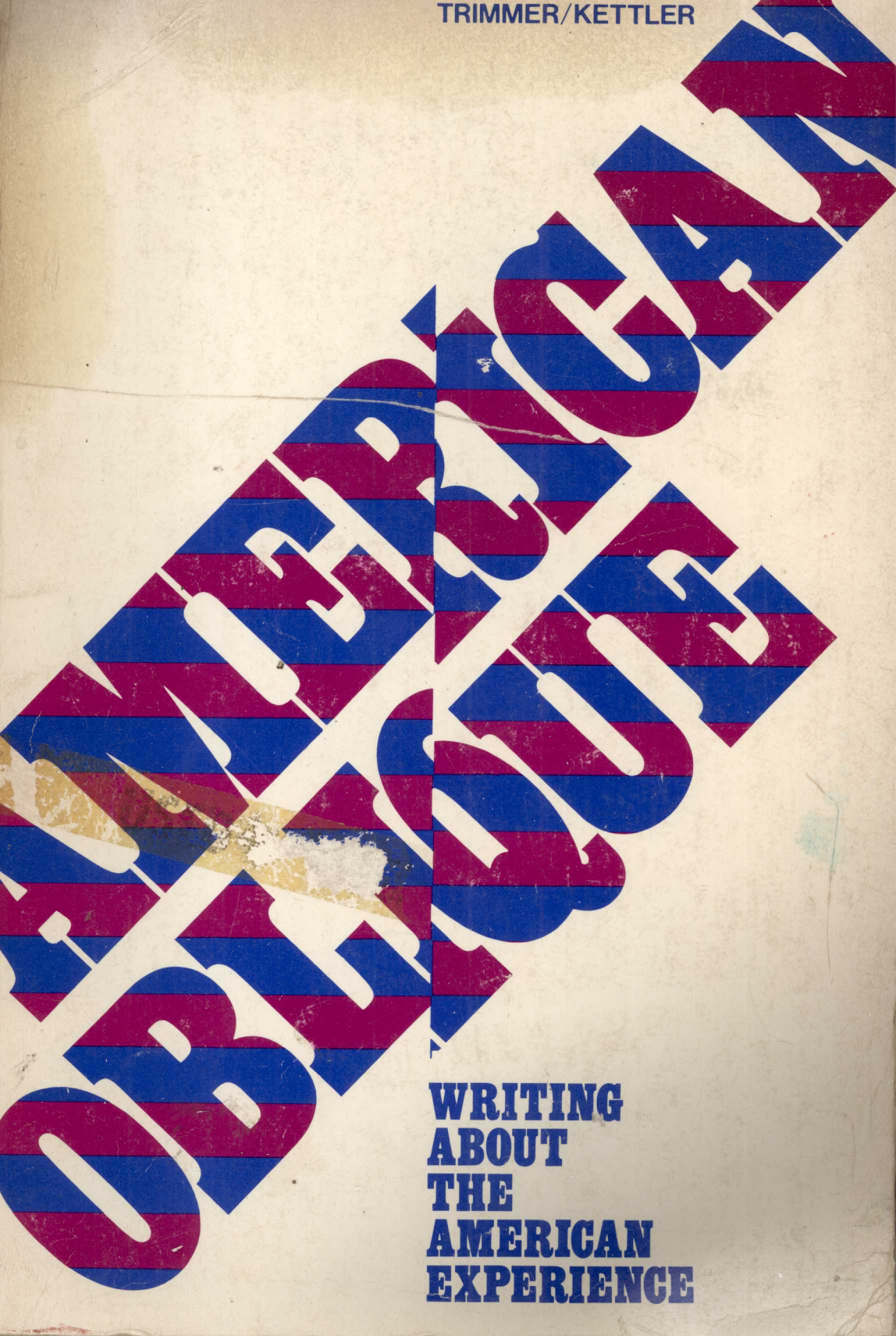


TRIMMER/KETTLER



**WRITING
ABOUT
THE
AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE**

AMERICAN OBLIQUE

WRITING ABOUT
THE AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE

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PREFACE

Anyone who enjoys identifying stars in the night sky has learned that the way to see the dimmest points is to look slightly to one side of them. They vanish if focused on directly and reappear when the line of vision is shifted away. This is because the more light-sensitive cells of the retina are found outside the region of the greatest acuity where we normally bring objects into focus.

*Looking obliquely carries with it slightly disturbing feelings, as much psychological as visual. We often say, "Let's bring the subject up and have a look at it." But we look past a dim star to see it, as though looking at something else. It is a little like Kant's observation that "ultimate things can only be discussed indirectly." PAUL SHEPARD, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game**

When we first began to plan this book, we tried to see "ultimate things" directly. Because many of our students seemed preoccupied with problems of identity and purpose, we felt that they would see more personal relevance in the work of the required composition course and particularly the weekly theme if we asked them to read essays and write themes about "where I lived and what I lived for." We hoped that by reading and discussing the personal essays of America's great writers our students would see how others had used their experience to talk about "ultimate things": What is an American? What is American about the American experience? What has happened to the American dream? In re-reading these writers, however, we were reminded that few of them ever attacked these questions directly. They explored all the big American questions, but brought them into focus by "looking obliquely." Similarly, we realized that our students usually wrote more intelligently about the meaning of their own experience when they were asked to see it obliquely.

The small library of material we have collected in *American Oblique* brings those ultimate questions about the American experience into focus by directing the reader's attention "slightly to one side of them." The writers in these selections focus on what, at first, appear to be small and manageable subjects, but as they describe our American landscapes, classify our American heroes, or analyze the techniques of our American salesmen, they inevitably discuss the kinds of environments Americans create and destroy, the types of individual achievements Americans honor, and the forms of deception Americans tolerate or applaud. The variety of material within each of the twelve sections fills in the number of angles in the oblique vision. For example, the descriptions of the structures in the American Monuments section inevitably raise questions of definition and value: What is a "monument"? What values do our American monuments commemorate? Do Americans make pilgrimages to these monuments because they honor tradition or because they seek novelty?

We selected and arranged the material in *American Oblique* to meet the requirements of most classes in freshman English. We began by organizing

the text around the four major rhetorical categories. Within these categories, we identified the twelve writing strategies most often discussed in composition courses. We then tried to find an American theme that would appropriately exhibit the form and function of each strategy. The selections in *American Journeys*, for example, show the way chronology works to organize narration, while the descriptions in *American Gadgets* illustrate the techniques of process analysis. Thus, the writing assignments, which are the end product of an analysis and discussion of each of these sections have both thematic and rhetorical coherence. For example, after reading several essays which attempt to define “work,” examining the writing strategies involved in the process of definition, and discussing the various manifestations of the concept of work in American culture, students should be prepared to write essays defining their own experience with work or the work ethic.

We realize that one can rarely find a pure example of rhetorical form; most narration involves description and most expository writing can be seen as argument. Also, we realize that writing a classification or a comparison and contrast theme may be a somewhat mechanical exercise. But we are interested here in the thought processes inherent in these rhetorical strategies and the imaginative insights they lead to when they are applied to the American experience.

Though the long essays in each section exemplify the predominant rhetorical form of that section, *American Oblique*, like all American machines, has interchangeable parts. Depending on the interests of the student and the instructor, productive class discussions and theme assignments could result from the attempt, not only to describe the American Family, but to analyze its organizational structure. The views of America’s Foreign Observers can be scrutinized for their hidden assumptions as well as compared and contrasted.

Perhaps we can best explain the design and function of *American Oblique* by calling attention to its related elements.

RHETORICAL ORGANIZATION: The book is divided into four parts organized around the four major rhetorical modes which are arranged in the order of ascending complexity. We realize that for many, narration and description are extremely intricate enterprises. For them it may seem strange to put at the beginning the sort of tasks that require the most skill. We believe, however, that at the beginning of a composition course most students feel more comfortable composing narrative and descriptive essays. After they record their experiences, they are better able to explain and analyze them.

THEMATIC ORGANIZATION: The four rhetorical categories are divided into twelve sections, each containing selections which illustrate a single thematic concept and a single writing strategy. The relationship between strategy and concept is one of form and function: the strategy provides an effective device for understanding the concept. Even though the thematic organization is predetermined by rhetorical considerations, the twelve sections, taken together, comprise a rather comprehensive view of American culture.

RHETORICAL INTRODUCTIONS: The short introduction to each of the four parts is intended to define and illustrate the principles of the writing strategies represented in each of its subsections. Because these principles are quite complicated, the introductions merely outline the territory. Each instructor will want to explain the use of these strategies in his or her own terms, or refer students to a rhetoric.

THEMATIC INTRODUCTIONS: These short introductory essays on the themes of each section are exercises in hypothesis making, one side of a conversation. They are beginning statements, occasionally even oblique statements, which each student will want to respond to, expand, or argue with as he or she reads, discusses, and writes about the material in the section.

SHORTER VIEWS: The sequence of verbal and visual selections in each section has an internal order that is both chronologically and culturally significant. The first three selections in each sequence are brief encounters with the central thematic concern, while the poem offers an additional perspective on the subject.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY: We selected photographs to illuminate the subject of the section from yet another angle. Because the four related photos contain several interesting visual and thematic patterns, they form a photographic essay that will allow for detailed examination and discussion.

LONGER ESSAYS: The three long essays that close each section expand both the chronological and cultural significance of the thematic sequence. These thoughtful and provocative statements not only provide the most sustained insight into the theme of the section, but also illustrate the most detailed use of the writing strategy under consideration.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Because we did not want to intrude on the student's engagement with the material, we have placed the discussion questions at the end of each section. There are usually two kinds of questions, rhetorical and thematic, in each unit; two questions are provided for each of the shorter pieces and four questions for each of the longer essays. In addition, five questions are included to expand and enrich the student's perception of the thematic and rhetorical concepts in the sequence.

THEME ASSIGNMENTS: The first three theme assignments in each section pertain to the writing strategy of the section and are arranged in an order of ascending difficulty. The last three theme assignments suggest other strategies for attacking the subject.

Because we continue to be enthusiastic students of American life and letters, we thoroughly enjoyed designing and assembling this book. And because we think composition students will enjoy talking and writing about their own

American experience from an oblique angle, we hope they will be enthusiastic about *American Oblique*. We would like to express our appreciation to the editorial staff of Houghton Mifflin for its invaluable support and encouragement in the creation of this book. We would like to thank Lyman Baker, Roger Bailey, Maurice Hatch, C. Wade Jennings, Scott Oury, and Charles Quagliata for their helpful editorial comments. We would also like to thank Karen Taylor and Holly McFarland for their cooperation and assistance in preparing the manuscript. And we would like to thank Bill Stafford for teaching us to see obliquely.

Joseph F. Trimmer

Robert R. Kettler

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PART ONE

NARRATION

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