

Gilbert H. Muller  
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# THE SHORT PROSE READER



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LaGuardia Community College

McGraw-Hill Book Company

New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland  
Bogotá Düsseldorf Johannesburg London Madrid  
Mexico Montreal New Delhi Panama Paris  
São Paulo Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto

This book was set in Century Schoolbook  
by Monotype Composition Company, Inc.  
The editors were William A. Talkington and David Dunham;  
the designer was Robin Hessel;  
the production supervisor was Dominick Petrellese.  
The Murray Printing Company was printer and binder.

### The Short Prose Reader

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0    MUMU    7 8 3 2 1 0 9

See Acknowledgments on pages 386–389.  
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#### Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Short prose reader.

Includes index.

1. College readers. I. Muller, Gilbert H.,  
date II. Wiener, Harvey S.  
PE1417.S446    808'.042    78-13284  
ISBN 0-07-043991-5

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# Preface

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*The Short Prose Reader* is a text for college composition courses. Its ten chapters cover all important patterns of writing, offering students concise and lively prose models for analysis, discussion, and imitation. Designed as a practical text, it addresses the challenge that faces today's college students in reading and writing short prose compositions.

The organization of *The Short Prose Reader* is one of its major strengths. Each of the first nine chapters contains four short essays that illustrate clearly a specific pattern or technique—description, narration, illustration, comparison and contrast, definition, classification, process analysis, causal analysis, or argumentation. We start with the forms of prose mastered most readily by college students, and move carefully to more difficult types of analytical and argumentative writing; students learn to build upon earlier techniques and patterns as they progress through the book. The last chapter, consisting of ten essays, offers students the opportunity to read and discuss short prose pieces that reflect the various rhetorical strategies.

Teachers and students will discover that the essays have been selected carefully to appeal to a broad audience. Readers will be excited by Jade Snow Wong's "Uncle Kwok," Langston Hughes' "Salvation," Alex Haley's "Roots," Ray Bradbury's "Tricks! Treats! Gangway!" Judy Syfer's "I Want a Wife," and the many other timely or controversial pieces included in the text. This is a *readable* text, and one that has ample representation by many different types of writers. Moreover, the essays, which range typically between 300 and 1,200 words, achieve their goals succinctly and clearly and are easy to read and understand. The essays

will alert students both to the *types* of college writing expected of them and to the *length* of essay required frequently by teachers.

Finally, the exercises we have included for each essay are comprehensive and integrated—designed to develop and reinforce the key skills required in college writing. We have included two vocabulary exercises for each selection; the Words to Watch exercise alerts students to words they will read in context, and the Building Vocabulary exercise uses other effective methods (prefix/suffix, context clues, synonym/antonym, abstract/concrete) of teaching vocabulary. A section called Understanding the Writer's Ideas reinforces reading comprehension. Sections entitled Understanding the Writer's Techniques and Exploring the Writer's Ideas provide an excellent basis for class discussion and independent reading and analysis. The last exercise for each essay involves a dynamic approach to writing projects. Guided writing activities—a novel feature of *The Short Prose Reader*—tie the writing projects to the reading selections. Instead of simply being told to write an essay on a certain topic, students through Guided Writing will be able to move from step to step in the process of composition.

*The Short Prose Reader* can be used flexibly and effectively by students and teachers alike. The text is simple yet sophisticated, presenting essays and exercises that are easy to follow but never condescending. Weighing the needs and expectations of today's college freshmen, we have designed a rhetoric-reader that can serve as the major text for the composition course.

We wish to thank our colleagues for support and are especially grateful to those who read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions: Professors Harry Crosby, Boston University; Robert Esch, University of Texas, El Paso; Roland Holmes, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; Sharon Katz, Iona College; and Robert Reising, Pembroke State University.

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# one

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## Description

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Since a writer's main purpose is to explain things clearly, description is an important aid. To add liveliness to an essay, descriptive details are necessary to create a clear, unified impression of an object or a scene. As a technique in writing, description matches the sorts of details we see in vivid and effective photographs. Good descriptive writers help the reader to "see" objects, scenes, and even moods by means of language.

The essays in this section reflect key qualities in all good descriptive writing. First, description relies on a basic talent that we all have—the ability to see, touch, taste, hear, or smell various elements in the world. Talented descriptive writers refine the power of their five senses in order to recreate people, places, things, emotions, and ideas. Second, in descriptive writing, the author must select details carefully. There might be thousands of details in any given scene, but clearly a writer cannot present all of them. Instead, the writer must choose only those details most useful in painting a picture for the reader. Third, writers must organize their descriptions carefully. With description, the writer must decide on a perspective (for instance, top to bottom, left to right, front to back) and then move carefully from detail to detail. The descriptive writer has a "camera eye" that ranges over its subject in a careful, consistent way. Fourth, descriptive writing creates a "dominant impression" of its subject. This main impression arises from the author's focus on a single subject, and from the feelings that the

writer brings to that subject. Finally, descriptive writing offers a thesis or main idea concerning its subject, as does all sound writing. In short, description makes a point.

Writing good descriptive papers is a challenge, because we (like the authors in this section) have to look at our world anew, to remember, to search for meaningful details, to recreate the images around us. As we write descriptive paragraphs and essays, we should keep a basic goal in mind—to permit the reader to see the world that we describe in a fresh, vivid, and concrete way. As descriptive writers, we have to be willing to look at the world, perhaps for the first time, close up.

## *Jade Snow Wong*

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### UNCLE KWOK

In this selection from *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, an autobiography of her childhood in San Francisco's Chinatown, Jade Snow Wong creates a unique portrait of her Uncle Kwok. As you read this short essay, try to picture Uncle Kwok—his dress, features, and behavior. How does the description the author provides show that, from the moment that he enters the Wong Factory (which also serves as the family's home), Uncle Kwok is a decidedly unusual man?

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### Words to Watch

**ambled** (par. 1): walked in a leisurely manner

**satchel** (par. 1): a small bag for carrying clothes, books, or articles

**deviation** (par. 3): a turning aside from a normal pattern of behavior

**sauntered** (par. 4): walked carelessly or idly

**meticulousness** (par. 4): extreme care about details

**fastidious** (par. 5): not easy to please; excessively refined

**A**mong the workers in Daddy's factory, Uncle Kwok 1  
was one of the strangest—a large-framed, awkward, un-  
shaven man whose worn clothes hung on him as if they did

not belong to him. Each afternoon around three-thirty, as some of the workers were about to go home to prepare their early dinners, Uncle Kwok slowly and deliberately ambled in through the Wong front door, dragging his feet heavily, and gripping in one hand the small black satchel from which he was never separated.

Going to his own place at the sewing machine, he took off his battered hat and ragged coat, hung both up carefully, and then sat down. At first Jade Snow was rather afraid of this extraordinary person, and unseen, watched his actions from a safe distance. After Uncle Kwok was settled in his chair, he took off his black, slipperlike shoes. Then, taking a piece of stout cardboard from a miscellaneous pile which he kept in a box near his sewing machine, he traced the outline of his shoes on the cardboard. Having closely examined the blades of his scissors and tested their sharpness, he would cut out a pair of cardboard soles, squinting critically through his inaccurate glasses. Next he removed from both shoes the cardboard soles he had made the day before and inserted the new pair. Satisfied with his inspection of his renewed footwear, he got up, went to the waste can some seventy-five feet away, disposed of the old soles, and returned to his machine. He had not yet said a word to anyone.

Daily this process was repeated without deviation.

The next thing Uncle Kwok always did was to put on his own special apron, homemade from double thicknesses of heavy burlap and fastened at the waist by strong denim ties. This long apron covered his thin, patched trousers and protected him from dirt and draft. After a half hour had been consumed by these chores, Uncle Kwok was ready to wash his hands. He sauntered into the Wong kitchen, stationed himself at the one sink which served both family and factory, and with characteristic meticulousness, now proceeded to clean his hands and fingernails.

It was Mama's custom to begin cooking the evening meal at this hour so that the children could have their dinner before they went to the Chinese school, but every

day she had to delay her preparations at the sink until slow-moving Uncle Kwok's last clean fingernail passed his fastidious inspection. One day, however, the inconvenience tried her patience to its final limit.

Trying to sound pleasantly persuasive, she said, 6  
"Uncle Kwok, please don't be so slow and awkward. Why don't you wash your hands at a different time, or else wash them faster?"

Uncle Kwok loudly protested the injustice of her 7  
comment. "Mama, I am not awkward. The only awkward thing about my life is that it has not yet prospered!" And he strode off, too hurt even to dry his hands finger by finger, as was his custom.

## BUILDING VOCABULARY

1. You can sometimes determine what words mean if you look at smaller words which make them up. What are definitions for the words below? First write down words within them, or based on them, that you may be able to recognize; then write your definition.

- a. deliberately (par. 1)
- b. ragged (par. 2)
- c. inaccurate (par. 2)
- d. thicknesses (par. 4)
- e. characteristic (par. 4)

2. In several of her sentences, Jade Snow Wong uses two or three descriptive words in a series. For example, in the first sentence she describes Uncle Kwok as a "large-framed, awkward, unshaven man." Write similar sentences, using a series of descriptive words for the following subjects.

- a. woman
- b. factory
- c. subway
- d. storm
- e. highway

## UNDERSTANDING THE WRITER'S IDEAS

1. What is the main point that Jade Snow Wong wants to make about Uncle Kwok? In which sentence in the selection is the point clearly established?
2. Describe in your own words the specific details we learn about Uncle Kwok.
3. Describe Uncle Kwok's daily routine.
4. What do we learn about Jade Snow Wong's attitude toward Uncle Kwok and about her mother's attitude toward him?

## UNDERSTANDING THE WRITER'S TECHNIQUES

1. Descriptive writing relies on words which create pictures (images) that the reader can see. These words create images because they appeal to our sense of sight (through color and action), sound, smell, touch, and taste. In this essay, the writer concentrates on the sense of sight because she wants to create a visual impression of her uncle. What are some details about Uncle Kwok's features and his clothing? How do these descriptive details help to create a dominant impression of him?

2. We also see Uncle Kwok in motion. Describe the way he moves. Find five words in the essay that capture the quality of his motion.

3. Writers often provide a *thesis sentence* to express the main idea of a composition. The thesis sentence establishes the subject, limits it, expresses the writer's attitude toward it, and when well expressed, captures the reader's interest. Is there a thesis sentence in this essay? Which one is it?

4. Why does the thesis sentence appear in the place that it does? Which functions of a good thesis sentence does it reflect? Does it capture your interest?

5. Wong arranges details carefully; the essay progresses from one stage in the description to another until we have a sound impression of Uncle Kwok. At what point do we meet Uncle Kwok? What are the stages in his

activities? How do these stages correspond to the paragraphs in the essay? How do the individual paragraphs help us understand the pattern of Uncle Kwok's activity?

6. What is the purpose in selecting a short one-sentence paragraph (par. 4)?

### EXPLORING THE WRITER'S IDEAS

1. The author suggests that people (like Jade Snow's mother) become upset by those who follow set routines. Do you agree? Describe someone you know who annoys you because he or she follows set patterns.

2. Why do we fall back on set routines or repeat the same pattern of behavior from day to day?

3. What makes an individual "strange"? Is the word ever misleading? Should we fear "strange" individuals?

4. What does Uncle Kwok's statement in paragraph 7 explain about his behavior?

### IDEAS FOR WRITING

#### *Guided Writing*

Write an extended paragraph or a short essay describing someone you found strange, frightening, delightful, amusing, or eccentric when you were a child.

1. Establish a strong thesis sentence and place it near the start of your composition.

2. Concentrate on images of sight (color, outline, appearance, and action) to describe the individual.

3. Try to use a series of descriptive terms in several sentences. See paragraph 4 in Wong's essay, for example.

4. Fill in the details of your character in a carefully organized manner. Place the character in a particular setting at a given point in time. Try to use a "camera eye" movement that follows the character from detail to detail in the description.

5. Try to create a "dominant impression" of the character, one that conforms with the main idea expressed in your thesis sentence.



### *More Writing Projects*

1. Write a vivid description of one of your teachers or of someone in your class.
2. Cut out a photograph of someone from a newspaper or magazine and then write a clear description of that individual.
3. Describe one of your favorite television or movie personalities.