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A SHORT GUIDE TO

*Writing
about
Literature*

SIXTH EDITION

Sylvan Barnet

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Tufts University



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Preface

Favorable response to the fifth edition has allowed me to revise the book again. Many changes have been made throughout, but the most obvious is the greatly increased amount of writing by students—annotations, preliminary notes, entries in journals, drafts, as well as six new essays by students. Less obvious but also important are new lists of questions that writers can ask themselves in order to generate ideas for essays.

Part One (three chapters emphasizing the close connection between reading and writing) assumes that we can't write well unless we can read well. If nothing else, we must be able to read *our own* prose thoughtfully. Reading, after all, is a way of getting ideas for writing. These early chapters emphasize the importance in the writing process of such activities as annotating a text, brainstorming, keeping a journal, and (especially) asking oneself questions in order to generate ideas. (Oddly, these activities are often called "pre-writing," but in fact they are part of the process of writing.)

Part Two, on writing about essays, fiction, poetry, drama, and film, introduces the reader to the elements of each genre, but looks back to Part One and provides some drafts and essays by students on representative works. In accordance with the assumption in Part One that asking oneself questions is an invaluable way of getting ideas, each chapter on writing about a genre ends with a list of questions that readers may ask themselves as they read, reread, and think about a work.

Part Three contains three chapters. The first of these, "Style and Format," is a fairly short and direct approach to the elements of clear writing. It treats such matters as denotation, connotation, subordination, paragraphs, and so forth, and it provides numerous examples of effective writing. The latter part of the chapter, devoted to manuscript form, is concerned chiefly with mechanical matters, ranging from the form of the title of an essay to advice about how to introduce quotations. The second chapter in this section, "Research Papers," includes material on settling on a topic and thesis, on finding material, and on the MLA system of documentation. The third chapter briefly discusses essay examinations.

Two appendixes conclude the book: The first includes two stories ("Young Goodman Brown" and "The Lottery") that are the subjects of student essays, and the second provides a glossary of literary terms.

I hope that the preceding remarks tell readers all they want to know about the scope of the book, but some further words must be added. Dr. Johnson said, "There is not so poor a book in the world that would not be a prodigious effort were it wrought out entirely by a single mind, without the aid of previous investigators." I cannot name all the previous investigators who have helped shape my ideas about literature, about writing about literature, and about teaching writing, but I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Morton Berman, William Burto, and Marcia Stubbs, who never tire of improving my pages, and (at HarperCollins) to Judith Leet and Lisa Moore. Others who have offered valuable suggestions include Rebecca Argall, James Blake, Randall Brune, David Cavitch, Warren Chelline, Charles Christensen, William Evans, Shearle Furnish, Bruce Golden, Okey Goode, Patricia Graves, Dean Hall, James Heldman, Deena Linnett, William T. Liston, Janet Madden, Gratia Murphy, J. M. Pair, Diane Quantic, Virginia Shale, Beverly Shields, Isabel Bonnyman Stanley, and Tom Zaniello. My thanks, too, to the PC&F staff, who turned a messy manuscript into a handsome book.

Sylvan Barnet

A Key to Types of Writing Assignments

The index is the best guide if you want to draw together all references to a given topic, such as references to “character” or “theme,” but the following key may be useful if you want to locate material—especially a sample essay—that will be of assistance in writing a particular kind of essay. Because the topics are not mutually exclusive, most of the sample essays are listed more than once.

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