

# America

*Short  
Readings*

# NOW

## Short Readings

*from Recent Periodicals*



# Robert Atwan

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# America Now

## Short Readings from Recent Periodicals

Second Edition

Edited by

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## Preface for Instructors

People write for many reasons, but one of the most compelling is to express their views on matters of current public interest. Browse any newsstand or library magazine rack and you'll find an overabundance of articles, features, and opinion columns written in response to current issues or events. Even reflective essays on subjects that aren't necessarily timely are often pegged (sometimes ingeniously) to a current issue or trend.

The second edition of *America Now*, like its predecessor, is designed to involve introductory writing students in the give-and-take of current public discussion. Its forty-seven selections are drawn from forty recent periodicals and address such controversial topics as violence in the media, affirmative action, gender differences, censorship, English-only laws, TV talk shows, interracial relationships, and date rape. Two chapters also feature controversial advertisements. All of the selections appeared in print within the past few years and all of the topics remain in the news. Originally published in some of our most popular and respected newspapers and magazines, the selections illustrate the variety of personal, informative, and persuasive writing read daily by millions of readers.

*New to this edition are seventeen published student essays — most drawn from college newspapers across the country.* These recent essays reveal student writers confronting, in a public forum, the same topics and issues that challenge some of our leading social critics and commentators. These selections are intended to show how student writers can enter into and influence public discussion. In this way, *America Now* invites students to view the act of writing as a form of personal and public empowerment. Too frequently, students see the writing they do in a composition course as having little connection with real-world problems and issues. Many selections in this book prove that writing can make a difference.

*Almost all of the student pieces in the second edition were located on the Internet,* making *America Now* the first composition

reader to draw heavily on this new and important resource for readers, writers, and anyone interested in discussing current political and cultural affairs. As Web pages, chat rooms, and other discussion sites proliferate, students will find a wide-open environment for sharing information, opinions, and concerns. All kinds of public forums are rapidly growing more convenient and accessible (most periodicals, for example, now welcome e-mail responses). Today, student writers can enter the public sphere as never before.

*Student essays not only make up a large percentage of this new edition but they also shape the volume's contents.* A wide spectrum of college newspapers were consulted (and sometimes polled) to discover the most commonly discussed issues and topics. Some issues — like affirmative action, censorship, and bilingualism — had provoked so much student response that they could have led to entire single-topic collections. Many college papers did not restrict themselves to news items and editorial opinion but found room for personal essays as well. Some favorite student topics on the personal side were roommates, campus life, identity, and gender stereotypes.

*America Now* intends to get students reading, thinking, talking, and writing. The overriding instructional principle — which informs everything from the choice of selections and topics to the design of apparatus — is that participation in informed discussion helps to stimulate and improve student writing. The book encourages both instructors and students to view reading, discussion, and writing as interrelated activities. It assumes that: (1) attentive reading will lead to informed discussion; (2) participation in open and informed discussion will lead to a broadening of viewpoints; (3) an awareness of different viewpoints will lead to thoughtful compositions. To further promote discussion, *this edition now features a prereading assignment for each selection.* The questions in “Before You Read” will help students explore a few of the avenues that lead to fruitful discussion and interesting papers. A full description of the advantages gained by linking reading, writing, and classroom discussion can be found in my introduction to the instructor's manual.

To facilitate group discussion and in-class work, *America Now* features both bite-sized chapters and relatively brief selections (some no longer than two pages). These tightly focused chapters permit instructors to cover a broad range of themes and issues in one semester. Each chapter can be conveniently handled in one or two class periods. The chapters move from very accessible, personal topics (for ex-

ample, physical appearance and sharing space) to more complex, public issues, thus accommodating teachers who prefer to start with personal writing and gradually progress to exposition, analysis, and argument. *The book concludes with two new chapters on argument:* an all-student discussion of affirmative action, followed by a focused debate on date rape in which one writer responds specifically to the opinions of the other. For instructors who prefer to organize selections by writing modes and methods, *this edition includes an alternate rhetorical table of contents.*

The apparatus of *America Now* supports both discussion-based instruction and more individualized approaches to reading and writing. Taking into account the increasing diversity of students (especially the growing number of non-native speakers) in today's writing programs, the apparatus includes extensive help with college-level vocabulary. *Another new feature of this edition is a "Words to Learn" list preceding each selection.* This vocabulary list with brief definitions will allow students to isolate some of the words they may have difficulty with as they read; encountering the word later in context will help lock it into memory. It's unrealistic, however, to think that students will acquire a fluent knowledge of new words by memorizing a list; therefore, the apparatus following each selection includes "Discussing Vocabulary / Using a Dictionary," a set of questions that introduces students to prefixes, suffixes, connotations, denotations, tone, and some etymology.

Along with the discussion of vocabulary, the questions that follow individual selections emphasize reading comprehension ("Discussing Meaning") and writing strategies ("Discussing Writing"). In addition, the selection apparatus includes "In-Class Writing Activities" and "Challenging the Selection," a cluster of questions that ask students to take a critical stance toward the essay. Realizing that beginning students can sometimes be too trusting of what they see in print, especially in textbooks, the "Challenging the Selection" questions invite them to take a more skeptical attitude toward their reading and to form the habit of questioning a selection from both an analytical and an experiential point of view.

In addition to the selection apparatus, *America Now* contains unit apparatus designed to encourage discussion and writing. The unit apparatus approaches the reading material from topical and thematic angles with an emphasis on group discussion. A brief introduction to each unit helps students understand the main discussion points and the way selections are linked together. The end of each

unit features three sets of interlocking study questions and tasks: (1) a suggested topic for discussion; (2) clusters of questions and ideas to help students prepare for class discussion; and (3) several writing assignments which ask students to move from discussion to writing—that is, to develop papers out of the ideas and opinions expressed in class discussion. Finally, instructors with very diverse writing classes may find “Topics for Cross-Cultural Discussion” a convenient way to encourage an exchange of perspectives and experiences that could also lead to ideas for writing.

Aside from the instructional aids noted above, this edition of *America Now* features two ancillaries: an instructor’s manual, *From Discussion to Writing: Instructional Resources for AMERICA NOW*, and a workbook, *Developmental and ESL Exercises to Accompany AMERICA NOW*.

Liz deBeer of Middlesex County College prepared the instructor’s manual, bringing to the task not only a familiarity with the text but years of classroom experience at all levels of composition instruction. The manual contains journal activities, numerous collaborative activities, classroom projects (including introductory research assignments), and additional writing assignments. Anyone using *America Now* should be sure to consult the manual before designing a syllabus, framing a discussion topic, or even assigning an individual selection. Professor deBeer also contributes to the instructor’s manual a helpful essay on designing student panels (“Forming Forums”) and advice on using the book’s apparatus in both developmental and mainstream composition classes.

*Developmental and ESL Exercises to Accompany AMERICA NOW*, prepared by Jennifer Ivers of Boston University, will expand the instructional utility of *America Now*. This workbook—which follows *America Now* chapter by chapter and draws on its selections for exercises—helps students improve their grammar, vocabulary, and sentence-level skills. The workbook also includes activities to generate thoughtful, coherent paragraphs and essays. Concluding with additional vocabulary exercises and an appendix that defines idiomatic expressions and other terms that may be challenging to ESL students, Professor Ivers’s workbook is an enormously useful addition to the *America Now* composition package.

### *Acknowledgments*

While putting together the second edition of *America Now* I was fortunate to receive the assistance of many talented individuals. In



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To revise a text is to entertain numerous questions: What kind of selections work best in class? What types of questions are most helpful? How can reading, writing, and discussion be most effectively intertwined? This edition profited immensely from the following instructors who generously took the time to respond to the first edition: Nancy Canavera, Charleston Southern University; Linda Currivan, University of Hawaii-Leeward Community College; Sheri Divers, Georgia Southern University; Mary M. Dossim, SUNY-Plattsburgh; John Gibney, Landmark College; Peggy Kocoras, Assumption College; Dawn L. Leonard, Charleston Southern University; Mark Lindemer, College of Southern Idaho; Nancy McCabe, University of Nebraska; Edward Mack, Sullivan County Community College; Alison McNeal, Slippery Rock University; Frank Noji, Kapiolani Community College; Mary J. Page, San Jose City College; William Roney, Rutgers University-New Brunswick; Natasha Saltrup, Rutgers University-Newark; Robin Schore, Mercer County College; and Warren B. Seekamp, University of Louisville.

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Community College; and Janet Vucinich, Santa Fe Community College. Many of the comments they offered during the book's planning stages remain relevant.

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R. A.

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# Introduction:

## The Empowered Writer

### *How to Read this Book*

*America Now* collects recent articles carefully selected to stimulate reading, discussion, and writing. The articles come from two main sources — popular periodicals and college newspapers available on the Internet. Written by journalists and columnists, public figures and activists, as well as professors and students from all over the country, the selections illustrate the types of material read by millions of Americans every day. The book covers fifteen of today's most widely discussed issues and topics. In reading, discussing, and writing about the selections, you will be actively taking part in some of the major controversies of our time.

*Participation* is the key to this collection. I encourage you to view reading and writing as a form of participation. I hope you will read the selections attentively, think about them, be willing to discuss them in class, and use what you've learned from your reading and discussion as the basis for your papers. If you do these things, you will develop three skills necessary for successful college work: the ability to read critically, to discuss topics intelligently, and to write persuasively.

*America Now* invites you to see reading, discussion, and writing as closely related activities. As you read a selection, imagine that you have entered into a discussion with the author. Take notes as you read. Question the selection. Challenge its point of view or its evidence. Compare your experience with the author's. Consider how different economic classes or other groups are likely to respond.

Remember, just because something appears in a newspaper or book doesn't make it true or accurate. Form the habit of challenging what you read. Don't be persuaded by an opinion simply because it appears in print or because you believe you should accept it. Trust your own observations and experiences. Though logicians never say

so, personal experiences and keen observations often provide the basis of our most convincing arguments.

When your class discusses a selection, be especially attentive to what others think of it. It's always surprising how two people can read the same article and reach two entirely different interpretations. Observe the range of opinion. Try to understand why and how people arrive at different conclusions. Do some seem to be missing the point? Do some distort the author's ideas? Have someone's comments forced you into rethinking the selection? Keep a record of the discussion in your notebook. Then, when you begin to draft your paper, consider your essay as an extension of both your imaginary conversation with the author and the actual class discussion. If you've taken detailed notes of your own and the class's responses to the selection, you should have more than enough information to get started.

### ***Participating in Class Discussion:*** ***Six Basic Rules***

Discussion is a learned activity. It requires a variety of essential academic skills: speaking, listening, thinking, and preparing. The following six basic rules are vital to healthy and productive discussion.

1. *Take an active speaking role.* Good discussion demands that everyone participates, not (as so often happens) just a vocal few. Many students remain detached from discussion because they are afraid to speak in a group. This fear is quite common — so common that psychological surveys show that speaking in front of a group is generally one of our worst fears. A leading communication consultant suggests that people choke up because they are more worried about how others will respond than about what they themselves have to say. It helps to remember that most people will be more interested in *what* you say than in *how* you say it. Once you get over the initial fear of speaking in public, your speech skills will improve with practice.

2. *Listen attentively.* No one can participate in group discussion who doesn't listen attentively. This may sound obvious, but just think of how many senseless arguments you've had because either you or the person with whom you were talking completely misunderstood what was said. A good listener not only hears what someone is saying but understands why he or she is saying it. One of the most important things about listening is that it leads to one element that lively discus-

sion depends on: good questions. When the interesting questions begin to emerge, you know good discussion has truly begun.

3. *Examine all sides of an issue.* Good discussion requires that we be patient with complexity. Difficult problems rarely have obvious and simple solutions, nor can they be easily summarized in popular slogans. Complex issues demand to be turned over in our minds so that we can see them from a variety of angles. Group discussion will broaden our perspective and deepen our insight into difficult issues and ideas.

4. *Suspend judgment.* Class discussion is best conducted in an open-minded and tolerant spirit. To fully explore ideas and issues, you will need to be receptive to the opinions of others even when they contradict your own. Remember, discussion is not the same as debate. Its primary purpose is communication, not competition. In discussion you are not necessarily trying to win everyone over to your point of view. The goal of group discussion should be to open up a topic so that everyone in the group will be exposed to a spectrum of attitudes. Suspending judgment does not mean you shouldn't hold a strong belief or opinion about an issue; it means that you should be willing to take into account rival beliefs or opinions. An opinion formed without an awareness of other points of view — one that has not been tested against contrary ideas — is not a *strong* opinion but merely a stubborn one.

5. *Avoid abusive or insulting language.* Free and open discussion can only occur if we respect the beliefs and opinions of others. If we speak in ways that fail to show respect for differing viewpoints — if we resort to name-calling or use demeaning and malicious expressions, for example — we not only embarrass ourselves but we close off the possibility for an intelligent and productive exchange of ideas. Contrary to what you might gather from some popular radio and television talk shows, shouting insults and engaging in hate-speech are signs of verbal and intellectual bankruptcy. They are usually the last resort of someone who has nothing to say.

6. *Come prepared.* Discussion is not merely random conversation. It demands a certain degree of preparation and focus. To participate in class discussion, you must consider assigned topics beforehand and read whatever is required. You should develop the habit of reading with pen in hand, underlining key points and jotting down questions, impressions, and ideas in your notebook. The notes you bring to class will be an invaluable aid in group discussion.

### *Group Discussion as a Source of Ideas*

Group discussion can stimulate and enhance your writing in several important ways. First, it supplies you with ideas. Let's say that you are participating in a discussion about how we express our identities (see Chapter 3). One of your classmates mentions some of the problems a mixed ethnic background can cause. But suppose you also come from a mixed background, and, when you think about it, you believe that your mixed heritage has given you more advantages than disadvantages. Hearing her viewpoint may inspire you to express your differing perspective on the issue. Your perspective could lead to an interesting personal essay.

Suppose you now start writing that essay. You don't need to start from scratch and stare at a blank piece of paper or computer screen for hours. Discussion has already given you a few good leads. First, you have your classmate's opinions and attitudes to quote or summarize. You can begin your paper by explaining that some people view a divided ethnic identity as a psychological burden. You might expand on your classmate's opinion by bringing in additional information from other student comments or from your reading to show how people often focus on only the negative side of mixed identities. You can then explain your own perspective on this topic. Of course, you will need to give several examples showing *why* a mixed background has been an advantage for you. The end result can be a first-rate essay, one that takes other opinions into account and demonstrates a clearly established point of view. It is personal, and yet it takes a position that goes beyond one individual's experiences.

Whatever the topic, your writing will benefit from reading and discussion, which will give your essays a clear purpose or goal. In that way, your papers will resemble the selections found in this book: They will be a *response* to the opinions, attitudes, experiences, issues, ideas, and proposals that inform current public discourse. This is why most writers write; this is what most newspaper and magazines publish; this is what most people read. *America Now* consists entirely of such writing. I hope you will read the selections with enjoyment, discuss the issues with an open mind, and write about the topics with purpose and enthusiasm.

### *The Practice of Writing*

Suppose you wanted to learn to play the guitar. What would you do first? Would you run to the library and read a lot of books on

music? Would you then read some instructional books on guitar playing? Might you try to memorize all the chord positions? Then would you get sheet music for songs you liked and memorize them? After all that, if someone handed you an electric guitar, would you immediately be able to play like Jimi Hendrix or Eric Clapton?

I don't think you would begin that way. You would probably start out by strumming the guitar, getting the feel of it, trying to pick out something familiar. You would probably want to take lessons from someone who knows how to play. And you would practice, practice, practice. Every now and then your instruction book would come in handy. It would give you basic information on frets, notes, and chord positions, for example. You might need to refer to that information constantly in the beginning. But knowing the chords is not the same as knowing how to manipulate your fingers correctly to produce the right sounds. You need to be able to *play* the chords, not just know them.

Learning to read and write well is not that much different. Though instructional books can give you a great deal of advice and information, the only way anyone really learns to read and write is through constant practice. The only problem, of course, is that nobody likes to practice. If we did, we would all be good at just about everything. Most of us, however, want to acquire a skill quickly and easily. We don't want to take lesson after lesson after lesson. We want to pick up the instrument and sound like a professional in ten minutes.

Wouldn't it be a wonderful world if that could happen? Wouldn't it be great to be born with a gigantic vocabulary so we instantly knew the meaning of every word we saw or heard? We would never have to go through the slow process of consulting a dictionary whenever we stumbled across an unfamiliar word. But, unfortunately, life is not so easy. To succeed at anything worthwhile requires patience and dedication. Watch a young figure skater trying to perfect her skills and you will see patience and dedication at work; or watch an accident victim learning how to maneuver a wheelchair so he can begin again an independent existence; or observe a new American struggling to learn English. None of these skills is quickly and easily acquired. Like building a vocabulary, they all take time and effort. They all require practice. And they require something even more important: the willingness to make mistakes. Can someone learn to skate without taking a spill? Or learn a new language without mispronouncing a word?

### *Writing as a Public Activity*

Many people have the wrong idea about writing. They view writing as a very private act. They picture the writer sitting all alone and staring into space waiting for ideas to come. They think that ideas come from “deep” within and only reach expression after they have been fully articulated inside the writer’s head.

These images are part of a myth about creative writing and, like most myths, are sometimes true. A few poets, novelists, and essayists do write in total isolation and search deep inside themselves for thoughts and stories. But most writers have far more contact with public life. This is especially true of people who write regularly for magazines, newspapers, and professional journals. These writers work within a lively social atmosphere in which issues and ideas are often intensely discussed and debated. Nearly all the selections in this book illustrate this type of writing.

As you work on your own papers, remember that writing is very much a public activity. It is rarely performed alone in an “ivory tower.” Writers don’t always have the time, the desire, the opportunity, or the luxury to be all alone. They may be writing in a newsroom with clacking keyboards and noise all around them; they may be writing at a kitchen table, trying to feed several children at the same time; they may be writing on subways or buses. The great English novelist D. H. Lawrence grew up in a small coal miner’s cottage with no place for privacy. It turned out to be an enabling experience. Throughout his life he could write wherever he happened to be; it didn’t matter how many people or how much commotion surrounded him.

There are more important ways in which writing is a public activity. Much writing is often a response to public events. Most of the articles you encounter every day in newspapers and magazines respond directly to timely or important issues and ideas, topics that people are currently talking about. Writers report on these topics, supply information about them, discuss and debate the differing viewpoints. The chapters in this book all represent topics now regularly discussed on college campuses and in the national media. In fact, all of the topics were chosen because they emerged so frequently in college newspapers.

When a columnist decides to write on a topic like affirmative action, she willingly enters an ongoing public discussion about the issue. She didn’t just make up the topic. She knows that it *is* a serious



issue, and she is aware that a wide variety of opinions have been expressed about it. She has not read everything on the subject but usually knows enough about the different arguments to state her own position or attitude persuasively. In fact, what helps make her writing persuasive is that she takes into account the opinions of others. Her own essay, then, becomes a part of the continuing debate and discussion, one that you in turn may want to join.

Such issues are not only matters for formal and impersonal debate. They also invite us to share our *personal* experiences. Many of the selections in this book show how writers participate in the discussion of issues by drawing on their experiences. For example, the essay by the Korean American novelist Chang-rae Lee, “Mute in an English-Only World” (Chapter 11), is written entirely from Lee’s own point of view, though the topic — English as an official language — is one widely discussed and debated by politicians and educators. Nearly every chapter of *America Now* contains an example of personal writing to illustrate how you can use your experiences to discuss and debate an issue.

Writing is public in yet another way. Practically all published writing is reviewed, edited, and re-edited by different people before it goes to press. The author of a magazine article has most likely discussed the topic at length with colleagues and publishing professionals and may have asked friends or experts in the field to look it over. By the time you see the article in a magazine, it has gone through numerous readings and probably quite a few revisions. Though the article is credited to a particular author, it was no doubt read and worked on by others who helped with suggestions and improvements. As a beginning writer, it’s important to remember that most of what you read in newspapers, magazines, and books has gone through a writing process that involves the collective efforts of several people besides the author. Students usually don’t have that advantage and should not feel discouraged when their own writing doesn’t measure up to the professionally edited materials they are reading for a course.

### *What Is “Correct English”?*

One part of the writing process may seem more difficult than others — correct English. Yes, nearly all of what you read will be written in relatively correct English. Or it’s probably more accurate to say “corrected” English, since most published writing is revised or

“corrected” several times before it appears in print. Even skilled professional writers make mistakes that require correction.

Most native speakers don’t actually *talk* in “correct” English. There are numerous regional patterns and dialects. As the Chinese American novelist Amy Tan says, there are “many Englishes.” What we usually consider correct English is a set of guidelines developed over time to help standardize written expression. This standardization — like any agreed-upon standards such as weights and measures — is a matter of use and convenience. Suppose you went to a vegetable stand and asked for a pound of peppers and the storekeeper gave you a half pound but charged you for a full one. When you complained, he said, “But that’s what *I* call a pound.” What if you next bought a new compact disc you’ve been waiting for, and when you tried to play it you discovered it wouldn’t fit your CD player. Life would be very frustrating if everyone had a different set of standards: Imagine what would happen if some places used a red light to signal “go” and a green one for “stop.” Languages are not that different. In all cultures, languages — especially written languages — have gradually developed certain general rules and principles to make communication as clear and efficient as possible.

You probably already have a guidebook or handbook that systematically sets out certain rules of English grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Like our guitar instruction book, these handbooks serve a very practical purpose. Most writers — even experienced authors — need to consult them periodically. Beginning writers may need to rely on them far more regularly. But just as we don’t learn how to play chords by merely memorizing finger positions, we don’t learn how to write by memorizing the rules of grammar or punctuation.

Writing is an activity, a process. Learning how to do it — like learning to ride a bike or prepare a tasty stew — requires *doing* it. Correct English is not something that comes first. We don’t need to know the rules perfectly before we can begin to write. As in any activity, corrections are part of the learning process. You fall off the bike and get on again, trying to “correct” your balance this time. You sample the stew and “correct” the seasoning. You draft a paper about the neighborhood you live in and as you (or a classmate or teacher) read it over, you notice that certain words and expressions could stand some improvement. And step by step, sentence by sentence, you begin to write better.