

The Borzoi Collège Reader

FIFTH EDITION

Charles Muscatine
Marlene Griffith



The Borzoi College Reader

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University of California, Berkeley

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Laney College

Alfred A. Knopf  *New York*

Fifth Edition

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Preface

In presenting this fifth edition of our book, we want to affirm its character not only as a source of models of composition, but also as a source of ideas, ideas that are immediate occasions for critical thinking and writing.

Human values and ethical choice continue to be the underlying theme of the book. This edition contains five new groups of essays (College and Education, The Problem of Identity, Race and Prejudice, Television and Reality, and Computers and People). In addition, several of the old sections have been substantially rethought and refocused. The book is larger by twenty-five selections and contains sixty new ones. As with the earlier editions, we have done no silent editing, and most of the pieces are either complete works in themselves or coherent sections (usually chapters) of longer works. Allusions and references that cannot be found in a standard college dictionary are glossed at the foot of each page.

We have again provided headnotes that give background and other information about each piece and its writer, not only to show that significant writing comes out of real lives and careers but also to show that these lives and careers are the kind open to all college students.

In preparing this edition, we have ourselves been surprised to find how interconnected the readings are. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," for example, is a key piece in the section titled On Civil Disobedience, but it applies equally well to thinking about Race and Prejudice and about Right and Wrong. Robin Lakoff's essay, "You Are What You Say," a document on The Right Use of Language, applies equally well in the sections on The Problem of Identity, and On Women and Men. Steven Levy's article "Hackers in Paradise" in Computers and People can also be read in relation to The Good Life. The whole subsection On the Meaning of Work can be read as one facet of The Problem of Identity.

What this suggests is that ideas of sufficient importance always relate to other ideas. A collection such as this, then, introduces college students to the world of serious discourse as an interconnected structure. It shows that the subjects and ideas that lie before them do not exist in isolation but have sources, ramifications, and consequences in very different reaches of experience and knowledge.

We provide at the end of the book a rhetorical index, an index of genres,

and a table of cross-references showing which essays are particularly well related to sections other than the ones in which they appear.

A Teacher's Guide is available from the publisher.

We owe particular thanks for help with this edition to the following friends and colleagues: Ann Connor, Gertrude Fator, Katherine Fulton, Sandra Gilbert, Bob Heilbroner, Christine Hilary, Christopher Hipkin, Bruce Jacobs, Susan McCallister, Quinto Pugliese, Susan Schacher, Sandra Shair, Marie Wilson, and Smokey Wilson.

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Jean O'Meara became more a collaborator than editorial assistant. The benefit of her scholarship, judgment, and teaching experience informs the whole book.

Advice to the Student: On Reading an Essay

In offering here some practical advice on how to read an essay, we do not mean to imply that there is just one way to go at it. Essays differ, and readers differ even more, and how a given reader comes to an understanding of an author's message may be a very individual process indeed. But for our present purpose—which is to offer some initial guidance to the comparatively inexperienced reader of essays—it will be safe to assume that if you have no settled way of starting out on your own, a good way to learn is to use standard moves that have worked well for others. The method we will offer, indeed, corresponds closely to what many college teachers do when an essay is being discussed in class. Thus students who follow our suggestions in the order given will often find that they have not only read an essay critically, but have prepared themselves for active class discussion and for writing about it.

First of all, you must be prepared—and leave time—to read the essay more than once. The first reading, which may be comparatively rapid, is to get a preliminary overview. This overview—a sense of how the essay goes from beginning to end—is essential to getting a good general sense of the essay's purpose and point. That is, the two main questions one asks oneself on first reading are: What is this essay trying to do? and What is its “main idea”?

What is the essay trying to do? Why is the writer telling us what he or she is telling us? A preliminary answer is essential to appreciating the essay, to coming to a secure conclusion about what it means. Most essays are prose statements that make some kind of a point, but within that rough definition they vary as much as the motives behind any human communication can vary. The writer may be trying, as one human being to another, to share an experience; or helpfully to explain something that might be interesting or puzzling to the reader; or to persuade the reader to an opinion about something, to move him or her to action, perhaps political. Some writers may even have selfish or questionable motives: to promote

themselves or to deceive the reader. In any case, you need some general idea of what the writer is up to in order to ask the right questions and to come to secure conclusions about the meaning and value of the essay in all its details. In the present volume, the essays are marshaled around a number of important issues in our culture, and most of them will be found to be expository—that is, written to set out, explain, or prove to the reader the truth of an idea. Yet many essays, however they may involve ideas, are principally narratives. They tell us—share with us—some important experiences in the authors' lives. (See, for instance, Dick Gregory's "Shame," p. 160; the piece by James Herriot, p. 395; and Thomas Merton's "First Mass," p. 797). Other essays seem to move, as we read them, from narrative of this kind to an explicit idea that is drawn, finally, from the events narrated. (Such, for instance, are Hannah Arendt's "Anton Schmidt," p. 178; George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," p. 164; and Paul Bohannon's "The Stranger," p. 347).

Many others announce right off that they are about ideas. Alexis de Tocqueville tells us this in the first sentence of his essay titled "Of Individualism in Democratic Countries," when he writes: "I have shown how it is that in ages of equality every man seeks for his opinions within himself; I am now to show how it is that in the same ages all his feelings are turned towards himself alone" (p. 315). Still others let us know, earlier or later, that they want us to take sides in an ongoing controversy. (See Martin Luther King, Jr., on the civil rights movement, p. 254; Esther Vilar on the status of women, p. 564; Clarence Darrow on believing in God, p. 764).

While we are coming to a rough idea of what the essay is for, we will already be working on the second question, What is the essay's main idea? The two questions are related, but they are not the same. It is important to have read an essay right to the end before deciding what the main idea is, for quite often the idea with which an essay begins is not the principal idea of the essay. The opening sections of the essay may be introducing the topic, laying the groundwork, perhaps getting the reader into a frame of mind for accepting the main idea, which may itself be reserved for the end. Thus Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" starts out with the idea that "the English language is in a bad way" (p. 97), and in the second paragraph, that the badness of our language "makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts" and that clear thinking may have something to do with our "political regeneration." He then spends some nine pages beautifully elaborating these preliminary ideas, not coming again to a full expression of what turns out to be his main idea—each aspect of which he has already argued in some detail—until his last paragraph: "The present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and . . . one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end." In "The Indispensable Opposition," Walter Lippmann gives us his main idea at the end of the fourth paragraph: "We must protect the right of our opponents

to speak because we must hear what they have to say" (p. 221). We know that this *is* the main idea because by the end of the essay nothing else tops it; the rest of the essay is devoted to expounding and defending it. Of course, many essays will announce their main idea quite early, as does Haig Bosmajian's at the end of the first paragraph: "... the power which comes from naming and defining people has had positive as well as negative effects on entire populations" (p. 110). His essay emphasizes the negative effects. Marc Feigen Fasteau's main idea in "Friendships Among Men" comes at the end of the second paragraph, when he writes: "Despite the time men spend together, their contact rarely goes beyond the external, a limitation which tends to make their friendships shallow and unsatisfying" (p. 579). Both of these essays, like many others, by ending on an upbeat or corrective note, seem to have not one but two main ideas—the one that occupies the body of the essay and the one that follows it at the end. Be that as it may, you will have done your reading well if the first time through you can put your finger on a statement that all or most of the essay seems to be supporting. Notice that a main idea *is* an idea: It says something *about* something. You can test whether you are identifying an *idea* as opposed, merely, to a *topic* like "sex roles" or "politics and language" by whether you can express it in a sentence.

Sometimes the main idea is not stated anywhere by the author in so many words, and sometimes, as in poetry or fiction, it is not reducible to simple terms; in these cases the reader can supply only an approximation of it. The "main idea" of Dick Gregory's narrative, a narrative that freely mingles ideas and feelings, is something about the way shame can get in the way of human sympathy. James Herriot's account of his rounds as a veterinarian includes some uncomfortable incidents, yet the total effect is to show how satisfying such work can be.

The reason that it is useful to start with a notion of the purpose and the main idea of an essay is that most good essays are *organized* or *unified* around their purpose and main idea, and so can be understood most handily in those terms. Much of an appreciative, critical reading comes from being able to explain the various parts or features of the essay and relate them to the essay's purpose and main idea. The main features that a good reader will be on the alert for by the second reading will be organization or argument, the kinds of evidence presented, and any elements of technique, tone or style that contribute to its full meaning. By this time the reader should be well past the "receptive" stage of just sitting there and letting the words come. Try to take an active role, working along with the writer step by step, or standing behind the writer and watching and appreciating how it is done.

There are many ways to organize an essay, but in general, in the essay that tries to establish an idea, the main parts will be the steps used to get the reader to accept the idea. As we have said, the author's strategy may lead to announcing the idea at the beginning or to withholding it until the

end, but the body of the essay will have to consist, in one way or another, of some organized combination of argument and evidence.

One of the simplest and best ways for a writer to make a point is to mention one by one all the things in personal experience or reading that make one feel the idea is true, organizing them by groups and subgroups in order to avoid diffuseness. Thus Marc Feigen Fasteau, after stating his main idea about the quality of friendships among men, starts in paragraph 3 (p. 579) with a group of observations about uncommunicativeness among men. He talks first about the general quality of male conversations, then in the next paragraph about the use of games as a substitute for conversation; in the next paragraph comes some evidence from his experience with a college friend and with his father; in the next comes an example from popular literature; then, after dealing with some exceptions, he lets us know, with the adverb *finally*, that his last piece of evidence for uncommunicativeness "is the way men depend on women to facilitate certain conversations" (p. 581). The next paragraph sees him summarizing for us the meaning of this subsection of his essay and announcing that he is now going to turn to "the reasons why men hide from each other," which "lie in the taboos and imperatives of the masculine stereotype" (p. 582). The alert reader will expect then, in the ensuing paragraphs, a list of cultural prohibitions or commands that make men behave the way they do, with some discussion of each. And sure enough, that is what he gives us, with due attention to some exceptions, and with a brief, constructive conclusion. Notice that a writer will often use adverbs and transitional phrases—*first of all*, *finally*, *however*, *furthermore*, and the like—to let the reader know continuously what is going on.

Your acceptance of the main idea of this kind of essay depends on your acceptance of the evidence presented. Is it true to your experience? Or, if it is not within your experience, do you believe it? What is the author's reliability? Is the author the kind of person who should be believed on this subject?

Sometimes the author will try to persuade by using some form of logic, a chain of argument. Thus Garrett Hardin (p. 289) argues that since the poor multiply many times faster than the rich, simply feeding the poor creates that much more of a surplus of poor people and makes the problem of world poverty ultimately greater, not less. In dealing with arguments based on logic, the experienced reader will want to test perhaps with the aid of further research or wider reading whether all the parts of the argument are true, whether the conclusions really do follow from the facts given, and whether anywhere in the argument the reader is being asked to accept a hidden assumption—something that is quietly assumed by the writer and intended to stand without proof. (The essay by Thomas H. Huxley, p. 25, will give you a good idea of two major forms of logic.)

Writers use many other means to help them make their meanings clear. Sometimes they offer contrasting definitions or comparisons, which help