



“Just Do It!”—Celebrating Plurilingual Writing  
in an Undergraduate Writing Contest

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**Abstract**

The Simon Fraser University Student Learning Commons holds an annual interdisciplinary, under-graduate writing contest. The writing contest provides an exciting opportunity to challenge deficit frameworks within writing and academic success centres. Through the contest, the writing centre is empowered to actively seek out and showcase excellence in under-graduate writing. Throughout the five years of the contest, the organizers have tweaked the contest’s submission categories to reflect the needs and interests shared by students and faculty member, to ensure that the contest supports the centre’s larger goals. This paper describes the creation of the contest’s Plurilingual Prize category, emphasizing the ways that this prize advances the writing centre’s commitment to both linguistic diversity and linguistic justice. The paper also provides context for the decision to use the term plurilingual to describe this contest category, as opposed to other terms used in writing centre discussions, such as English Language Learner (ELL), English as an Additional Language (EAL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and multilingual learners.

*Keywords: writing centre programs; writing contest; undergraduate writing; plurilingual writing; linguistic diversity; linguistic justice.*

### **Introduction**

Writing centres can play an important role in breaking down unspoken though rigorously enforced linguistic and cultural barriers that continue to characterize many academic spaces and experiences. To play this role effectively, however, writing centres must take the unequivocal stance that good academic writing is diverse, dynamic, surprising, and linguistically rich. There has been a proliferation of writing centre statements on linguistic justice in recent years. Examples of such statements include the CCCC Statement on Students' Right to their own Language (Committee on CCCC Language Statement, 1975) and repeatedly reaffirmed (2003, 2006, 2014); University of Connecticut Writing Center's Linguistic Justice Statement (Linguistic Justice Statement, n.d.); Michigan State University Writing Center's Language Statement (*Who We Are*, n.d.); The Emily Carr Writing Centre Manifesto (especially the section "Writing is Culturally Determined," which begins with the statement "We believe multilingualism is a strength.") (*Manifesto*, n.d.). These statements serve as evidence of the role writing centres can play within academic institutions and societies vis-à-vis plurilingual writing: to encourage plurilingual writers, long overdue, to speak and write with their own voices; to reclaim the linguistic repertoires that may have become largely unavailable to these writers through academic training; and to trust that they will be heard, in whatever format they choose to present their writing.

As writing centre professionals, however, we have often felt constrained in our ability to break down these barriers in our institution because of Simon Fraser University's writing centre, like most writing centres, is situated in the university: we do not set assignment guidelines or assess students' writing. While we recognize that the parameters of writing centre positions vary across institutions, we have heard similar concerns from our writing centre colleagues beyond our institution. Together, we often struggle to get past drafting position or vision statements and to figure out ways that we can embrace plurilingualism and linguistic justice beyond the symbolic. While these statements can make the particular stance of a writing centre clear to the wider community, performative encouragement of plurilingualism can have the unintended consequence of undermining students' experiences and concerns by stating that multilingualism is an asset while students clearly experience it as a detriment to their academic performance in their classes (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). This paper's title, "just do it," speaks to our intention in creating the Plurilingual Prize category in our undergraduate writing contest.

The writing contest committee (hereafter, the committee) is made up of the co-authors of this paper (Hermine Chan and Julia Lane) and SLC Learning Services Coordinator, Ruth Silverman. The committee has developed and coordinated this writing contest together, and Hermine and Julia worked closely together on the vision and implementation of the plurilingual prize. Creating this prize was something the committee felt we had to "just do" as a way of acting within our own sphere of power and

influence to uplift the plurilingual brilliance in our community. While it certainly does not “fix” the many problems of linguisticism within universities (or even within our singular university), the Plurilingual Prize is a tangible way that our Writing Centre can promote plurilingual writing repertoires as powerful rhetorical strategies that must be read, and judged, in their own right.

### **Overview of the Writing Contest**

The Student Learning Commons at Simon Fraser University (SLC) has held an annual, interdisciplinary undergraduate writing contest since 2017. In addition to serving as a novel way to recruit students into the SLC’s peer tutoring program, the writing contest provides an exciting opportunity for the SLC to challenge the deficit framework (Lockett, 2019, p. 22) that our team continues to discuss often in our work in a writing and academic success centre. Much has been said and written about this deficit framework. For a compelling recent example, see Alexandria Lockett’s, “Why I Call it the Academic Ghetto,” wherein she writes that the work of writing centres “occurs beneath the panoptic microscope of teachers and administrators who make it clear that the function of the place is to improve a dilapidated physical and mental condition” (Lockett, 2019, p. 22). While writing and academic success centre professionals often understand our work in very different terms, Lockett makes it clear that many still see our centres as being for struggling or failing students. Our writing contest is one potential response. Through it, we actively seek out and showcase excellence in under-graduate writing.

It is clear to us co-authors that all too often the criteria for excellence in academic writing is incredibly narrow (Inoue, 2015, p. 18).<sup>1</sup> In the context of these narrowed criteria, an undergraduate writing contest is unlikely to nurture a broad range of writing excellence without intentional and sustained attention. To this end, the committee’s approach to the contest continues to be guided by our own engagement with the significant body of scholarship that articulates the relationships between language, writing, race, racism, and assessment (Baker-Bell, 2020; Chavez, 2021; Condon & Faison, 2022; García, 2017; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Inoue, 2021; Lockett, 2019; Martinez, 2020; Young, 2010; Young et al., 2013; Younging, 2018). A guiding principle for the contest is the broad understanding that “excellence in writing is not culturally or disciplinarily neutral,” and the commitment that “everyone involved with the writing contest will work toward greater awareness of our unconscious biases about what makes for “good” writing as we engage with student submissions” (Student Learning Commons Writing Contest, “Judges & Criteria”, n.d.).

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<sup>1</sup> Inoue (2015) provides a way of understanding this narrowing of criteria through the metaphor of assessing athleticism by judging how fast everyone can run a 400-meter sprint: “We use this measure because it seems a good measure to us. We are conscientious and caring. We really are trying to be fair-minded to all so we judge everyone by the same standard, but we only know how to judge a 400-meter sprint. It’s what we know. Sure, we will do fine. Sprinters will be judged highly, but what of those curlers, or the snowboarders, or the swimmers, or the archers, or the skiers, or the tennis players, or the water polo players, or the wrestlers? You get the idea. In the name of finding a consistent (i.e., fair) way to judge everyone by the same standard, we have made an unfair assessment of athletic prowess by narrowing our definition of what it means to be an athlete, by ignoring the diversity of athleticism” (p. 18).

While these intentions and commitments have been a part of the contest from the beginning, the committee never felt satisfied that they were enough to meet the goals of the contest, especially those related to broadening the understanding of excellence in undergraduate writing at what remains a rigorously English-dominated university. Learning from Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford, and Lawrence, we recognize that, Language is an embodied phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 2009; Gallagher & Hutto, 2008) and particular ways of speaking “can have such strong emotional or linguistic-ideological connotations that they are unavailable or only partly available at particular moments” if the person concerned is made to feel that their identity or language has a lower status. (2021, p. 1, quoting Busch, 2017, p. 356)

While the focus above is on ways of speaking, we extend this understanding to writing and recognize that many students have been consistently made to feel that their identities, languages, and ways of writing have a lower status within universities (Chavez, 2012; Condon & Faison, 2022; Baker-Bell, 2020; Garcia, 2017; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Inoue, 2015, & 2021; Lockett, 2019; Martinez, 2020; Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford, & Lawrence, 2021; Young, 2010; Young et al., 2013; Younging, 2018). The committee, therefore, has our work cut out for us in our intention to put on a writing contest that uplifts ways of writing that have been previously rendered unacceptable or partially acceptable and provides a platform for elevating the status of plurilingual writing. To this end, we remain committed to reviewing the contest goals and adapting the contest criteria and parameters.

### **Creating the Plurilingual Prize**

In 2021, the committee created the Plurilingual Prize category to deepen our commitment to linguistic diversity and linguistic justice, and to further the Student Learning Commons’ stance, within the wider university, of challenging the hegemony of Standardized Academic English, “the belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively” (Young, 2010, p. 111). The Plurilingual Prize represents an exciting development in the SLC’s resistance to the deficit framework: while many incorrectly continue to see our centre as a place to tame and “fix” students’ writing and bring it into alignment with Standardized Academic English, the Plurilingual Prize provides us with a platform to elevate writing that pushes back on those very conventions. The committee decided to use the term *plurilingual* for the prize—instead of terms that are potentially more commonplace in writing centres such as English Language Learner (ELL), English as an Additional Language (EAL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and even multi-lingual students/learners—because of the expansiveness of the term. As Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford, and Lawrence explain in their introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Pluri-lingual Language Education* (2021), *plurilingualism* is a term that stresses “the holistic, inter-connected nature of the language resources of the individual, and also the fact that languages themselves are socially constructed composita” (p. 1). By focusing on the language resources that individuals have access to and the composite nature of language systems themselves, the term plurilingual allows us to keep to

the prize's emphasis on writing and rhetorical strategies, rather than on the writer's linguistic identity. The term plurilingual, therefore, resonates with the contest's goals of celebrating the interconnectedness of languages and the possibilities of expressing that interconnectedness in writing. Furthermore, the intention of the plurilingual prize is to showcase the work of students who play with language and live at cross-linguistic boundaries. These writers often speak and write in multiple languages, but they may or may not identify as ELL, EAL, or ESL writers, and they do not need to hold any of those identities to submit their work for the plurilingual prize.

### **Prize focus and development**

The Plurilingual Prize category was developed in collaboration with Dr. Steve Marshall who specializes in the interplay between plurilingualism, academic literacy, and pedagogy in higher education. Marshall's research reveals that most of students' plurilingual work is done "behind the scenes" as part of their writing processes (Marshall, 2020). Multilingual students often brainstorm and draft in their more familiar language(s) and communicate with other students who share those language(s) to check their understandings of course concepts and develop their ideas. Despite this plurilingual writing process, the written products that these students end up submitting are often polished to be monolingualistic in ways that fit the standards and expectations of Standardized Academic English. With the pressure of these expectations, those of us who are involved with writing assessment (including through course assessment and writing contests) can ask ourselves if we have left any room in Western scholarship for voices, styles, and linguistic repertoires that fall outside of and even challenge the status quo. As a remedy, the Plurilingual Prize category provides space outside of the standardized English box, allowing students room to write freely in their own modes of language and expression. The writing contest invites students to submit papers they have written for a course at Simon Fraser University. For all categories of the contest, students can revise their papers prior to submitting, if they wish, to incorporate feedback from others and to meet the contest's word limits. For the Plurilingual Prize in particular, we encourage students to revise their papers to re-incorporate the linguistic palimpsest that was part of their writing process but was erased in their final submission.

The focus of the Plurilingual prize is on the writing and rhetorical strategies used in the paper, not on the identity of the author. Students who self-identify as English language learners (ELL), EAL, ESL, or multi/plurilingual writers are welcome to submit to any category of the contest for which they are eligible. Where students' papers showcase multi/plurilingual writing (as described in the list that follows), however, the committee has encouraged them to consider submitting to the Plurilingual Prize category.

For the purposes of the writing contest, we define plurilingual writing strategies as follows:

- Papers that use multiple languages in the writing.
- Papers that use multiple styles/dialects/forms of English or Englishes in the writing.

- Papers that engage approaches to writing outside of the standardized academic conventions.
- Papers that engage with the relationship between language, knowledge, and culture in their content.
- And any combinations of the above (Student Learning Commons Writing Contest, n.d., “Plurilingual Prize”).

In addition to providing the above list, the contest eligibility clarifies that while the committee hopes students will submit papers that use more than one language, the writing must still be comprehensible in English for our judges—though that does not mean that the writing needs to be easy for monolingualistic readers. It also does not mean that the judges need to be able to read and understand everything included in a paper.

### **Countering Anglocentrism**

Acknowledging that, in the current Anglocentric postsecondary classroom, there is often little room made for plurilingualism, the committee wanted to ensure that students had a variety of options for showcasing their plurilingual repertoires through the contest. For this category only, students have the option to either submit a paper they wrote for a class (which they can revise), or submit a paper written specifically for the contest. For the latter option, the committee provided students with the following writing prompt:

Write a 1,250 to 2,500 word [sic] paper that engages plurilingual writing strategies to tell your readers about the way you use language(s) in your learning. Your reflections can include your language use both inside and outside of the classroom and in ways that are visible to others (example, in your Canvas responses) and invisible to others (example, in your personal notetaking, use of translation programs, etc.). How do these visible and invisible aspects of your language use come together to support your learning in an English dominated environment? (Student Learning Commons Writing Contest, “Plurilingual Prize,” n.d.)

The option of writing a new essay from this prompt invites students to reflect on and share how they use languages in their learning in ways that aren’t obvious or that cannot be seen by others. The committee encourages students to share their notes, translated works, and snippets of their journeys as they navigate through their languages and cultures to come through in an English-dominant university environment.

The committee looks for papers that are written about or written using terminology in other languages, using multiple languages, or writing about concepts found only in certain languages. The contest actively invites writing that challenges standardized English and engages meaningfully with other languages, whether they be translated, code-meshed (Young et al., 2013), code-switched, or all three. In this way, the contest takes up the kind of work that bell hooks called for in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), “encourag[ing] students to use their first language and translate it so they do not feel that seeking higher education will necessarily estrange them from that language and culture they know most intimately” (p. 225).

## **Judging the Plurilingual Category**

The committee has had the fortune of inviting a diverse panel of judges to rank the essays in all the contest categories. The inaugural year of the Plurilingual Prize was judged by professors in both Health Science and Criminology and by an EAL consultant from SFU's Centre for Educational Excellence, which supports faculty members, instructors, staff, and academic units in their teaching roles.

Part of the committee's work in creating the Plurilingual Prize was creating an assessment rubric to support the judges' reading of these interdisciplinary, plurilingual papers. The committee knew that a standard rubric that directed the judges to look at the content, grammar, and structure of the submissions wouldn't be sufficient and might, in fact, be counterproductive. The committee, therefore, created a rubric expansive enough to include all the non-standardized and groundbreaking ways that students might choose to approach pluri-lingual writing. And while we wanted to direct the judges' attention to particular linguistic and aesthetic decisions that a writer might make, we didn't want to penalize students for making different choices from their peers or from what we anticipated.

We hoped to receive submissions that engaged with cultural gaps in thinking, with writing that didn't feel pressure to explain itself; instead, the expectation is to leave readers to sit in the discomfort of not understanding the full context. To ethically invite such sub-missions, however, the committee needed to provide the judges with criteria that would support them to, quoting again from hooks (1994), "listen [and read] without 'mastery,' without owning or possessing speech [and writing] through interpretation, but also the experience of hearing non-English words" (p. 225). This task of reading without mastery can be especially challenging for faculty members who are used to relying on their expertise within academic spaces. Because of this, the committee invited judges to engage intentionally with the rubric, reflecting both on the piece of writing and on the linguistic and aesthetic decisions that may have driven the writing process. For example, one writer might use symbols or images to help illustrate a point about something specific in their language, whereas another writer might use only text. One of these choices is not better than the other, so the Plurilingual Prize rubric draws judges' attention to different areas of consideration, with a flexibility within the scoring rubric only those questions that were applicable to each specific piece of writing. The committee's overall intention was to ensure that writers could make different rhetorical and stylistic choices without being penalized in their overall numerical scores by a rubric that was driving toward standardization.

The quantitative assessments that the judges make on the contest rubrics in every category of the contest serve as an initial springboard for discussion. These discussions among the judges have surfaced concerns about particular papers and have allowed judges to champion the merits of a paper that may have been overlooked by others. In this way, the contest rubrics can serve as an important focusing device for the judges' assessments, without shutting down insights that can arise through more

qualitative and dialogic assessments. We have included the rubric we developed for the Plurilingual Prize here as Appendix One (attached).

### **Results of the First Year of the Plurilingual Prize**

Here are the results from the first year of the Plurilingual Prize category (drumroll, please): In first place, Emily Ma, who wrote “Eating bitterness (吃苦): Critical to Chinese immigrant identity or perpetuating the model minority myth?” (2022). “Eating bitterness (吃苦)” is a concept that is critical to the Chinese identity and can also fuel the model minority myth. Ma unpacks these complexities in her essay. Emily Ma initially submitted to the First-Year category and not the plurilingual prize category. When the committee saw her essay, we thought that her writing was perfect for the plurilingual category, and we contacted her to ask if she would like to be entered into the plurilingual category because we were excited for the opportunity to show-case her excellent linguistic and cultural analysis with the Plurilingual Prize.

We are also thrilled that Emily subsequently joined the Writing and Learning Peer program in the Student Learning Commons and both Emily and Judy recently presented with us at conferences to share about the Plurilingual Prize. While presenting at that conference, we (Hermine and Julia) learned that Emily had looked at previous contest-winning essays to provide her with a frame of reference for writing “Eating Bitterness” since it was the first university-level essay she ever wrote. She consulted the writing contest archives not because she planned to enter the contest, but because she wanted to see examples of excellence in undergraduate level writing. The contest is therefore also meeting another initial goal of serving as a resource for students who are looking for examples to support their own writing process.

In second place, Judy Yae Young Kim, who wrote “[AI translators and the international K-Pop fandom on Twitter](#)” (2022), a Communications Studies paper that considers reflects on the limitations of AI translations in online fandom spaces. Both essays are published in our writing contest open access journal, and you can read them, along with all other winning submissions to the contest since its inauguration, [here](#).

### **Conclusion**

The early success of the Plurilingual Prize reveals an emerging interest in re-imagining academic writing through a plurilingual lens. This interest is being brought to the forefront by Writing Centre professionals, faculty members, and, perhaps most importantly, by students themselves at SFU. More broadly, embracing plurilingualism and linguistic justice within writing centres requires more from writing centre professionals than simply stating that we have embraced it. As next steps, writing centre professionals must challenge themselves to learn specific strategies and approaches that make up the plurilingual writing repertoire. Undertaking this learning will allow us to become more informed readers of plurilingual writing and will challenge us to become better at reading without mastery, as hooks suggests. We must learn to read with effort, engaging with both what is



comprehensible and incompre-hensible to us in the writing, recognizing that we can learn from the opportunity to encounter both from writers whose cultural and linguistic repertoires differ from our own.

We connected with our writing centre colleagues through a series of conference presentations, including at the CWCA/ACCR conference in 2022. Through these conference connections and discussions, it has become clear to us as co-authors that there is interest throughout the writing centre community in celebrating and championing plurilingual writing in writing centre spaces. For our colleagues who might be interested in creating their own plurilingual prizes as one way to promote plurilingual writing, we have the following recommendations:

- Get started by understanding the existing landscape in your institution. In particular, be on the lookout for courses at your institution that may have a window for engaging with plurilingual writing (in readings, assignments, learning outcomes, etc.). In our case, an innovative course in the World Languages and Literatures department (WL 105W: World Literature Lab) served as initial inspiration. Ideally, connect with the faculty members who are teaching these courses with plurilingual frameworks. Find out what they need to support their students and what excites them. Ask them if they would be willing to serve as judges for your prize!
- Build up your library of samples of plurilingual writing, especially at the level you are looking to create the prize for (i.e., not just published works by established scholars, though these can be useful resources). You are welcome to use the publications from our contest as a starting point for your own library.
- Promote widely through student groups.
  - As you promote, find relevant examples of plurilingual writing to share with student groups to serve as specific inspiration for them. For example, when we promoted the plurilingual prize to the 2SLGBTQIA+ centre, we shared this poetic essay by a Vietnamese author that talks about the creation of a non-binary pronoun in Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2019).
- Start small and build on your results year after year.
  - We introduced the Plurilingual Prize after already running a writing contest for four years. The contest itself, therefore, already had some energy and recognition among students and faculty. You might consider taking a similar approach by introducing a more general writing contest first to build interest and momentum among students and faculty. Once established, you can introduce a plurilingual prize as an opportunity to showcase a broader and more diverse range of excellence in writing.
- Proactively encourage students to submit their writing to the Plurilingual Prize.
  - We have noticed, for example, that students whose work clearly fits within the parameters of the Plurilingual Prize will still often submit to another category first. We have been on the lookout for these submissions and

have proactively reached out to students to ask whether they would like their work to be considered for the Plurilingual Prize. They have always said yes to this invitation and have explained that they “weren’t sure if they could/should submit for that prize.” So, it is clear that there is still work to be done to support a broader understanding of plurilingual writing and its linguistics repertoires. That being said, each year that we publish examples of students’ writing in this category is a year that we build our shared understanding of what plurilingual writing is and can be.

Reflecting on the adage, “you can’t be what you can’t see,” we recognize that one of the main strengths of the Plurilingual Prize in the writing contest is that it continues to make under-graduate writing (including plurilingual writing) more visible to both undergraduate writers and readers (and graders) of undergraduate writing. It is our hope that if more people can celebrate plurilingual writing, more people can also be plurilingual writers.

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## Appendix One – Plurilingual Prize Judging Rubric

### Plurilingual Prize

Please use this form to rate submissions.

You will be asked to rate the papers in the following categories:

- Content and Critical Analysis (yes/no)
- Structure and Organization (score out of 20)
- Style and Language (score out of 10)

In each category, you will be asked a series of questions and will provide a rating from 1-5 (with 1 being low and 5 being high).

We will use the combined ratings from the judges to determine an initial ranking of papers. Judges will be provided with the opportunity to discuss this ranking and decide on the contest outcomes.

#### Content and Critical Analysis

\*The writing engages a plurilingual repertoire (i.e., uses more than one language and/or more than one variety, style, code, or dialect of English). This engagement could include but is not limited to:

1. Papers that use multiple languages in the writing
2. Papers that use multiple styles/dialects/forms of English in the writing
3. Papers that engage approaches to writing outside of the standardized academic conventions
4. Papers that engage with the relationship between language, knowledge, and culture in their content
5. And any combinations of the above

If the answer is “no,” this paper is not a contender for the Plurilingual Prize.

- yes
- no

#### Structure and Organization - 1

\*How effectively do the plurilingual writing strategies and/or reflections on plurilingualism engage with and/or bridge cognitive and cultural gaps of thinking, knowledge production, and writing?

(Please rank from 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective.” If the paper does not reflect this criteria, please select n/a)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- n/a

#### Structure and Organization - 2a

\*If it appears that the writer wants to make the purpose(s) and intention(s) of incorporating plurilingual writing strategies clear for the reader, how successfully is that accomplished?

(Please rank from 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective.” If the paper does not reflect this criteria, please select n/a)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- n/a

Structure and Organization - 2b

\*If it appears that the writer wants to leave the purpose(s) and intention(s) of incorporating the plurilingual writing strategies deliberately unclear for the reader, how successfully is that accomplished?

(Please rank from 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective.” If the paper does not reflect this criteria, please select n/a)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- n/a

Structure and Organization - 3

\*Does the paper make use of symbols, images, or other visuals? If so, how effectively do the visual elements contribute to the meaning made by the text?

(Please rank from 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective.” If the paper does not reflect this criteria, please select n/a)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- n/a

Style and Language - 1

\*How effectively does the writer make use of their language(s) in the text? Is their use of language inventive, interesting, creative, and/or engaging?

(Please rank from 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective.” If the paper does not reflect this criteria, please select n/a)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- n/a

Style and Language - 2

\*How confidently does the writing express unique personality, voice, and writing style and/or make use of a plurality of styles and voices?

(Please rank from 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective.” If the paper does not reflect this criteria, please select n/a)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- n/a
- 

Judge’s Comments

Is there anything else about this paper that impacts your assessment of it but is not clearly reflected in the rating criteria? (if no, leave blank. If more space is needed, please email the writing contest committee. These comments will not be shared with the author)