

Going to Japan

Essay by Barbara Kingsolver

Have you ever felt **OUT OF PLACE?**

COMMON CORE

RI 2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development, including how it emerges and is shaped; provide an objective summary. **RI 4** Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RI 6** Analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance a point of view or purpose. **L 4b** Identify patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings. **L 4c** Consult reference materials to determine a word's etymology.

You know the feeling—that sinking sense of not quite fitting in. Pretty much everybody feels out of place at some point, whether it's at a party where you don't know anyone or on your first day at a new school in a new town. In "Going to Japan," Barbara Kingsolver describes a time when she felt totally out of her element. She relates the blunders she made as she tried to blend in.

QUICKWRITE In a paragraph, describe a situation in which you felt out of place. Include all the details you can remember—even the embarrassing ones! What about the situation made you feel self-conscious? Did you eventually relax and feel better, or were you uncomfortable the whole time?



Meet the Author

● TEXT ANALYSIS: HUMOR

Have you ever used a joke to get your point across? Writers often use **humor** to convey a point of view on a topic and to create surprise and amusement. The following rhetorical techniques are common devices of humor:

- **Hyperbole:** exaggeration of the truth
- **Irony:** a contrast between what you expect to happen and what actually happens
- **Wordplay:** verbal wit—playing with word choices and word sounds

In this essay, Kingsolver mixes facts with personal, often humorous examples to describe her experiences in Japan. While she explains certain elements of Japanese culture, she also presents an exaggerated account of how she felt out of place. “When I stepped on a streetcar,” she writes, “a full head taller than all the other passengers, I became an awkward giant.” As you read, note passages that you find humorous.

● READING SKILL: SUMMARIZE

When you **summarize**, you use your own words to restate the central idea, main points, and important details of what you’ve read, without including your own opinions. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record the important details presented in each of the essay’s three parts. In your own words, sum up the main point of each part, and then determine the essay’s central idea.

Part	Details Included	Main Point
Part I: lines 1–15		
Part II: lines 16–59		
Part III: lines 60–91		

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Write sentences showing the meaning of each boldfaced word as you understand it.

1. showed defiance by speaking **brazenly**
2. felt **mortified** when her father sang in public
3. **cede** control to the new student council president
4. accepted his **abject** apology
5. a **baleful** and frightening threat



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Barbara Kingsolver

born 1955

A Scientific Leaning

Though Barbara Kingsolver began writing stories and essays as a child, she never dreamed she’d someday become a professional author. The writers she read, she explains, “were mostly old, dead men from England. It was inconceivable that I might grow up to be one of those myself.” Kingsolver majored in biology in college, but also took one creative writing class—and found she loved it.

Writing for Change

Kingsolver wrote her first novel holed up in a closet, typing while her husband slept. Her dedication paid off, and *The Bean Trees* was a critical and popular success. Kingsolver is now an award-winning author of essays, novels, and short stories. She believes that literature can be a force for social change. “I’m extremely interested in cultural difference,” Kingsolver says, “in social and political history, and [in] the sparks that fly when people with different ways of looking at the world come together.”

BACKGROUND TO THE ESSAY

Hiroshima

On August 6, 1945, at a crucial moment in World War II, the U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The bomb destroyed the city and killed 80,000 people almost instantly; thousands more died later from radiation illness and other injuries. The city of Hiroshima has been rebuilt and is now at the center of a movement to abolish atomic weapons. Ground Zero, where the bomb fell, is now home to Peace Memorial Park.

Author
Online



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Going to Japan

Barbara Kingsolver

Analyze Visuals ►

Examine the collage on page 855. Name three elements that contribute to how out of place the photograph on top looks against the background images.

My great-aunt Zelda went to Japan and took an abacus, a bathysphere, a conundrum, a diatribe, an eggplant. That was a game we used to play. All you had to do was remember everything in alphabetical order. Right up to Aunt Zelda.

Then I grew up and was actually invited to go to Japan, not with the fantastic Aunt Zelda but as myself. As such, I had no idea what to take. I knew what I planned to be doing: researching a story about the memorial at Hiroshima;¹ visiting friends; trying not to get lost in a place where I couldn't even read the street signs. Times being what they were—*any* times—I intended to do my
10 very best to respect the cultural differences, avoid sensitive topics I might not comprehend, and, in short, be anything but an Ugly American. When I travel, I like to try to blend in. I've generally found it helps to be prepared. So I asked around, and was warned to expect a surprisingly modern place.

My great-aunt Zelda went to Japan and took Appliances, Battery packs, Cellular technology. . . . That seemed to be the idea. **A**

And so it came to pass that I arrived in Kyoto² an utter foreigner, unprepared. It's true that there are electric streetcars there, and space-age gas stations with uniformed attendants who rush to help you from all directions at once. There are also golden pagodas³ on shimmering lakes, and Shinto shrines⁴

A HUMOR

What clues in lines 1–15 hint that this will be a humorous essay? Explain your answer, citing evidence.

1. **the memorial at Hiroshima** (hĭ-rō'shə-mə): The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park commemorates the deaths and destruction caused by the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima near the end of World War II.

2. **Kyoto** (kē-ō'tō): A Japanese city rich in history and culture, Kyoto was the nation's capital from 794 until 1868.

3. **pagodas** (pə-gō'dəz): sacred buildings of the Buddhist religion, typically towers with many levels.

4. **Shinto shrines**: shrines from the Shinto religion, one of the main religions of Japan.



20 in the forests. There are bamboo groves and nightingales. And finally there are more invisible guidelines for politeness than I could fathom. When I stepped on a streetcar, a full head taller than all the other passengers, I became an awkward giant. I took up too much space. I blended in like Igor would blend in with the corps de ballet in *Swan Lake*.⁵ I bumped into people. I crossed my arms when I listened, which turns out to be, in Japanese body language, the sign for indicating **brazenly** that one is bored.

But I wasn't! I was struggling through my days and nights in the grip of boredom's opposite—i.e., panic. I didn't know how to eat noodle soup with chopsticks, and I did it most picturesquely *wrong*. I didn't know how to order,
30 so I politely deferred to my hosts and more than once was served a cuisine with heads, including eyeballs. I managed to wrestle these creatures to my lips with chopsticks, but it was already too late by the time I got the message that *one does not spit out anything*.

I undertook this trip in high summer, when it is surprisingly humid and warm in southern Japan. I never imagined that in such sweltering heat women would be expected to wear stockings, but every woman in Kyoto wore nylon stockings. Coeds in shorts *on the tennis court* wore nylon stockings. I had packed only skirts and sandals; people averted their eyes.

When I went to Japan I took my Altitude, my Bare-naked legs, my Callous
40 foreign ways. I was **mortified**. **B**

My hosts explained to me that the Japanese language does not accommodate insults, only infinite degrees of apology. I quickly memorized an urgent one, "*Sumimasen*," and another for especially extreme cases, "*Moshi wake gozaimasen*."⁶ This translates approximately to mean, "If you please, my transgression is so inexcusable that I wish I were dead."

I needed these words. When I touched the outside surface of a palace wall, curious to know what it was made of, I set off screeching alarms and a police car came scooting up the lawn's discreet gravel path. "*Moshi wake gozaimasen*,

5. **Igor . . . corps de ballet** (kôr'də bā-lā') in *Swan Lake*: Igor is the clumsy assistant in many Frankenstein movies. *Swan Lake* is a Russian ballet composed by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (chī-kôf'skē).

6. **Sumimasen** (sōō-mē-mā-sēn) . . . **Moshi wake gozaimasen** (mō-shē wā-kē gō-zī-mā-sēn).

COMMON CORE L4b

Language Coach

Antonyms Many words with prefixes such as *a-*, *dis-*, *in-*, and *un-* contain their own **antonyms**, or opposites. Reread line 21. Which word contains its opposite? What does each word mean?

brazenly
(brā'zən-lē') *adv.* boldly and without shame

mortified (môr'tē-fīd')
adj. very embarrassed; humiliated **mortify** *v.*

B HUMOR

Kingsolver repeats this alphabetical **word play** throughout the essay. How does this contribute to the humor of the piece? Explain your answer.



Officer! Wish I were dead!” And in the public bath, try as I might, I couldn’t
50 get the hang of showering with a hand-held nozzle while sitting fourteen inches
from a stranger. I sprayed my elderly neighbor with cold water. In the face.

“*Moshi wake gozaimasen*,” I declared, with feeling.

She merely stared, dismayed by the foreign menace. **C**

I visited a Japanese friend, and in her small, perfect house I spewed out
my misery. “Everything I do is wrong!” I wailed like a child. “I’m a blight
on your country.”

“Oh, no,” she said calmly. “To forgive, for us, is the highest satisfaction.
To forgive a foreigner, ah! Even better.” She smiled. “You have probably made
many people happy here.”

60 To stomp about the world ignoring cultural differences is arrogant, to
be sure, but perhaps there is another kind of arrogance in the presumption
that we may ever really build a faultless bridge from one shore to another,
or even know where the mist has **ceded** to landfall. When I finally arrived
at Ground Zero in Hiroshima, I stood speechless. What I found there was
a vast and exquisitely silent monument to forgiveness. I was moved beyond
words, even beyond tears, to think of all that can be lost or gained in the gulf
between any act of will and its consequences. In the course of every failure of
understanding, we have so much to learn.


I remembered my Japanese friend’s insistence on forgiveness as the highest
70 satisfaction, and I understood it really for the first time: What a rich wisdom
it would be, and how much more bountiful a harvest, to gain pleasure not
from achieving personal perfection but from understanding the inevitability
of imperfection and pardoning those who also fall short of it. **D**

I have walked among men and made mistakes without number. When I
went to Japan I took my **Abject** goodwill, my **Baleful** excuses, my Cringing
remorse. I couldn’t remember everything, could not even recite the proper
alphabet. So I gave myself away instead, evidently as a kind of public service.
I prepared to return home feeling empty-handed.

At the Osaka⁷ Airport I sat in my plane on the runway, waiting to leave for
80 *terra cognita*,⁸ as the aircraft’s steel walls were buffeted by the sleet and winds
of a typhoon. We waited for an hour, then longer, with no official word from
the cockpit, and then suddenly our flight was canceled. Air traffic control in
Tokyo had been struck by lightning; no flights possible until the following day.

“We are so sorry,” the pilot told us. “You will be taken to a hotel, fed, and
brought back here for your flight tomorrow.” **E**

As we passengers rose slowly and disembarked, we were met by an airline
official who had been posted in the exit port for the sole purpose of saying
to each and every one of us, “Terrible, terrible. *Sumimasen*.” Other travelers
nodded indifferently, but not me. I took the startled gentleman by the hands
90 and practically kissed him.

“You have no idea,” I told him, “how thoroughly I forgive you.” 

7. **Osaka** (ō-sā’kə).

8. **terra cognita** (tēr’ə kŏg-nē’tə): Latin for “a familiar land or country.”

C HUMOR

Reread lines 49–53.
Do you think that
accidentally splashing
someone is grounds for
being labeled a “foreign
menace”? Identify the
humorous technique
Kingsolver uses here.

cede (sēd) *v.* to give up;
give way

D SUMMARIZE

What is Kingsolver’s
main point in lines
69–73? Summarize the
feelings she expresses
about forgiveness in
this passage.

abject (ăb’-jĕkt’) *adj.*
exceedingly humble

baleful (bāl’fəl) *adj.*
evil; destructive

COMMON CORE L 4c

E FOREIGN WORDS

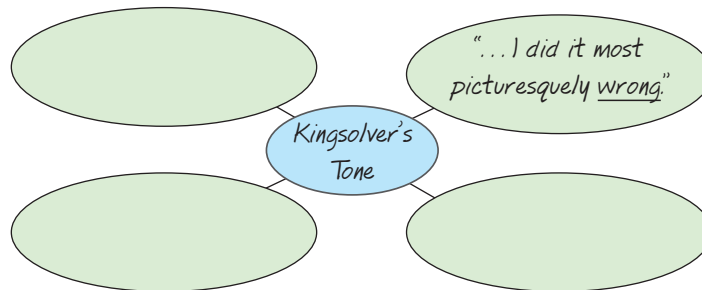
The phrase *terra cognita*
is a Latin phrase that
means “a familiar land
or country.” You might
recognize the word *terra*
as a root in words such
as *terrestrial*. Can you
think of any other English
words that have the Latin
word *terra* as a root?
Consult a dictionary if
necessary.

Comprehension

- Recall** Why did the author go to Japan?
- Recall** List three examples Kingsolver gives to illustrate her inability to blend in on her trip to Japan.

Text Analysis

- Draw Conclusions** Why did Kingsolver react so strongly to the airline official's apology while her fellow travelers simply "nodded indifferently"? Explain, citing evidence from the text to support your conclusion.
- Identify Irony** This essay is filled with examples of **situational irony**, the contrast between what a reader or character expects and what actually exists or happens. Identify three examples of situational irony and explain what is ironic about each.
- Summarize** Review the chart you filled in as you read. Taken together, what do the details you recorded reveal about Kingsolver's overall message? Summarize the author's **central idea** in your own words.
- Analyze Tone** How would you describe Kingsolver's tone in this essay? Use a graphic like the one shown to record striking or unusual words and phrases from the essay. Then describe the tone Kingsolver's **word choice** helps create.
- Evaluate Humor** Review the bulleted list of humorous techniques on page 853, and think about how Kingsolver uses humor to communicate her perspective. In your opinion, which technique best helps Kingsolver to convey her thoughts and feelings in a funny way? Give examples from the essay to support your answer.



COMMON CORE

RI 2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development, including how it emerges and is shaped; provide an objective summary of a text. **RI 4** Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RI 6** Analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance a point of view or purpose.

Text Criticism

- Different Perspectives** Kingsolver is a writer who has long been fascinated by cultural differences and who works to make others see these differences as unique and positive. Would someone less attuned to cultural differences have felt as out of place as Kingsolver did? Explain, citing evidence from "Going to Japan" to support your opinion.

Have you ever felt OUT OF PLACE?

What can you learn from being in unfamiliar territory?

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Decide whether these statements are true or false. If you need to reread the definitions of the boldfaced vocabulary words, consult the Glossary of Vocabulary on page R123.

1. You might be **mortified** if you get the lowest test score in the class.
2. Hearing a **baleful** speech is likely to frighten or anger many people.
3. If you speak **brazenly**, your parents will probably compliment you on your politeness.
4. Mornings usually **cede** to afternoons.
5. **Abject** flattery has to do with praising someone's choice of clothing.

WORD LIST

abject
baleful
brazenly
cede
mortified

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• appreciate • attribute • indicate • unique • vary

Is it important for us to learn to **appreciate** the **unique** characteristics of other cultures? Write a paragraph explaining why it is or is not important. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: APPROPRIATE WORD CHOICE

To communicate effectively, you should consider several factors when choosing your words. One is a word's **denotation**—its surface meaning or definition. The other is the word's **connotation**, or the overtone of meaning it carries beyond its surface definition. Saying "Jake spoke *brazenly*," for example, has a stronger negative connotation than saying that he spoke *boldly*. Another factor to consider is the formality of the situation. A word like *cede* is rather formal and might sound inappropriate in casual speech or writing.

PRACTICE Choose the word or phrase that is more appropriate in each situation.

1. In a negative review of a singer: Her voice was (shrill, high-pitched).
2. In a letter to a friend: We were (taken in by a con artist, duped by a charlatan).
3. In a formal report: Dr. White was (uptight, apprehensive) about the decision.
4. In a letter of recommendation: He has a (reserved, tight-lipped) but friendly manner.

COMMON CORE

L 5b Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

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