

PROGRESSIONS

READINGS

FOR

WRITERS

BETSY S.
HILBERT



Progressions

Readings for Writers

BETSY S. HILBERT

Miami-Dade Community College



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Preface

Students arrive in my classes these days like the gods in Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Days," each one bearing different gifts. They represent in their diversity the student populations that colleges have come to know: a marvelous mix of people with a wide and fascinating range of cultural backgrounds, language abilities, ages, genders, political convictions, social attitudes, intentions, ambitions, academic preparations. Many of these students have had superb academic training; many more need quantities of help. Their backgrounds may be widely diverse, but their processes as learners are remarkably similar. They need to be accepted and feel acceptable; to be challenged and encouraged forward; to be safe from destructive criticism or unalloyed failure; and to be guided step-by-step toward greater growth. On the first day of class, they wonder: *Will it be easy? Will it be hard? Will it be interesting? Will I be able to do this?* The answer to each of those questions ought to be Yes.

Step-by-Step to Increasing Literacy

The plan of this book is to help students move progressively to greater successes and further challenges. It goes, in brief, from easy to hard—from short, straightforward pieces at the beginning to longer, more complex readings at the end. In the first few chapters readers will find punchy, rapid readings, beautiful examples of skillful short prose, and then they will move onward to the rich, complex essays at the end, intended to challenge the best readers in the classroom (instructor included). All along the continuum, the emphasis is on adult themes, and the emotional and intellectual content of each piece—wherever it is placed—should lead to lively class discussion.

Much of the challenge and interest of this book also comes from the wide variety of writing. Students will discover here many types and styles of essays, in addition to editorials, memoirs, short fiction, poetry,

and biography. The idea is to honor the diversity of readers with a corresponding diversity of subjects, approaches, genres, themes, and authors.

Organization

The readings in this book are divided into seven groups, by length and reading level. "Short Prose and the Mini-Essay" is a collection of short pieces designed to intrigue a wide range of students and encourage active writing and class discussion. "Clarity, Economy, and Style" also consists of complete short works, demonstrating tight focus and economy as they stretch language and vocabulary skills. Second-language English students will easily apprehend the pieces in these first two sections, while expanding their vocabularies and usage, and even excellent readers will find the content compelling. The third section, "Organizing Patterns," shows students various structures and approaches, illustrating and explaining rhetorical organization. "Critical Thought" presents a somewhat more difficult intellectual challenge, including arguments to serve as models and sources for discussion and response. The essays in this section also have somewhat longer paragraphing than earlier selections, and increased vocabulary level. "From Experience to Issues" provides longer, more developed personal essays; and from those full-length biographical pieces students move on to the sixth level, "Textual Challenges," developing analytic and interpretive skills as they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. Finally, "Eloquence and Expertise" provides philosophically and stylistically advanced readings, including modernist prose, each piece a rewarding workout for the intellect and spirit.

In Focus

The study questions, writing assignments, and In Focus discussions also move progressively from reading into writing. Study questions in the early chapters tend to focus on understanding and interpretation, while the later study questions and writing assignments move to critical thinking and in-depth analysis. The writing assignments are diverse by design, drawing heavily on personal experience in the early parts of the book and moving toward more-critical and argumentative prose, some involving research, at the end. Students will find a good deal to talk about, both in class and on paper, with the topics engendered by the study questions and writing assignments.

The In Focus essays that follow most of the reading selections are

brief, informative discussions on various points of reading and writing, distillations of what readers and writers ought to know. (A selection without its own In Focus essay further illustrates the previous discussion.) These selections are also designed to run progressively, going from “basic” discussions such as explanations of subject, theme, thesis, and purpose in the early sections to advanced literary perceptions and techniques in the later chapters. In no case, even with the earliest, shortest prose selections, does an In Focus discussion run longer than the piece itself. Students need plenty of information about literacy and composition, and we have provided plenty, but we also believe, from long experience on both sides of the teaching desk, that extended lecturing about writing can often create more inattention than education. The In Focus pieces are short, pithy, and packed with information on how to read and write effectively; they accomplish their purposes in as little space possible.

Wide-ranging Subject Matter

This book takes a different direction from the many composition texts that organize contents by topic or theme, even though alternative tables of contents organized by subjects and by rhetorical modes have been provided for instructors who prefer those approaches. The emphasis of this reading is on expressive and interpretive ability. It operates from the conviction that any subject can be made interesting when a competent writer interacts with an open-minded reader. It challenges the stereotype that only certain kinds of content will attract certain kinds of readers, and encourages students to become more open-minded about the subjects that might interest them.

Thus, the major criterion for inclusion in this book was simply *Is it wonderful writing?* The choices of contents followed Salman Rushdie’s description of literature from *Imaginary Homelands*, his parable of a house with many rooms and with voices in every room: “The voices are talking about the house, about everyone in it, about everything that is happening and has happened and should happen.”

Increasing Literacy in the Community of Readers and Writers

When the selections in this book were field-tested in composition classrooms, the student response was gratifying: “This is different,” they said. “This is definitely *interesting*.” Readers were captured by the human interest and drama of many of the selections, fiction and nonfiction. They saw reflections of their own lives, even when the events described were far from their own experiences. They began (with a little help from their instructors) to recognize the various

techniques involved in skillful writing of any kind. Reading and writing were improving together.

This book responds to—and celebrates—the differences and diversities of the contemporary college English classroom and of the literatures it teaches. Above all, the book is intended to convey the variety, importance, and pleasures of the written word.

Acknowledgments

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Above all, the Hilbert/Sokolof/Cohen clan loved and supported me in this endeavor, as in everything else. This book comes out of a lifetime of joy in reading, and so it is dedicated in loving memory to the person who first taught me how to read: my sister, Muriel Cohen.

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