act in the world and how to make sense of it. Usually, we are unaware of the power of language and culture until we experience firsthand a different culture or learn to speak a different language. These activities help us to gain a perspective on our own culture and to see some of its unspoken but powerful rules. They also make us aware that, when two cultures meet, one culture can misunderstand or misinterpret the other.

The two selections that follow use examples to show the power of culture and language in our lives. As you read the essays, try to answer these questions:

1. What kinds of rules do we follow every day without thinking about them? Do these rules help us to live in society or do they cause problems?
2. What problems can happen when two cultures have different ideas about what kind of behavior is acceptable? What can happen when mistranslations of words and concepts occur?
3. How has your culture shaped your behavior?

Reading

“How Unwritten Rules Circumscribe Our Lives”
by Bob Greene

Bob Greene’s newspaper columns and articles are collected in Johnny Deadline Reporter: The Best of Bob Greene (1976) and American Beat (1983). In the article reprinted here, Greene writes about the power of unwritten cultural rules in our lives. As you read the essay, consider these questions:

1. Are Greene’s examples confirmed by your own experiences in American culture?
2. Would these same examples be true in your culture?
3. Can you think of additional examples of unwritten cultural rules?

1 The restaurant was almost full. A steady hum of conversation hung over the room; people spoke with each other and worked on their meals.

2 Suddenly, from a table near the center of the room, came a screaming voice:

3 “Damn it, Sylvia...”

very loudly

4 The man was shouting at the top of his voice. His face was reddened, and he yelled at the woman sitting opposite him for about 15 seconds. In the crowded restaurant, it seemed like an hour. All other conversation in the room stopped, and everyone looked at the man. He must have realized this, because as abruptly as he had started, he stopped; he lowered his voice and finished whatever it was he had to say in a tone the rest of us could not hear.
It was startling\textsuperscript{5} precisely because it almost never happens; there are no laws against such an outburst, and with the pressures of our modern world you would almost expect to run into such a thing on a regular basis. But you don't; as a matter of fact, when I thought about it I realized that it was the first time in my life I had witnessed\textsuperscript{3} such a demonstration. In all the meals I have had in all the restaurants, I had never seen a person start screaming at the top of his lungs.\textsuperscript{5}

When you are eating among other people, you do not raise your voice;\textsuperscript{6} it is just an example of the unwritten rules we live by. When you consider it, you recognize that those rules probably govern our lives on a more absolute basis than the ones you could find if you looked in the lawbooks. The customs that govern us are what make a civilization; there would be chaos\textsuperscript{6} without them, and yet for some reason—even in the disintegrating\textsuperscript{7} society of 1982—we obey them.

How many times have you been stopped at a red light late at night? You can see in all directions; there is no one else around no headlights, no police cruiser\textsuperscript{7} idling behind you. You are tired and you are in a hurry. But you wait for the light to change. There is no one to catch you if you don't, but you do it anyway. Is it for safety's sake? No; you can see that there would be no accident if you drove on. Is it to avoid getting arrested? No; you are alone. But you sit and wait.

At major athletic events, it is not uncommon to find 80,000 or 90,000 or 100,000 people sitting in the stands.\textsuperscript{8} On the playing field are two dozen athletes; maybe fewer. There are nowhere near enough security guards on hand to keep the people from getting out of their seats and walking onto the field en masse.\textsuperscript{5} But it never happens. Regardless of the emotion of the contest, the spectators stay in their places, and the athletes are safe in their part of the arena. The invisible barrier always holds.

In restaurants and coffee shops, people pay their checks. A simple enough concept. Yet it would be remarkably easy to wander away from a meal without paying at the end. Especially in these difficult economic times, you might expect that to become a common form of cheating. It doesn't happen very often. For whatever the unwritten rules of human conduct are, people automatically make good\textsuperscript{7} for their meals. They would no sooner walk out on a check than start screaming.

Rest rooms are marked "Men" and "Women." Often there are long lines at one or another of them, but males wait to enter their own washrooms, and women to enter theirs. In an era of sexual egalitarianism,\textsuperscript{8} you would expect impatient equality people to violate\textsuperscript{7} this rule on occasion; after all, there are private stalls inside, and it would be less inconvenient to use them than to wait. . . . It just isn't done. People obey the signs.

Even criminals obey the signs. I once covered a murder which centered
around that rule being broken. A man wanted to harm a woman—which woman apparently didn't matter. So he did the simplest thing possible. He went to a public park and walked into a rest room marked "Women"—the surest place to find what he wanted. He found it. He attacked with a knife the first woman to come in there. Her husband and young child waited outside, and the man killed her. Such a crime is not commonplace, even in a world grown accustomed to nastiness. Even the most evil elements of our society generally obey the unspoken rule: If you are not a woman, you do not go past a door marked "Women."

I know a man who, when he pulls his car up to a parking meter, will put change in the meter even if there is time left on it. He regards it as the right thing to do; he says he is not doing it just to extend the time remaining—even if there is sufficient time on the meter to cover whatever task he has to perform at the location, he will pay his own way. He believes that you are supposed to purchase your own time; the fellow before you purchased only his.

I knew another man who stole tips at bars. It was easy enough; when the person sitting next to this man would depart for the evening and leave some silver or a couple dollars for the bartender, this guy would wait until he thought no one was looking and then sweep the money over in front of him. The thing that made it unusual is that I never knew anyone else who even tried this; the rules of civility stated that you left someone else's tip on the bar until it got to the bartender, and this man stood out because he refused to comply.

There are so many rules like these—rules we all obey—that we think about them only when that rare person violates them. In the restaurant, after the man had yelled "Damn it, Sylvia" and had then completed his short tirade, there was a tentative aura among the other diners for half an hour after it happened. They weren't sure what disturbed them about what they had witnessed; they knew, though, that it violated something very basic about the way we were supposed to behave. And it bothered them—which in itself is a hopeful sign that things, more often than not, are well.

EXERCISE 7-1 Comprehension/Discussion Questions

1. What is Greene's thesis in "How Unwritten Rules Circumscribe Our Lives"?
2. What are some of the examples he gives to support it?
3. Are all of his examples equally strong? Do any of them strike you as unconvincing?
4. Why is it important that the laws discussed by the writer are unwritten? Do you agree that these laws govern our lives more strongly than written ones?
5. Which of the laws given by the writer are true in your culture? Give examples to support your answer.
6. Can you give additional examples of unwritten laws in any culture?
7. In your view, which unwritten laws mentioned in the essay seem basic to life in any civilized society and which seem relatively minor matters of form or taste? Explain your answers.
8. Where does Greene first state his thesis? Does he state it again? If so, where? Do you think his organization is effective?
9. Are the author's examples selected from a broad enough range of experience to support his thesis effectively?
10. Why are so many of Greene's examples exceptions, that is, examples of people who do not follow the unwritten laws?

Internet Activity: Composition Skills and the Internet

As the Internet has grown, an Internet culture has developed. When you are sending e-mail or joining a newsgroup, you need to know the "rules of the Internet" and the culture of the group you are joining. The term "netiquette" has come to mean the "etiquette" or rules of the Internet. To learn more about this, do a keyword for "netiquette." Then, test your knowledge of Internet culture by taking this "Netiquette quiz" [http://www.albion.com/netiquette/netiquiz.html]. Then, discuss this question with your classmates: Why are the rules for appropriate behavior on the Internet often written down so clearly? Why don't people usually write down the rules for cultural behavior?

EXERCISE 7-2 Vocabulary Development The following idiomatic expressions are used in Greene’s essay. Study the sections of the reading in which the expressions occur. From the context clues or surrounding information, determine the meaning of each idiomatic expression. Then use each one in an original sentence.

1. at the top of his voice (par. 4)

2. at the top of his lungs (par. 5)

3. run into (par. 5)

4. raise your voice (par. 6)