multilingual individuals have one dominant language and are therefore less proficient in their other languages. Use counterstory as a rhetorical move that centers your own lived experiences and functions as a vantage point, one that looks beyond the dominant narrative and empowers your own voice as a writer. As an undergraduate student you consume knowledge, but you are also a critical thinker and contributor to the body of knowledge you engage with. Craft counterstories that question your personal experiences and situate them in the context of a larger conversation that speaks to and challenges the dominant narrative.

Counterstories are integral to multilingual learners' journey as writers because they provide them with opportunities to offer viewpoints and engage in conversations that they may have otherwise felt excluded from. Also, counterstories validate experience; by telling your story, you give others an opportunity to connect, commiserate, challenge, or be informed. Without counterstories, myths perpetuated by the dominant culture remain fixed and propagate false narratives and realities that are not inclusive of everyone's lived experiences. As a methodology, use counterstory to expose and challenge stock stories when thinking, reading, and writing for other genres beyond your first year writing course. Imagine the following scenario: You hear multilingual learners being referred to as Limited English Proficient students (LEPs). Depending on the context, you can use counterstory to draft an email or write a letter that counters the limitations of this term.

COUNTERSTORY AS A TOOL FOR MULTILINGUAL WRITERS TO ACHIEVE LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

Experiences of exclusion, racism, and racial discrimination are everyday occurrences. English as the *lingua franca* (i.e., a common or bridge language between speakers of diverse linguistic backgrounds) facilitates communication in the contemporary global world, but also takes on a position of dominance since proficiency in the English language becomes valued over other languages (this is known as English hegemony). Standard Academic English (SAE), also known as mainstream American English, is the spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary of English that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is established by formal and informal speech and writing. It is a variety of English that is privileged by those who hold power in U.S. society and adversely affects people of color by stratifying their language practices. Arguably, SAE holds the same privilege globally because English fluency is often perceived to be tied to upward mobility.

The trope is that everyone needs SAE to be successful; however, knowing and using SAE well does not mean that a person is guaranteed success. It also does not mean that other languages are somehow less than English, and as a student you should never be made to feel that your other languages are inferior or insubordinate to English. This is linguistic justice; it advocates that all languages and language varieties have equal value, and challenges systems that maintain language discrimination. When thinking about your own counterstory, think about the languages you speak. By ‘other languages,’ I mean dialects of English such as African American English, Spanish English, Hinglish, Arabish, Appalachian, etc. in addition to languages of other cultures and countries. Also, think about your own writing experiences so far. Have they reinforced or challenged the dominant narrative of what it means to be a writer? What about the stories you have read or come across in an educational setting? Do they reflect your own lived experiences? In general, what spaces have you moved in and out of that made you feel out of place because your cultural capital (i.e., the social assets you possess such as education, knowledge, skills, behaviors, and cultural competencies) did not match the social situation? This is the place for your counterstory that works towards linguistic justice.

Your counterstory does not have to be told entirely in English. Write in your natural language, which may be separate from standard American English or may be a different language or languages altogether. Think about your voice outside of what convention dictates, and how it can be

used to dismantle the dominant narrative and create a more equitable and inclusive society. Check with your professor and consider code-meshing, where students are encouraged to draw from their repertoire of linguistic sources. They mesh, or bring together, their multiple linguistic capabilities when writing. For example, the phrase “Hi, Keefak, Ca va?” (Hi, How are you?) combines English, Arabic, and French. “Yeh Dil Maange More” (The heart desires more) is from a popular 90s advertisement that combines Hindi and English. Use your identity as a multilingual individual as cultural capital when writing counterstories. The more capable, confident, and assured you are of your own evolving skills and abilities, the more those skills and abilities will be encouraged in educational environments you find yourself in. You will engage in meaningful classroom conversations, gain discipline-specific knowledge, and evolve as independent learners. Diversity of experience matters, and counterstories help multilingual learners achieve linguistic freedom and justice by reclaiming writing in a way that provides them with agency. For those students who are reading this and are not multilingual learners, think about how the stories of others and their experiences with linguistic discrimination, for example, inform your own understanding and positionality. Think of what you learn by seeing the world through other people’s lenses and linguistic repertoires. By challenging systems that perpetuate discrimination, counterstories are one medium of how to promote equity and linguistic justice for everyone.

Counterstories empower students by having them reflect and write meaningfully about their language and writing experiences. Stories, in general, are powerful. They explain events, appeal to our emotions, and help us understand our place in the world. You, your individual and unique experiences, and your voice all matter. Keep talking and contributing to the conversation. I can assure you someone is listening, and that someone may just be the voice inside of your head reminding you that you have always had a legitimate place at the table.

WORK CITED

Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Illinois, NCTE, 2020.

TEACHER RESOURCES FOR “WRITING COUNTERSTORIES: WAYS TO CHALLENGE DOMINANT NARRATIVES IN FYC”

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay works really well in a first year composition course where students compose using a range of rhetorical modes and incorporate a variety of rhetorical strategies when writing. Counterstories work as independent assignments or can be embedded within other genres of writing. For instance, students can be assigned to write a stock story that identifies a myth perpetuated by the dominant culture in which they live. An example of a myth mentioned in this chapter: “Multilingual individuals have one dominant language and are therefore less proficient in their other languages.” As a follow-up or independent assignment, students are then tasked to write a counterstory that challenges or responds to the stock story.

To incorporate multimodal pedagogical practices or for educators who do not want to create a high stakes writing assignment focused on counterstories, first year writing faculty can also have students create podcasts, word clouds, or visual images in the form of a digital counterstory. This is why there are both high and low stake activities provided, and why counterstories as a pedagogical technique work so well when educators are tasked with helping students learn how to compose using a variety of different rhetorical modes and genres in a first year writing course. For example, if writing about an environmental issue, providing a personal account of how you were directly impacted is just as (if not more) valuable than risk assessment data. If desiring policy change, I would argue both expert and personal, anecdotal evidence equally contribute to the conversation. With this in mind, counterstories can be embedded within a genre, in this case a report or a grant proposal, that seeks policy change.

Counterstories help multilingual learners find their voice as writers by situating themselves in the broader context of their lived realities. By using counterstories as a pedagogical technique in the composition classroom, educators bridge the teacher-student divide because students know that their diverse backgrounds and unique experiences matter. Students also feel more comfortable and gain ownership of their educational experiences. Counterstories encourage students to be more receptive to listening to others, help them understand their unique positionalities in relation to others such as their peers, and have the potential to open the door to larger

conversations about social change. Teaching students how to craft counterstories and for what purposes is the first step in the process towards transformative pedagogy that enacts social change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt excluded or othered? How did this make you feel and why? How did power/powerlessness feed into your feelings?
2. Oftentimes we hear and read stories that have nothing to do with us and who we are. Why is it important to expose ourselves to these stories? What can these stories teach us about ourselves, our positionality, our privilege, and/or our being in the world?
3. How does counterstory contribute to or rewrite how histories are told?
4. Think of your lived experiences thus far. Whose stories do we traditionally hear about in our academic experiences? How about through the media? Why is it important to also hear the voices of minority communities? What can their experiences teach us, and how does counterstory contribute to social justice and change?
5. How can counterstories contribute to our larger understandings of diversity, social issues (i.e., poverty, homelessness, working conditions, food justice, immigration, refugee experiences), gender identity, linguistic discrimination, and/or learning differences?
6. What are some of the stock stories you have encountered as a multilingual learner, both inside and outside of the classroom? How did these experiences make you feel? If you are not a multilingual learner, what are some of dominant narratives or myths you have heard for people who speak English as their second, third, or fourth language?

ACTIVITIES

1. Oftentimes stories offer new perspectives and vantage points (a window through which we see), and other times they reveal and

expose our own lived experiences (a mirror reflecting back at us). This is known as the “Windows and Mirrors” learning framework. Think of a static visual image you have seen, a textual piece you have read, or something you have recently watched on television. Does this medium reflect your lived experiences (mirror) or is it a window into the lives of others? Do you feel a sense of positive social identity (mirror)? Does this medium help you further empathize and understand other people’s lived experiences within their social contexts (window)? Share your findings in a small learning community of 3-4 students. Then, the group can either free write, create a word cloud, or use visual images that reflect everyone’s ideas.

2. Watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story” (https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en OR <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg&t=208s>). What are Adichie’s own preconceived biases towards people such as Fide’s family? What are the biases others have of her and the region of the world she identifies with? How does Adichie’s Ted Talk contribute to your understanding of the importance of counterstories? Free write your response in a journal or work in a small collaborative learning community where you collate everyone’s response in a shared written document, shared visual image, or collaborative podcast.
3. Counterstories can be used in a variety of different genres such as reports, emails, visual presentations, white paper assignments, grant proposals, and (of course) academic essays. Think of an issue (economic, environmental, social, or political) impacting your local community and incorporate a counterstory to produce an assignment/project using one of the genres mentioned above.
4. Aja Y. Martinez, author of *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of critical Race Theory*, draws upon Richard Delgado, Derrick A. Bell, and Patricia J. Williams as ‘counterstory exemplars.’ In a small learning community of 3-4 students, locate and skim/read an article by one of these authors. What are the author’s main points of argument? How does the author’s work connect to how counterstories can be used by multilingual learners to enact social change and/or achieve linguistic justice? Create a word cloud or use visual images that reflect everyone’s ideas.

TRAUMA-RESPONSE PEDAGOGY

Since counterstories give voice to those who have been silenced, overlooked, or oppressed, they sometimes uncover and elaborate on experiences of trauma. Use the following strategies to negotiate and mitigate any trauma that counterstory may trigger:

1. Create a safe learning environment where students feel validated, comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, and supported.
2. Facilitate multiple formal and informal opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences and negotiate their feelings.
3. Promote coping strategies or direct them to campus resources where they can learn how to manage their feelings and develop resilience.
4. Seek professional development activities and/or trainings that increase awareness of trauma-informed responses and how they can be applied in the classroom setting.