

ABOUT

LANGUAGE

*A Reader for Writers*

*Second Edition*

ROBERTS



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*A Reader for Writers*

*Second Edition*

WILLIAM H. ROBERTS  
*University of Lowell*

GREGOIRE TURGEON

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For Matt, Amy, and Becky

For my father, the best teacher

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# Preface

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This second edition of *About Language: A Reader for Writers* is meant to help students become more conscious of language and more able to use it responsibly. The choice of reading selections was guided by our belief that an introduction to the complex, subtle, and manipulative nature of language will help students understand the ways in which language shapes our world and thought—and that such an awareness will help students to write with more skill and confidence.

## Organization and Coverage

*About Language* is an anthology of sixty-one classic and contemporary reading selections, organized around ten language issues:

- Chapter 1, "The Process of Writing," looks at prewriting, writing, and revising through the eyes of such writers as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, William Zinsser, and Donald Hall. The chapter also includes an unusually sensitive essay by Pico Iyer, "In Praise of the Humble Comma," published in 1988 in *Time*.
- Chapter 2, "Names and Naming," examines the names we give to people and places—from surnames to women's names to nicknames to place names—and discusses what these names in turn reveal about us.
- Chapter 3, "Dictionaries," looks at the origin of dictionaries, the process of compiling dictionaries, and the sometimes surprising influence of dictionaries (Malcolm X, "Get Hold of a Dictionary"). The chapter also includes an article on the role of the lexicographer, written expressly for this edition of *About Language*, by Anne Soukhanov, executive editor of the American Heritage dictionaries.
- Chapter 4, "Language Development," has essays on the origin of language (Charles Barber, Lewis Thomas), the history of the English language (Paul Roberts), and the growth of American English (H. L. Mencken). A recently published, entertaining article by Susan Trausch looks at how rapidly language can change.
- Chapter 5, "Slang, Taboo, and Euphemism," explores the origins, contexts, and implications of these aspects of language. John Updike's short story "A&P" is included to show how slang contrasted with more formal language can represent the transition from adolescence to adulthood.
- Chapter 6, "Language, Identity, and Discrimination," examines how language can include and exclude people from groups and also set one group apart from others. Several points of view are presented in essays

on black speech, bilingualism, and sexism and racism in language. A 1987 article by Alfie Kohn explores recent sociolinguistic research on the difference between male and female speech patterns.

- Chapter 7, "Jargon," analyzes both the uses and abuses of "in-language," especially in such fields as medicine, journalism, education, and law. "Legal Trees," a poem first published in 1988 in the *Atlantic*, parodies in legal language Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees."
- Chapter 8, "Language and Advertising" reveals the subtle, persuasive, manipulative use of language in advertising. In addition to essays—from Daniel Boorstin's "The Rhetoric of Democracy" to Carl Wrighter's "Weasel Words: God's Little Helpers"—the chapter reproduces six advertisements for students to analyze.
- Chapter 9, "The Political Voice," includes George Orwell's classic "Politics and the English Language," two presidential speeches, and other essays that explore the ways in which politicians use language to lead, inspire—and deceive. Paul Chilton's "Nukespeak: Nuclear Language, Culture, and Propaganda" explores a frightening new language.
- Chapter 10, "Language and Technology," explores issues from writing with a word processor to the effect of computers on everyday language. The last essay in the text, "The Multilingual Mind" by Beryl Lief Benderly, explores some recent surprising discoveries about the way the brain handles language.

## Apparatus

All reading selections are followed by questions on content, questions on structure and style, and assignments for writing and projects. The Instructor's Manual for *About Language* suggests answers to the questions following each selection. The Manual also offers ways of approaching particular selections or specific aspects of selections.

Each of the ten chapters concludes with additional assignments and research projects. Students are invited to write longer papers and to take on more complex projects or activities.

## New to the Second Edition

- Twenty-two new reading selections, many first published since 1985
- New material on many aspects of language, including bilingualism, jargon, euphemisms, "nuclear language," advertising, speech patterns, compiling dictionaries, and nicknames
- New sequence of chapters to help students build on previous knowledge (for example, advertising is now placed before politics so that

students can explore persuasive language in familiar and then less familiar contexts)

- Expanded material in “Additional Assignments and Research Topics” (for example, assignments on “Sniglets” and oxymorons in Chapter 2, which engage students in language activities that encourage creative thinking)
- Expanded Chapter 1, with substantially more material on revision
- New—and more—advertisements for students to analyze

### **Acknowledgments**

We extend thanks to our colleagues and students at the University of Lowell and to our wives, Patsy and Sue, for yet more patience and insight.

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*W.H.R. & G.T.*

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