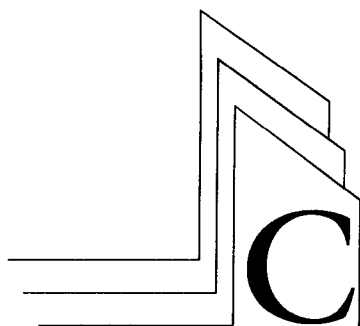


CONTEXTS
A THEMATIC READER



EDITED BY LINDA SIMON

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A THEMATIC READER

Edited by

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To the Instructor

Contexts is a thematic reader that examines the contexts—social, cultural, and historical—that shape individual identity. Grouped into topical contexts such as family, gender, education, work, and media, the readings represent a range of perspectives and methods of approach; but because they are interrelated through their common focus on the variety of forces that shape our attitudes, our beliefs, and our social and personal responses, they can provide a strong intellectual context for a class in college writing at the freshman level.

The lack of such a context is, I think, troubling for many instructors of composition courses. Most thematic readers group essays into a rather broad range of topical categories; few focus on a single theme to relate each essay in the book to every other. Courses in which such traditional thematic readers are used tend to be fragmented; discussions and assignments that may apply to one group of readings tend to be irrelevant to another. But *Contexts* offers readings and writing exercises that reflect the ways in which writers from across the disciplines approach the same area of study. How, for example, does an historian inquire into the forces that shape a person's identity? What questions does a sociologist ask? A psychologist, a philosopher, an anthropologist, a theologian, an artist? What approach does a journalist take?

Students will find in *Contexts* essays that represent many rhetorical modes: narration, description, comparison, illustration, definition, and argument. They will find essays based on personal experience and essays based on research with primary and secondary source material. These essays have been chosen to serve as models of good expository prose and, at the same time, to generate ideas that students can use as a basis for their own writing. In addition, the essays and their organization encourage students to think more actively and more critically. Because its approach requires students to consider the cultural, historical, and rhetorical contexts of what they read, *Contexts* attempts to challenge what may be pat assumptions and push students to examine how their ideas and beliefs have been shaped. Consequently, they are more likely, I hope, to go beyond superficial thinking and recognize the complexity of the issues they will face as college writers. The coherent sequence of themes also allows students opportunities to build on what they've thought about and written about previously, enabling them to deepen and expand their ideas and find increasingly sophisticated modes of expression.

The apparatus has been designed to support this approach. Introductions to each contextual unit pull together the common threads of the readings, while suggesting the diversity of viewpoints and approaches. Questions at the end of each reading ask students to consider ideas, context, and the writing process involved. Students may be asked, for example, to:

1. Summarize or paraphrase key material;
2. Locate the author's thesis;
3. Articulate questions that generated the writing of the essay;
4. Identify techniques the author uses to focus the essay;
5. Compare two or more essays on the same theme;
6. Evaluate the evidence that an author presents in support of a thesis;
7. Analyze techniques that make the essay stylistically successful;
8. Consider the assumptions that they, as readers, bring to the essay; or
9. Consider ways in which their own background and experiences affect their response to the text.

Writing exercises ask students to engage in research, prewriting, and writing tasks in a variety of rhetorical modes. They are asked to reflect on their own experiences; to report on observations or readings; to explain terms, ideas, or processes; to take a stand and argue their position. Several exercises within each unit require students to do some library research. Further, more integrative writing topics follow each unit, and an alternate table of contents allows students to expand their reading in each contextual unit with additional selections from other units—making it possible for instructors, if they wish, to focus the writing course more narrowly on one or another individual context.

Many of the authors included here are being anthologized virtually for the first time—Dick Schaap, Colette Brooks, Peter Filene, Gloria T. Hull, Bernice Reagon, among others—and those that are more familiar are often represented by selections that have not appeared in freshman texts before. *Contexts*, like any reader, represents its editor's tastes and preferences. I have tried to include essays and selections from longer works that I believe reflect good, interesting, thoughtful writing and that I hope will be enduring and important as well as stimulating for freshman writers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their helpful comments over the course of the development of *Contexts*, I would like to thank the following reviewers: Chris Anderson, Oregon State University; Margaret Broder, Cleveland State University; Kitty Dean, Nassau Community College; Laurie Kaplan, Goucher Col-

lege; Thomas Martinez, Villanova University; Joseph Musser, Ohio Wesleyan University; Keith C. Odom, Texas Christian University; John Olson, University of Southern California; Thomas Recchio, Rutgers University; David Roberts, Samford University; Charles Schuster, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee; Martha Nell Smith, University of Maryland; William Tanner, Texas Women's University; Suellyn Winkel, Santa Fe Community College; and Linda Woodson, University of Texas at San Antonio.

Nancy Perry believed in this book from the start. Mark Gallaher took over the project with enthusiasm and helped me to shape *Contexts* into the book it is. Edward Mitchell-Hutchinson offered consistently intelligent and practical help throughout the writing and revision. My thanks go to these fine editors.

LINDA SIMON

To the Student

Contexts is a reader that grew out of my experiences both as a biographer and a college instructor. Its title is meant to convey three meanings: first, the essays included here focus on the contexts that shape an individual's identity. Second, the collection as a whole is meant to give a vital and interesting context for discussion about the strategies and choices involved in writing an essay. And third, the questions and exercises after each essay are aimed at helping you, as a student writer, to understand how the writer's and reader's context interact to give meaning to the text.

The question of identity concerns not only biographers and autobiographers. Each of us, throughout our life, reflects at times about who we are, how we have changed from the person we were, and how we are evolving into the person we will become. Often, those moments of reflection occur when we are placed in a new context: we begin a new job, we enter a new school, we meet someone for the first time. These moments tend to make us aware of patterns of behavior that define us: patterns we may like, or patterns we may hope to change. How are those patterns set? What makes us the person we are?

The writers included in this collection consider the broad question of individual identity from eight points of view. There are essays on family, gender, and culture. There are essays that examine the way our education affects our changing conceptions about who we are. Some essayists consider the ways the media—especially advertising and television—provide us with models for behavior. Other writers look at the role of work as a force in shaping identity; still others examine aesthetic experiences that influence life choices. And last, a group of essays focuses on the influence of ethics in self-definition.

The essays reflect not only the *subject* of identity, but the identity of each individual writer. When Toni Morrison, for example, tells us about her family, she is helping us to understand who she is, how she generates ideas for her fiction, how she makes choices in selecting details for her work. By illuminating her work for us, she helps us to illuminate our own process of writing. All writers—students and professionals—listen for their distinctive “voice” in the pieces they produce. How does that voice come into existence? What patterns of behavior affect patterns of prose? How does our choice of friends relate to our choice of words? What kind of person do we want our readers to meet?

Each essayist reflects training or experiences in a particular discipline. Some—Toni Morrison and Madeleine L'Engle, for example—are

fiction writers by profession. But there are also essays in this collection by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists, educators, psychologists, musicians, and theologians. How does a writer's professional context affect the kind of essay he or she produces?

All readers, too, bring to a text their own contexts. When we read Wendy Fairey's memoir about growing up in Hollywood, we bring to it our own assumptions about the myths and legends of Hollywood life. When we read Perri Klass's reflection about anatomy and destiny, we bring to it our own assumptions about appropriate behavior for males and females in our culture. It is in the text that the contexts of reader and writer intersect.

The questions that follow each reading are divided into two sections. The first, Text and Context, asks you to focus on the essay as a work of literature, produced by a particular writer. How does this essay convey its meaning? What strategies—narration, description, definition, comparison, illustration, anecdote—does the writer use? What form does the writer give to the essay? Why does the writer make certain choices? What assumptions does the writer make about you, the reader? What is the context that generated the essay? What context do you bring to your reading of the work?

The second section, Suggestions for Writing, asks you to explore the theme of the essay in essays of your own. You may be asked to reflect on personal experiences or to do some outside reading or research. As you write these essays, you will gain awareness of the ways in which your own contexts affect both the process of writing and the essay that you produce.

My aim in this book is to give you the opportunity to explore your roles as writer and reader, to affirm and to consider your own identity, and to enrich your own literary context. Essay collections are, inevitably, personal documents in themselves. *Contexts*, then, reflects my own interests and literary tastes, and it also reflects my assumptions about my readers. If you have responses or comments to the book as a whole or to particular works, I would be glad to hear from you.

LINDA SIMON

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Thinking about an Essay

WHAT IS AN ESSAY

An essay is a special form of nonfiction prose that we encounter often in our readings. We may read essays daily in newspapers and magazines: that piece on the op-ed page, arguing against the death penalty, is an essay; so is the film review in the Arts section; so is the article on the actress Kathleen Turner in a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*. In college, much of the communication between instructors and students, and between scholars within various disciplines, takes the form of an essay.

An essay allows writers to explore a topic and to make a point about that topic. Sometimes essays show a writer reflecting on personal experience. In this collection, Wendy Fairey offers us an essay reflecting on her childhood in Hollywood and especially on her relationship with her mother. The essay, however, is not merely a string of reminiscences about her youth; Fairey selects those anecdotes, illustrations, and descriptions that help her readers to see what her youth meant to her. What was important about this experience, she asks? How can she explain her relationship with her mother? What significance did this relationship have for her? What significance might Fairey's personal experience have for her readers? Fairey addresses these questions in her essay. "In My Mother's House," then, rather than being a mere compilation of information, takes on a clear focus.

Other writers have different purposes in writing an essay. Theodore Roszak moves from his own experience in raising an artistic daughter to ask questions about education in general. Roland Marchand looks at advertisements from the 1920s and 1930s and asks questions about the culture that produced them. Robert Jay Lifton visits Japan to ask about the effect of the dropping of an atomic bomb on Japanese culture and about our connection, many decades later, with this event. These questions, like Fairey's, help Lifton to select the details he wants to include in his essay. Rather than produce an essay that merely chronicles his visit, he selects from his observations, interviews, and readings the information that will allow him to produce a coherent and well-focused essay.

Essays have a focus: they are about something. They have a thesis: they are making a point. In the first paragraphs, the reader discovers the focus of the essay and often is able to anticipate what will follow. In "The Manhood Game: American Football in Critical Perspective," readers learn