

TENTH EDITION

THE Bedford Guide *for* College Writers

with Reader,
Research Manual,
and Handbook

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BEDFORD/ST. MARTIN'S
Boston ♦ New York



For Bedford/St. Martin's

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Composition: Graphic World, Inc.

Printing and Binding: RR Donnelley and Sons

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

8 7 6 5 4
f e d

For information, write: Bedford/St. Martin's, 75 Arlington Street, Boston, MA 02116
(617-399-4000)

ISBN 978-1-4576-3076-7 (paperback Student Edition)

ISBN 978-1-4576-3104-7 (hardcover Student Edition)

ISBN 978-1-4576-4904-2 (loose-leaf Student Edition)

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**Sandra Cisneros****Only Daughter**

Sandra Cisneros is an accomplished author, well regarded since the publication of her first novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and her short story collection, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). She has been praised for her literary experimentation and her keen eye for cultural connections and economic struggles. Her work has earned her several awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and her Macondo Foundation provides socially conscious writing workshops for writers. The following essay, detailing Cisneros's relationship with her father, was first published in 1990 in *Glamour* magazine.

AS YOU READ: In what ways does Cisneros's father treat her differently in a family full of boys?

Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an anthology I was part of. I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That* explains everything."

Well, I've thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I am today.

I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public. But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.

Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in the fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "*Que bueno, mi'ja*, that's good." That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years of college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.

In retrospect,^o I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a "What's that you're writing?"

But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as "My only daughter, the writer." Not as "This is only my daughter. She teaches." *Es maestra*—teacher. Not even *profesora*.

In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink *Esto* sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody *¡Alarma!* magazines that feature yet another sighting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*^o on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering^o husband by bashing his skull in with a *molcajete* (a

retrospect: Considering the past. ***La Virgen de Guadalupe:*** The Lady of Guadalupe, a Mexican icon of the Virgin Mary. **philandering:** Cheating.

kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock). Or the *fotonovelas*, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the character's mouths in bubbles.

My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is uninterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo.

When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered bouts of nostalgia. Then we'd have to let go of our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches, and head south. To Mexico City.

We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: "I have seven sons."

He meant *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it as "sons." "I have seven sons." To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. "I have seven sons." As if he deserved a medal from the state.

My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: "Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*."

When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead of this—our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. "Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor.

Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.

At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always; hot *tamales* and sweet *tamales* hissing in my mother's pressure cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins—talking too loud and at the same time, like in a Fellini° film, because that's just how we are.

I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano° writing,

Fellini: Federico Fellini (1920–1993), an influential Italian filmmaker. **Chicano:** Mexican American.

and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante° movie on Galavisión° and eating rice pudding.

There was a glass filmed with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.

I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac°, the *colonia*° my father was raised in and the house he grew up in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.

I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this So-and-so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading.

When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?"

Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful.

Pedro Infante: José Pedro Infante Cruz (1917–1957), a famous Mexican actor and singer.
Galavisión: A Mexican television network. **Tepeyac:** A borough north of Mexico City.
colonia: Spanish for "colony."

Questions to Start You Thinking

1. **Considering Meaning:** Cisneros clarifies her situation as an only daughter by supplying some context about her ethnicity, family, and class status. Why are these important aspects of her biography? What do they explain about her?
2. **Identifying Writing Strategies:** How does Cisneros create a picture of her father in this essay? Which descriptions help you to understand what he is like? Why do you think Cisneros chooses these particular details to recount to readers?
3. **Reading Critically:** Cisneros writes that she is "the only daughter and *only* a daughter" (paragraph 3). Why does she make this distinction? How does she explain each sense of *only* as a characteristic of her situation in the family?
4. **Expanding Vocabulary:** Studying English instead of another major, Cisneros was free to spend time "embroidering" (paragraph 5) her writ-

essay in which you analyze the importance of conversation, even when it is difficult. To deepen your analysis, draw on outside sources about communication, such as other essays in this chapter or one of Deborah Tannen's essays (see p. 543 and e-Pages) or books.



Amy Tan

Mother Tongue

Amy Tan was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, a few years after her parents immigrated to the United States from China. After receiving a BA and then an MA in linguistics, Tan worked as a specialist in language development before becoming a freelance business writer in 1981. Tan's first short story (1985) became the basis for her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1990), which was a phenomenal bestseller and was made into a movie. Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), was equally popular. Besides her novels, she has written a book of autobiographical essays, a forty-three-page "bookette" (*Rules for Virgins*, 2011), children's books, and the libretto for an opera based on her novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). Her work has been translated into thirty-five languages. Throughout her work run themes of family relationships, loyalty, and ways of reconciling past and present. "Mother Tongue" first appeared in *Threepenny Review* in 1990. In this essay, Tan explores the effect of her mother's "broken" English—the language Tan grew up with—on her life and writing.

AS YOU READ: Identify the difficulties Tan says exist for a child growing up in a family that speaks nonstandard English.

I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than 1
personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others.

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved 2
language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I 3
was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, *The Joy Luck Club*. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, "The intersection of memory upon imagination" and "There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus"—a speech filled with carefully wrought° grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized° forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of Standard English that I had

wrought: Crafted. **nominalized:** Made into a noun from a verb.

learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, and the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: "Not waste money that way." My husband was with us as well, and he didn't notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It's because over the twenty years we've been together I've often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

So you'll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds like, I'll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation which I videotaped and then transcribed.^o During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family's, Du, and how the gangster in his early years wanted to be adopted by her family, which was rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother's family, and one day showed up at my mother's wedding to pay his respects. Here's what she said in part:

"Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming Island people. The local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn't look down on him, but didn't take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don't stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won't have to stay too long. He come to my wedding. I didn't see, I heard it. I gone to boy's side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen."

You should know that my mother's expressive command of English belies^o how much she actually understands. She reads the *Forbes* report, listens to *Wall Street Week*, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine's books with ease—all kinds of things I can't begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I've been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as "broken" or "fractured"

transcribed: Made a written copy of what was said. **belies:** Contradicts; creates a misleading impression.

English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than “broken,” as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I’ve heard other terms used, “limited English,” for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people’s perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother’s “limited” English limited *my* perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, “This is Mrs. Tan.”

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, “Why he don’t send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money.”

And then I said in perfect English, “Yes, I’m getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn’t arrived.”

Then she began to talk more loudly. “What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?” And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, “I can’t tolerate any more excuses. If I don’t receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I’m in New York next week.” And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn’t budge. And when the

doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English—lo and behold—we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular,^o plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A's and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was _____, Mary thought he was _____." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming," with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic^o opposites, so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous." Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship—for example, "Sunset is to *nightfall* as _____ is to _____." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: *red* is to *stoplight*, *bus* is to *arrival*, *chills* is to *fever*, *yawn* is to *boring*. Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, "sunset is to *nightfall*"—and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words—*red*, *bus*, *stoplight*, *boring*—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: "A sunset precedes nightfall" is the same as "a chill precedes a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine

insular: Detached or isolated; keeping to oneself. **semantic:** Relating to the meaning of language.

an associative situation, for example, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, 18 about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs. Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can't begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge 19 of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing non-fiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn't until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I 20 wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here's an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent° state.” A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won't get into today, I later decided I should 21 envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech, and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had suc- 22 ceeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”

nascent: Beginning; only partly formed.

Questions to Start You Thinking

1. **Considering Meaning:** What are the Englishes that Tan grew up with? What other Englishes has she used in her life? What does each English have that gives it an advantage over the other Englishes in certain situations?
2. **Identifying Writing Strategies:** What examples does Tan use to analyze the various Englishes she uses? How has Tan been able to synthesize her Englishes successfully into her present style of writing fiction?
3. **Reading Critically:** Although Tan explains that she writes using “all the Englishes” she has known throughout her life (paragraph 21), she doesn’t do that in this essay. What are the differences between the English Tan uses in this essay and the kinds she says she uses in her fiction? How does the language she uses here fit the purpose of her essay?
4. **Expanding Vocabulary:** In paragraph 9, Tan writes that she had “plenty of empirical evidence” that her mother’s “limited” English meant that her mother’s thoughts were “imperfect” as well. Define *empirical*. What does Tan’s use of this word tell us about her present attitude toward the way she judged her mother when she was growing up?
5. **Making Connections:** Compare and contrast Tan’s cultural clash with her mother to that of Anjula Razdan with hers in “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” (pp. 523–28).

Link to the Paired Essay

Tan and Richard Rodriguez (“Public and Private Language,” pp. 512–17) recount learning English as they grew up in homes where English was a second language. In what way did they face similar experiences and obstacles? How did learning English affect their self-image and influence their relationship with their family?

Journal Prompts

1. Describe one of the Englishes you use to communicate. When do you use it, and when do you avoid using it?
2. In what ways are you a “translator,” if not of language, then of current trends and fashions, for your parents or other members of your family?

Suggestions for Writing

1. In a personal essay explain an important event in your family’s history, using your family’s various Englishes or other languages.
2. Take note of and, if possible, transcribe a conversation you have had with a parent or other family member, with a teacher, and with a close