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About Language

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A
READER
FOR
WRITERS

FOURTH EDITION

About Language

A
READER
FOR
WRITERS

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For Patsy, my inspiration
For Sue, as is everything

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Preface

This fourth edition of *About Language: A Reader for Writers* is intended to help students become more conscious of language and better able to use it effectively and 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 how often language shapes our world and our thinking about it. We also believe that such awareness helps students write more skillfully and confidently.

New Features of the Fourth Edition

- Twenty-nine new reading selections
- Increased emphasis on multiculturalism and the writing process
- Universal changes in the apparatus that facilitate and encourage use of reader response journals
- New material on many aspects of language, including language extinction, metaphor and the languages of science and journalism, sign language, gender and language usage, and the cultural implications of censorship
- Revised grouping of language issues with increased emphasis on the various purposes for language use

Organization and Coverage

About Language is an anthology of seventy contemporary reading selections organized around nine language issues:

- Chapter One, “Writers and the Writing Process,” looks at journal writing, prewriting, writing, and revising through the eyes of such writers as Joan Didion, Chris Anderson, Natalie Goldberg, Mike Rose, Donald Murray, and William Zinsser. Also included is “Computers and Writing” by Sharon Cogdill. This essay, written especially for *About Language*, addresses the effects of computers on student writing.

- Chapter Two, “Language Development: Personal and Social,” presents essays on the origin of language and of writing (by Charles Barber and C. M. Millward) and on the history and evolution of the English language (by Anthony Burgess and Bill Bryson). Appearing as well are a selection from the autobiography of Helen Keller and selections that examine language and human physiology (by Shannon Brownlee and by Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman).

- Chapter Three, “Language and Cultural Diversity,” examines the links between language and culture. Included are personal reflections and reactions (Richard Rodriguez, Nancy Masterson Sakamoto, Barbara Ehrenreich, James Baldwin, and

Maxine Hong Kingston) as well as informative discussion of the political aspects of this timely language issue (Jared Diamond and Lawrence Fuchs).

- Chapter Four, “Usage and Authority,” brings together several topics that address the issue of “correct” language: dictionaries (Malcolm X and Bill Bryson), slang (Calvin Trillin and Samuel Clemens), euphemism (Hugh Rawson), and metaphor and the language of science (Chet Raymo). The chapter concludes with Robert MacNeil’s “English Belongs to Everybody,” a thoughtful, reassuring commentary on history, language, and resistance to language change.

- Chapter Five, “Language and Fair Play,” examines gender-based differences in language use (Deborah Tannen), sexist language (Alleen Pace Nilsen, Eugene R. August, and Cyra McFadden), and the deliberate use of derogatory speech (Jean Seligmann and others and Patricia Smith).

- Chapter Six, “Names and Naming,” focuses on the psychological, historical, and sociological aspects of the names we give to people, places, and things. Included are works by such authors as Maya Angelou, Bruno Bettelheim, and Diane White.

- Chapter Seven, “Words as Inspiration and Spectacle,” looks at persuasive language and its effects on our opinions, decisions, and desires. Relevant language issues include language taboo (addressed by Barbara Lawrence, Wallace Stegner, and Ron Fimrite), public discourse (Daniel J. Boorstin and Anthony Burgess), and the language of advertising and politics (William Lutz and e. e. cummings). Also appearing are noteworthy presidential addresses by John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan.

- Chapter Eight, “Censorship,” reviews the history of language considered unacceptable (Hugh Rawson) and examines controversies that relate to censorship and culture (David Rieff and Liz Hasse), pornography (Ellen Goodman), and free speech on the college campus (John Leo). The chapter includes James Hunter’s overview of the sociological implications of conflicting American views on censorship.

- Chapter Nine, “Language Play,” invites students to experience the pleasure of language as entertainment. A wide variety of reading selections illustrates some of the ways that language play enriches our experience of the world without trivializing it.

Acknowledgments

We thank, yet again, our colleagues and students at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. Thanks also go, in abundance, to our wives Patsy and Susan for their advice and patience.

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W. H. R. and G. T.

Introduction

All writing instructors eventually hear themselves telling student writers to “begin at the beginning.” It thus seems only fair that we begin this fourth edition of *About Language: A Reader for Writers* with an introduction that describes some of the reasons why your instructor has directed you to buy a language reader. Instructors regularly disagree about the best approach to take when teaching writing, but those who adopt a language reader usually do agree on one thing—that concentrated attention to language issues serves vital purposes in learning to write well. *About Language*, which is *A Reader for Writers*, begins with a chapter that addresses several of the most important aspects of the writing process, and every reading selection in this book should prove helpful to a student writer. This is true for many reasons, some of which deserve mention here.

A language reader benefits a wide range of college writing students. Some of you entered college well prepared to write unified, coherent prose. You also perhaps realize that words can bring unique pleasure to both writers and their audiences. If either of these descriptions fits you, you’ll find that this language reader provides an unexpected, refreshing introduction to the ways in which language serves us. On the other hand, if your preparation for college writing has been less useful, you will benefit immeasurably from this reader’s emphasis on *seeing* language, for doing so is always the necessary first step toward writing well.

Regardless of your experience, much of the pleasure of the language-based approach comes from its immediate relevance to the world that we all experience every day. For example, one chapter of *About Language* is devoted to the issue of names and naming. You’ll explore the idea that names, instead of serving only as identifying labels, actually possess immense power to categorize and to influence attitudes. Anyone who shudders at the thought of naming a child *Wilbur* or *Irma* already understands this fundamental truth about names. However, the same principle guides the naming of enemy missiles *Scuds* and U.S. missiles *Patriots*. Naming manifests an identical power for parents and for governments (and advertisers and many others), and examples of this power at work are all around us. Language and discrimination, language play, and the other language issues treated in *About Language*—they all connect directly with our daily lives.

A language reader focuses attention appropriately, that is, on writing itself. You might find that students in other writing classes are using readers organized according to the rhetorical modes, which include comparison, cause and effect, division and classification, and other tactics for structuring paragraphs and essays. However, because writing is not “about” comparison and the other modes, this approach sometimes encourages writers to mistake tactics for objectives. When asked to identify what they wrote in a previous semester’s composition course, some students, ignoring topics and essay writing itself, declare that they “wrote a process analysis and a cause and effect.” Although these students misconstrue the writing task, they simply remember what they were encouraged to remember. The language-

based approach provides a more appropriate focus. Although writing is not “about” language, *writing about* language encourages writers to treat the rhetorical modes as valuable tactics, not as ends in themselves.

You also might hear about “writing across the curriculum,” another increasingly popular approach to college writing. It, too, subordinates tactics. Its purpose is to remind students that people in all disciplines write so as to learn, and that writing well allows people to learn more effectively about any subject. Because language issues obviously play a role in studying every subject, study of language issues, presented as part of an English curriculum, can help any student to understand better the demands of “writing across the curriculum.”

A language reader provides a focus appropriate to an increasingly diverse society. Regardless of their culture, all people are linked in their use of language, so the study of language issues inevitably reminds us that our society is multicultural. Studying language issues also facilitates the study of cultural similarities and differences. *About Language* includes a chapter titled “Language and Cultural Diversity,” and many selections in other chapters explore this issue.

A language reader can unify writing topics without sacrificing freedom. A language reader can make writing easier for the student who asks, “What do I write about?” Usually you write about language. Moreover, because most aspects of human experience involve language, the language-based approach provides an almost unlimited supply of writing topics. As an example, suppose you have a special interest in writing about your grandparents. While exploring the issue of language and group identity, you might write about the ways that you and your grandparents use language to reflect membership in specific but different groups. The issue of public and private language might lead you to consider how language encourages or inhibits intimacy with your grandparents. Study of language development and discrimination could help identify historical and cultural influences evident in your grandparents’ language and in your own. Writing about almost any subject can incorporate language study in similar ways.

Finally, a language reader serves a purpose that derives from the writing process. Although this process is always personalized by a writer’s strengths, weaknesses, and disposition, it inevitably centers itself on the same frustrating yet intoxicating task: to find the right word. Experienced writers appreciate how many subtle implications are embodied in this description. For student writers, then, one fundamental purpose for a language reader can be summarized this way: *to focus attention on words and thus to reveal what “the right word” can mean.*

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