

THEMES FOR COLLEGE WRITERS

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*Themes for
College Writers*

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Random House



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Preface

At our universities and at most others we know, composition is divided into a two-course sequence. The first part, taken by a good number of entering freshmen, is variously termed "basic," "developmental," or "remedial." Such a course tries to bring student writing up to college level by confronting the problems underprepared writers have in imagining an audience, in developing ideas, in employing useful revision strategies, and in proofreading effectively. Students who pass their basic composition course go on to regular freshman composition courses where they will more than likely write essays in various rhetorical modes, probably using a rhetorically based reader to supply examples and models. *Themes for College Writers* will be useful to instructors in either course.

Students in basic writing classes are frequently asked to do too little. They write sentences and paragraphs and work on grammar, usage, and spelling in little "units." They are given large doses of exercise material, few readings longer than a paragraph, and little or no chance to do writing anyone can take seriously. Our approach to the beginning student, even at the developmental level, is different. Our students come to us poorly prepared, but we have discovered that they are not without resources. Given high expectations and the right assignments, our basic writing students do indeed have something to say on paper. They can transform their experience and knowledge into writing that has meaning for them and their readers. And their writing, once it becomes more than an empty exercise, can become the place where they practice revising and proofreading. We

feel strongly that students learn organization better when they have something they feel is worth organizing.

Of course, this principle applies equally well to student writing in regular freshman composition courses. But in addition to pursuing and developing their own ideas about significant issues, these more competent beginning writers must also develop critical and analytical skills and learn to apply those skills in reading other writers' essays. They must also apply those skills to their own papers.

The questions we have provided at the end of each selection encourage our students to think critically about the readings and to articulate their own questions about the issues professional writers raise. In addition, our assignments frequently require students to seek information from outside sources through magazines, newspapers, television, and informal interviews. Therefore this text provides beginning writers with numerous opportunities to practice the more sophisticated public discourse they must master in order to succeed in their academic coursework.

We have organized our book around themes that students know best: their own lives, families, friends, neighborhoods, jobs, schools, and activities. Each theme is illustrated by essays that share three characteristics: brevity (no piece is beyond the length we can honestly demand of beginning students); interest (every selection is readable and is interesting because of its subject matter or its writing style); and appropriateness for college writing (we have included a mix of experiential and referential prose to illustrate different approaches to each theme).

In determining our themes we found ourselves confronted with a paradox. It is apparent that students can attain the authoritative voice required in academic prose by writing from expertise. That is, when a student knows a lot about a subject, he or she usually has an easier time presenting the material in a forceful, coherent essay. Unfortunately, students in beginning composition courses lack the depth of knowledge about academic subjects that would enable them to sound authoritative (or intelligently tentative) about the topics they have to write about. Thus many of their essays sound superficial or read like empty exercises. Paradoxically, they *can* sound most authoritative when they write about themselves and their own knowledge or experience.

Because we are aware that all too often personal writing can turn into thoughtless narrative or vapid description, we mix personal

and more academic prose throughout our book. We also stress that personal experience is only the raw material for student essays. If their knowledge and experience are to be turned into college-level essays, our students must transform that raw material through planning, revision, and careful editing and proofreading. Ultimately, we demand public, not private writing, so our text continually stresses the steps needed to turn private experience into public discourse.

The format of *Themes for College Writers* is straightforward. Each chapter is preceded by a brief introduction giving a preview of the pieces to be included. Each selection has a brief introduction supplying the context from which it was taken. After each selection, two types of questions are provided. The first questions are primarily informational, requiring students to think about the author's main point and the details that support it. These informational questions serve as a check on the reading, and they help students isolate telling details that communicate exactly what a building looked like or how someone recalled his or her old home town.

The second type of question is intended to provoke thought and discussion about the values and opinions embodied in the reading. These questions will, we hope, evoke some kind of committed response from students—a response they will want to put on paper.

The questions are followed by assignments that build on them. Some assignments call on students to write about themselves, some ask them to imagine themselves in different circumstances, and some require research. (As mentioned earlier, our assignments prepare students for the kind of writing they will be expected to do in more advanced composition courses, as well as in their other academic subjects.) We have avoided treating rhetorical modes as isolated entities; however, a rhetorical table of contents is included in the Instructor's Manual.

Our choice of selections was based on what has worked for us in the classroom. We limited ourselves mostly to short readings of no more than five pages with the vast majority under three pages. We did not hesitate to include self-contained sections from longer essays; we think that the pieces are all quite unified in their own right. No changes have been made within the selections themselves; there is nothing "edited" for student consumption here. We have also provided a list of Words to Know to help the students focus on terms they must understand in order to follow each reading.

We would like to thank the following reviewers for their care-

ful readings and useful suggestions: Carol Edwards, University of California, Los Angeles; Jack Folsom, Montana State University; Barbara Gray, Polytechnic Institute of New York; Alice Heim, Bowling Green State University; Richard Larson, Lehman College of the City University of New York; Andrea Lunsford, University of British Columbia; Jerry Olson, Middlesex County College; and Karen Thomas, Boise State University.

A Note to Students on Reading and Vocabulary

Your instructor will be giving you reading assignments from this book throughout the course. Part of your task will be to do an effective job of reading them. What makes an effective job? You probably know something about it already. It's obviously not a hurried look five minutes before class begins or a quick skimming just to get the general idea. A good reading is thorough. It starts with a look at the introduction before each selection, where we have supplied some background information and an indication of the writer's topic.

An effective reading continues with a search for meaning. The writer is trying to *do* something to you, and you need to become attentive to what that something is. A good reader is an active reader, someone who continually asks questions: "What are the writer's main points?" "What do I know about them?" "How is the writer supporting those points?" "Is that enough?" This kind of reading is not always easy, and in many cases it will seem slightly unnatural. If you're like most readers you're probably not used to reading this way, critically and analytically. In the introductions we have given some suggestions about what to look for; at the end of each selection we supply questions for discussion. These questions will help you test yourself. If you have read attentively, you should be able to answer most of them, either on the spot or after another brief look at the selection. (You can also skim those questions in advance, looking for what you'll need to get from the reading.)

At the end of an effective reading you should have two things to say: an account of what you think the writer was trying to do, and an account of what it was like to read the selection. That second part is important. It takes two to make a reading, the writer and you. Readers don't just absorb, they help create. So part of a good reading means being able to talk about the reading process, to supply a story of your reading. Your instructor will want to hear what happened as you read and reread the essay. You'll need to say such things as, "As I read this I felt . . .," and, "During the third paragraph I changed my mind," and, "After I read the end I went back to check on the beginning." It's just as important to note where you got confused or sidetracked as it is to know where everything became clear. In other words, as a good reader you won't just be reading for nuggets of information. You will be able to tell about the reading *as a reading*, as a process that involves thinking and judging and testing.

We have provided lists of key vocabulary words after each selection. Most of the time you'll know what some of the words mean; sometimes you might know them all. Fine. But often you'll need to use your dictionary to check on a word's exact meaning (and some words have more than one), or you'll have to return to the essay in order to make an educated guess about them from their context. The words are important; you can't discuss your reading intelligently if you don't know what the words mean. Once you know what they mean, make them your own. Keep a list of words that are new to you and use them in your English course and in your other courses as well.

Your job as a reader, then, will be to remain active, seeking the writer's meaning, testing it against what you know from your experience, examining the vocabulary and word choice, and coming to some conclusions about the piece and your reading of it. As you do more reading, you'll notice that you are taking in more from each essay, becoming a better, more analytical reader with a wider vocabulary and a more developed sense of how to understand a piece of writing, both someone else's and your own.