

DIMENSIONS

Essays for Composition

THOMAS H. BROWN

JEFFREY T. GROSS

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PREFACE

The title of this book, *Dimensions*, suggests what the editors have attempted to provide—a wide variety of essays by writers who examine or comment on various phases of human life. The collection is arranged thematically, beginning with early childhood experiences, moving through adolescence and early adulthood to the universal desire of mature adults to transmit to younger generations the values that have shaped and guided their lives.

The title also refers to the range of writing styles and talents included in the book, in an attempt to demonstrate that there is no one correct style but that style is largely the product of a strong personality grappling with a subject. Some essays have been included not because their styles are worthy of emulation but because they represent all too vividly the danger of jargon and careless writing. These examples are infrequent and should be apparent to both teacher and student. Much is to be gained by a thoughtful discussion of why a piece of writing is *not* particularly good. Outside the English classroom the student is going to confront all kinds of writing, bad as well as good; the belief that all that is printed must be good must be assaulted.

It is a commonplace that writers should write from experience. They should draw upon their own firsthand observation and memory to supply the specific details that give writing vitality. The editors believe that what beginning writers know best and what they are most interested in are their own life experiences. As Henry David Thoreau, one of America's greatest writers, has observed, "I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me."

This book begins, then, with a number of essays written in the first-person, autobiographical, narrative mode, because this is the mode most easily emulated by the beginning writer. As individuals grow and mature, their horizons expand, and they begin to look outward, away from the self, and to view themselves more objectively. That pattern is exemplified by the increasing number of objective essays in the later chapters of this book.

Each essay, except those designated as “For Further Reading,” is followed by study and discussion aids. Many potentially troublesome words are defined within their context, but the editors believe that students should not be entirely absolved of the responsibility and the challenge of making judicious use of their own dictionaries. The discussion questions begin with asking *what* the essay is about, and move to an examination of *how* the essay is structured, *how* evidence is marshaled, and *what effect* is intended for its audience.

We pose four categories of questions about each of the readings. In *Thesis/Topic* we are concerned primarily with helping students to determine two things about the essay. In the first place they must determine the *topic*, what the essay is about. This is not always as easy as it seems. For instance, the very first essay, “A Parent’s View,” seems to be about the activities of children, and more specifically about the actions of Kerr’s son, Christopher. But the real topic is how parents view the activities of children. In this case it pays to take the title of the essay seriously. Some essays, on the other hand, present hidden topics. H. L. Mencken’s “The Nature of Liberty” is not exactly about liberty. “Pericles’ Funeral Oration” at first seems to be a speech in praise of those who died for their country, but in fact the real topic is Athens itself.

Having identified the topic, it is important to determine what point the author wants to make about it. This is called the *thesis*. In chapter 4 Suzanne Gordon describes singles bars because she wants to make the point that they are places of loneliness and frustration. Boroson’s essay “Workaholics,” in chapter 5, describes a certain personality, but the essay goes beyond mere description to make important points about productivity and creativity.

The distinction between *thesis* and *topic* is particularly important because it is precisely in this area that most student essays go wrong. In composition classes students are generally assigned topics and find it difficult to make any real point about them. If asked to write a description, students produce a dull catalogue of the contents of their rooms. They never decide what they want to say about that room. On the other hand, if they are able to develop a *thesis*—for instance that dormitory rooms are designed to prevent sleep and make study impossible—they are on the right path. Each of the essays in this reader has a clearly

identifiable point or thesis to make, and in analyzing individual essays for both thesis and topic students can develop a sense of what Sheridan Baker calls the "aboutness" of a subject.

The second category of questions, *Structure/Transition*, seeks to make the student aware of how essays are put together. The term *structure* refers to the ways in which the authors take a number of disparate elements and put them together to form a single unit, whether it is a sentence, a paragraph, or an essay. Such essays as Marc Fasteau's "Friendships Among Men" illustrate clearly a structure based on cause and effect. In the first part of the essay Fasteau describes in some detail a particular effect—the ways in which American men relate to one another. This is followed by an orderly analysis of the causes of this behavior. Structure is also concerned with the repetition of words and phrases to pull an essay together. At the beginning of his essay, George Plimpton recounts Cornell president White's description of football as "agitating a bag of wind." Then Plimpton repeats the phrase at the end of the essay as a way of tying everything together.

In the *Structure/Transition* category there is the usual attention to introductions and conclusions, but there is also a particular emphasis on *transition*, the means by which a writer moves from one thought to the next and makes that movement clear and easy for the reader. The various transition devices include certain key words and phrases (*another reason, on the other hand, also, nevertheless, because*).

The third category, *Evidence/Example*, examines the means by which authors prove the points they wish to make. In these questions there is an emphasis on the use of concrete examples to illustrate or prove a point. Too often beginning writers settle for bland generalization over specific fact. Many of the essays in *Dimensions* are autobiographical, with an emphasis on writing that is full of concrete details and descriptions. In "Sister Flowers" Maya Angelou describes Mrs. Bertha Flowers. "Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged. . . . I don't think I ever saw Mrs. Flowers laugh, but she smiled often. A slow widening of her thin black lips to show even, small white teeth, then the slow effortless closing." James Thurber fills "Courtship Through the Ages" with specific examples of bizarre courtship patterns of animals. "The male bird is, of course, pretty well done in before the chase starts, because he has worn himself out hunting for eyeglass lenses and begonia blossoms. . . . The male fiddler crab . . . has one enormously large and powerful claw, usually brilliantly colored, and you might suppose that all he had to do was reach out and grab some passing cutie."

More formal essays, such as Fasteau's "Friendships Among Men," marshal authorities in support of their arguments, and even in an informal essay George Plimpton cites authorities to back up some of his

points. The constant focus of the questions on evidence and example is to make the student see how concrete examples are used both to clarify and to prove the central point of the essay.

Finally, *Dimensions* includes a section of questions on *audience* and *tone*. Writers often get so lost in themselves and their subjects that they forget they are addressing a particular audience—whether that audience consists of a jaundiced composition instructor or an outraged customer who wants to know why his order is three weeks late. In order to help the student become conscious of different audiences and how they must be addressed, *Dimensions* includes several speeches delivered to particular audiences on special occasions—for instance, John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, in which he addressed the American people at a particular moment and tried to give them some sense of the American destiny. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner addressed a distinguished assemblage of scholars, scientists, and politicians.

In addition almost every chapter contains essays on the same general topic addressed to different audiences. Erma Bombeck's essay in chapter 2 is aimed at the American housewives who read her syndicated column in their daily newspapers. In the same chapter, Mark Twain gives ironic advice to high-school students, and Harold Rosenberg addresses a well-educated, mature audience. The easiest way to determine the intended audience for a given work is to examine the vocabulary used, and most of the questions focus on the author's choice of words.

The author's vocabulary also gives the readers the best clue to the tone of the essay. *Tone* refers to the author's attitude toward his subject matter. It may be serious or comic, scholarly or casual, outraged or disinterested. *Tone* is closely related to *audience*, because it is through control of tone that the author manipulates the audience to adopt a particular attitude toward his subject. For instance, in chapter 3 Robert Benchley invites us to laugh at college life.

The best way to discuss tone is through comparison of different works on the same general topic. Therefore each chapter contains essays that exhibit various tones. In chapter 5 Louis B. Wright's "The Gospel of Work" has a fairly straightforward, objective, and rather scholarly tone. The essay opens as follows: "In the tradition of American life, few ideas have received greater prominence than the notion of the dignity of labor and the virtue of diligent application to one's job, whatever it might be." Such words as "prominence" and "diligent" indicate that the tone is serious. Bonnie Angelo's "Good Ole Boys" begins, however, "It is Friday night at any of ten thousand watering holes of the small towns and crossroads hamlets of the South. The room is a cacophony of the ping-pong-dingding of the pinball machine, the pop-fizz of another round of Pabst, the refrain of *Red Necks, White Socks and Blue*

Ribbon Beer on the juke box.” The fairly formal tone that might be suggested by “cacophony” is more than offset by such expressions as “ping-pong-dingdingding of the pinball machine” and “another round of Pabst.”

If students will consider seriously both the questions and the basic categories at the end of each selection, they will be better prepared to write coherent, interesting, and concrete essays.

Technical terms that may be unfamiliar to the student are italicized in the text and defined in a glossary at the end of the book. We have provided a “Brief Guide to Major Rhetorical Modes” to help students in writing their own essays.

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