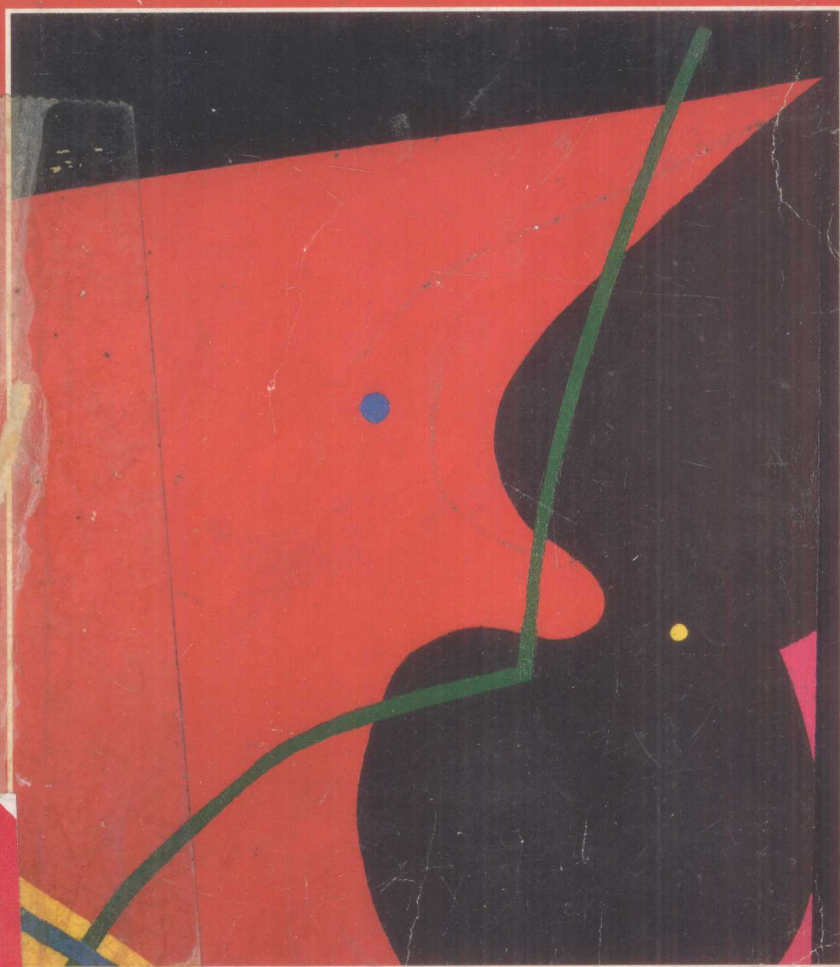


A WRITER'S READER

Donald Hall • D.L. Emblen



Fifth
Edition

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Donald Hall

D. L. Emblen

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Preface

Reading well precedes writing well. Of all the ancestors claimed by a fine piece of prose, the most important is the prose from which the writer learned his craft. Writers learn craft, not by memorizing rules about restrictive clauses, but by striving to equal a standard formed from reading.

A composition course, then, must be two courses: one in reading, another in writing. If students lack practice in writing, they are usually unpracticed readers as well. Most students lack quality of reading as well as quantity; and if we assert that good models help us, we admit that bad models hurt us. People who read bad prose twelve hours a week—newspapers, popular fiction, textbooks—are as ill-served as people who read nothing at all. Surely most textbooks, from freshman handbooks through the text for Psych 101, encourage the illusion that words merely stand in for ideas, or carry information on their backs—that words exist for the convenience of thinking much as turnpikes exist for the sake of automobiles.

This barbarism underlies the vogue of speed reading, which urges us to scan lines for comprehension, ignoring syntax and metaphor, ignoring image and feeling and sound. If we are to grow and to learn—and surely if we are to write well—we must learn to read slowly and intimately, and to read good writing. We must learn to read actively, even aggressively, without the passivity derived from watching television. The active reader questions as he reads, subjects each author's ideas to skeptical scrutiny, and engages the writer in dialogue as part of the reading process.

For language embodies the human psyche. Learning to read—that privilege so recently extended to the ancestors of most of us—allows us to enter human history. In books we perceive the gesture, the pulse,

the heartbeat, the pallor, the eye movement, the pitch, and the tone of people who lived before us, or who live now in other places, in other skins, in other habits, customs, beliefs, and ideas.

Language *embodies* the human psyche, which includes ideas and the feelings that properly accompany ideas. There is no sleight-of-mind by which the idea may be separated from its body and remain alive. The body of good writing is rhythm and image, metaphor and syntax, order of phrase and order of paragraph.

A NOTE TO LATER EDITIONS

Many teachers helped us prepare the second edition of *A Writer's Reader*—in letters, in conversations at colleges all over the country, in responses to a Little, Brown survey of users. We thank more people than we can list.

We have added considerable material, and we are pleased with the result. We believe that we have made a representative sampling of good prose. We like some pieces more than others, heaven knows, but we believe that all of them provide something to learn from. We have included a wide variety of American prose, not only contemporary but historical, with high points of our history represented in their own style and syntax. We hope that young Americans will attach themselves to the body of their history by immersion in its significant utterances.

We have numbered paragraphs for ease of reference. Although *A Writer's Reader* is a collection of essays, we have again violated coherence by including fiction, feeling that the contrast afforded by a few short stories among the essays was useful and refreshing. For this edition, we have gone further afield and included several poems, for the same reason. Perhaps we should make an argument for including poems—but let us just say that we enjoy them, and we hope you do too. To satisfy students' curiosity, we have included headnotes to the poems; but we have stopped short of suggesting questions after them, lest we seem to surround a landscape garden with a hundred-foot-high concrete wall.

We have chosen to arrange our essays, stories, and poems alphabetically by author. This arrangement makes for random juxtaposition, irrational sequence, and no sense at all—which is why we chose it. We expect no one to teach these pieces in alphabetical order. (We expect teachers to find their own order—which they would do whatever order we attempted to impose.) In our first edition we struggled to make a stylistic organization, listing some essays as examples of "Sentences,"

others as examples of "Paragraphs." For the editors themselves, a year after deciding on our organization, it was no longer clear why essay X was to be studied for its sentences, essay Y for its paragraphs. With a rhetorical organization, one runs into another sort of problem. Although an essay may contain Division, or Process Analysis, or an example of Example, the same essay is likely to use three or four other patterns as well. No piece of real prose is ever so pure as our systems of classification. Thematic organizations, which have their attractions, have similar flaws; is E. B. White's theme, in "Once More to the Lake," Mortality? Aging? Youth and Age? or, How I Spent My Summer Vacation?

Our arrangement is more arbitrary than an arrangement by style or rhetoric or theme, and presents itself only to be ignored. At the same time, there are dozens of ways in which these essays (and poems and stories) can be used together. Our Instructor's Manual suggests several combinations. Our Rhetorical Index, printed as an appendix to the text itself, lists single-paragraph examples of rhetorical patterns as well as longer units. We hope that students will find the Rhetorical Index useful. Freshmen who return to their rooms from class, set to write a paper using Comparison and Contrast, sometimes find themselves in need of a concrete example of the assigned pattern to imitate.

Thus, we have tried to supply some useful maps to go with our arbitrary arrangement. We have also added a Thematic Index. Following suggestions from several teachers, we have chosen to represent a few authors by small clusters of their work. We have expanded our representation of writing by scientists. In response to many suggestions, we have looked for short, complete essays in exposition and argument on a variety of topics.

If we have omitted essays or authors you miss, please let us know. If there are authors we overlook, whom you would recommend, we solicit your help. Although we intend to remain alert, to good prose and to the needs of the classroom, we need help from the outside.

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Contents

- 1** EDWARD ABBEY
Science with a Human Face 1
"I can only repeat the charge, itself a banality but no less true for being so, that science in our time is the whore of industry and the slut of war. . . ."
- 2** HENRY ADAMS
Winter and Summer 8
"Winter and summer, then, were two hostile lives, and bred two separate natures. Winter was always the effort to live; summer was tropical license."
- 3** JAMES AGEE
Knoxville: Summer 1915 15
"We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child."
- 4** WOODY ALLEN
Death Knocks 20
"Death: I remind him of Moe Lefkowitz. I'm one of the most terrifying figures you could possibly imagine, and him I remind of Moe Lefkowitz."
- 5** MAYA ANGELOU
Mr. Red Leg 29
"So during the age when Mother was exposing us to certain facts of life, like personal hygiene, proper posture, table manners, good restaurants and tipping practices, Daddy Clidell taught me to play poker, blackjack, tonk and high, low, Jick, Jack and the Game."

- 6** BARBARA LAZEAR ASCHER
On the Road with the College Applicant 35
"Lack of sleep and fear of rejection take their toll. My daughter has become crazed. Every high school senior I know has become crazed."
- 7** MARGARET ATWOOD
Pornography 40
"In a society that advertises and glorifies rape or even implicitly condones it, more women get raped. It becomes socially acceptable."
- 8** FRANCIS BACON
The Sphinx 47
"The fable adds very prettily that when the Sphinx was subdued, her body was laid on the back of an ass: for there is nothing so subtle and abstruse, but when it is once thoroughly understood and published to the world, even a dull wit can carry it."
- 9** JAMES BALDWIN
Autobiographical Notes 51
"One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give."
- 10** JOHN BERGER
Her Secrets 57
"Every time I went to bed—and in this I am sure I was like millions of other children—the fear that one or both of my parents might die in the night touched the nape of my neck with its finger."
- 11** WENDELL BERRY
A Native Hill 63
"The pristine America that the first white men saw is a lost continent, sunk like Atlantis in the sea. . . . I walk knee-deep in its absence."
- 12** AMBROSE BIERCE
Some Devil's Definitions 75
"Education, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding."

- 13** CAROLINE BIRD
Where College Fails Us 79
"Too many young people are in college reluctantly, because everyone told them they ought to go, and there didn't seem to be anything better to do."
- 14** ROY BLOUNT, JR.
How to Raise Your Boy to Play Pro Ball 90
"Not many occupations today bring together fighting and working the way football does. But working was a kind of fighting for Owen."
- 15** JIMMY BRESLIN
Dies the Victim, Dies the City 96
"Billy Mabry turned his head. Behind him was this little guy of maybe eighteen, wearing a red sweater, dark pants, and black gun."
- 16** BRUCE CATTON
Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts 100
"They were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision."
- 17** LYNNE V. CHENEY
Students of Success 105
"College should be a time for learning to enjoy the life of the mind rather than for learning to tolerate what one doesn't find interesting."
- 18** EVAN CONNELL, JR.
A Brief Essay on the Subject of Celebrity with Numerous Digressions and Particular Attention to the Actress, Rita Hayworth 109
"Nor can there be the least doubt that the United States of America is mad. Symptoms are too numerous to catalogue. Let us take one, possibly two . . ."
- 19** FRANK CONROY
A Yo-Yo Going Down 119
"The witty nonsense of Eating Spaghetti, the surprise of The Twirl, the complex neatness of Cannonball, Backwards round the World, or Halfway round the World—I could do them all . . ."

- 20** EMILY DICKINSON
There's a certain Slant of light 127
"When it comes, the Landscape listens—Shadows—hold
their breath . . ."
- 21** JOAN DIDION
On Keeping a Notebook 129
"It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose
that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about."
- 22** ANNIE DILLARD
Strangers to Darkness 137
"But shadows spread and deepened and stayed. After
thousands of years we're still strangers to darkness, fear-
ful aliens in an enemy camp with our arms crossed over
our chests."
- 23** ANNIE DILLARD
Sojourner 140
"The planet itself is a sojourner in airless space, a wet ball
flung across nowhere. The few objects in the universe
scatter."
- 24** FREDERICK DOUGLASS
Plantation Life 144
"As I received my first impressions of slavery on this plan-
tation, I will give some description of it, and of slavery
as it there existed."
- 25** LOREN EISELEY
More Thoughts on Wilderness 150
"Nothing grows among its pinnacles; there is no shade
except under great toadstools of sandstone whose bases
have been eaten to the shape of wine glasses by the wind."
- 26** RALPH ELLISON
On Becoming a Writer 153
"Like Huck, we observed, we judged, we imitated and
evaded as we could the dullness, corruption, and blind-
ness of 'civilization.'"

27 NORA EPHRON
A Few Words about Breasts: Shaping Up Absurd 161

"Even though I was outwardly a girl and had many of the trappings generally associated with the field of girlhood—a girl's name, for example, and dresses, my own telephone, an autograph book—I spent the early years of my adolescence absolutely certain that I might at any point gum it up."

28 WILLIAM FAULKNER
A Rose for Emily 170

"When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house. . . ."

29 ROBERT FROST
Design 180

"What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern a thing so small."

30 ROBERT FROST
In White 182

"What but design of darkness and of night?
Design, design! do I use the word aright?"

31 ROBERT FROST
The Figure a Poem Makes 183

"If it is a wild tune, it is a poem."

32 MARTIN GANSBERG
38 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police 187

"For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens."

33 STEPHEN JAY GOULD
The Politics of Census 191

"The census has always been controversial because it was established as a political device, not as an expensive frill to satisfy curiosity and feed academic mills."

- 34** LILLIAN HELLMAN
Runaway 198
"I had four dollars and two bits, but that wasn't much when you meant it to last forever and when you knew it would not be easy for a fourteen-year-old girl to find work in a city where too many people knew her."
- 35** ERNEST HEMINGWAY
Hills Like White Elephants 205
" 'Would you do something for me now?'
'I'd do anything for you.'
'Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?' "
- 36** EDWARD HOAGLAND
What I Think, What I Am 211
"A personal essay is like the human voice talking, its order the mind's natural flow, instead of a systemized outline of ideas."
- 37** LANGSTON HUGHES
Salvation 215
"God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved."
- 38** LANGSTON HUGHES
Two Poems 218
"Cause you don't love me
Is awful, awful hard."
- 39** THOMAS JEFFERSON
The Declarations of Jefferson and of the Congress 220
"I will state the form of the declaration as originally reported. The parts struck out by Congress shall be distinguished by a black line drawn under them; & those inserted by them shall be placed in the margin or in a concurrent column."
- 40** ETHERIDGE KNIGHT
The Idea of Ancestry 226
"Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers . . ."

- 41** ROBIN LAKOFF
You Are What You Say 228
 "Having learned our linguistic lesson well, we go out in the world, only to discover that we are communicative cripples—damned if we do, and damned if we don't."
- 42** ABRAHAM LINCOLN
The Gettysburg Address 235
 "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."
- 43** BARRY LOPEZ
The Stone Horse 237
 "What finally made me move was the light. The sun now filled the shallow basin of the horse's body. The weighted line of the stone berm created the illusion of a mane and the distinctive roundness of an equine belly."
- 44** NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI
How a Prince Should Keep His Word 244
 "Since, then, a prince must know how to make good use of the nature of the beast, he should choose from among the beasts the fox and the lion. . . ."
- 45** BERYL MARKHAM
He Was a Good Lion 248
 "I still have the scars of his teeth and claws, but they are very small now and almost forgotten. . . ."
- 46** ANDREW MARVELL
To His Coy Mistress 255
 "The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace."
- 47** JOYCE CAROL OATES
On Boxing 257
 "The boxing ring comes to seem an altar of sorts, one of those legendary magical spaces where the laws of a nation are suspended: Inside the ropes, during an officially regulated three-minute round, a man may be killed at his opponent's hands but he cannot be legally murdered."

- 48** FLANNERY O'CONNOR
The Total Effect and the Eighth Grade 262
"Like the college student who write in her paper on Lincoln that he went to the movies and got shot, many students go to college unaware that the world was not made yesterday. . . ."
- 49** FLANNERY O'CONNOR
A Good Man Is Hard to Find 267
"'. . . it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,' he said. . . ."
- 50** FLANNERY O'CONNOR
From Flannery O'Connor's Letters 283
"The interpretation of your ninety students and three teachers is fantastic and about as far from my intentions as it could get to be."
- 51** GEORGE ORWELL
Politics and the English Language 292
"But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can be spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better."
- 52** GEORGE ORWELL
Shooting an Elephant 306
"And suddenly I realized I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it. . . ."
- 53** GEORGE ORWELL
A Hanging 314
"It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man."

- 54** ELEANOR PERÉNYI
Partly Cloudly 320
 "No wonder the prospect of a little bad weather makes us nervous. We aren't equipped to handle it physically or—what is more important in the long run—psychologically either."
- 55** SYLVIA PLATH
Journal Entries: Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers 326
 "They began looking for the old queen. Slide after slide was lifted, examined on both sides. To no avail. Myriads of crawling, creeping bees."
- 56** SYLVIA PLATH
The Bee Meeting 331
 "The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing.
 The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?"
- 57** DAVID QUAMMEN
The Big Goodbye 334
 "In this tricentennial year of the extinction of *Raphus cucullatus*, the giant flightless Mauritian pigeon, it is worth remembering that *Homo sapiens* too could become part of the Late Quaternary Extinction. . . ."
- 58** CHET RAYMO
Dinosaurs and Creationists 340
 "In spite of setbacks in the courts, fundamentalists maintain pressure on school boards, state legislators and textbook publishers to include creation science in school curricula. . . ."
- 59** JAMES C. RETTIE
"But a Watch in the Night": A Scientific Fable 343
 "The Copernicans, it seems, had time-lapse cameras some 757 million years ago and they also had superpowered telescopes that gave them a clear view of what was happening upon this Earth."

- 60** RAINER MARIA RILKE
On Love 350
"And this more human love . . . consists in this: that two
solitudes protect and border and greet each other."
- 61** CARL SAGAN
Nuclear Winter 355
"There is little question that our global civilization would
be destroyed. The human population would be reduced
to prehistoric levels, or less. Life for any survivors would
be extremely hard. And there seems to be a real possibility
of the extinction of the human species."
- 62** WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
That time of year thou mayst in me behold 363
"In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west . . ."
- 63** DON SHARP
Under the Hood 364
"To be wrong about inflation or the political aspirations
of the Albanians doesn't cost anybody anything, but to
claim to know why the car won't start and then to be
proved wrong is both embarrassing and costly."
- 64** SUE SHELLNBARGER
Selling Off the Family Farm 373
"Bidding for the harvester comes to a close. My father
shakes the hand of a friend. 'Well,' he says, 'I guess I'm
out of business.'"
- 65** LESLIE MARMON SILKO
Slim Man Canyon 379
"700 years ago
people were living here"
- 66** PAGE SMITH
The New Abolitionism 381
"To inform the world that we may have to destroy the
greater part of it in order to save it from Communism
(or anything else) is an arrogant presumption. . . ."