READING LITERATURE AND WRITING ARGUMENT

SECOND EDITION

Missy James • Alan P. Merickel

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

James, Missy.
Reading literature and writing argument / Missy James, Alan Merickel.— 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-13-189109-X
1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. Persuasion (Rhetoric) 3. College readers.
4. Report writing. I. Merickel, Alan. II. Title.

PE1408.J36 2005
808'.0427—dc22

2004013473

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Printer/Binder: Phoenix Book Tech Park

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
S.E. ISBN 0-13-189109-X
I.E. ISBN 0-13-137177-3

Reading Literature and Writing Argument

Preface

Any real study of great literature must take in human life at every possible level and search out every dark corner. And its natural territory is the whole human experience, no less. It does not astonish me that young people love to hear about these things, love to talk about them, and think about them.

—Katherine Anne Porter, "To Dr. William Ross"

The second edition of *Reading Literature and Writing Argument* springs directly from our classroom experiences as teachers of two college composition courses: "Writing Argument and Persuasion" and "Writing About Literature." In both courses, students are enriched, as readers and as writers, through their active engagement with ideas in written text. We want our students to experience the best of these two worlds. *Reading Literature and Writing Argument* is based on the premise that writing is valued when it makes readers think. This premise implies, of course, that a person must have ideas—something to say—in order to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. However, the notion that these ideas must have value can be daunting to the individual who is staring at the blank page or screen. Here is where literature—stories, poems, plays, essays—can play a vital role, one too often overlooked in students' overly busy, information-laden lives. Literature can unlock the gate to students' imaginations and open the window for creative envisioning. Likewise, the study of argument is vital to compelling students to think clearly and objectively.

Students can practice the skills of analysis and evaluation and, in doing so, develop critical standards and criteria for judging ideas. For example, Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience," presents an explicit argument; students learn when they examine his assertion that the individual's first responsibility is to maintain his or her own integrity. Similarly, students learn from examining the arguments made in a play by Aristophanes, in a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, or in stories by Louise Erdrich, Randall Kenan, and Fae Myenne Ng.

Literature liberates thinking, and argument disciplines it. The combined and complementary forces are inspiring and empowering. With our students' experiences in the two composition courses as our guide, we have attempted to harness the courses' complementary strengths in *Reading Literature and Writing Argument.*

NEW TO THIS EDITION

The organizational structure of *Reading Literature and Writing Argument* has been well-received. Additionally, reviewers universally have praised the diversity of reading selections in the first edition. We, therefore, dropped only four selections while adding twenty-four. In our new choices we once again have created a blend of the classical (Aristophanes, Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Wallace Stevens) and the contemporary (Robert Crumb, Public Enemy, Janisse Ray, and Brady Udall). Also, we have added research/writing topics; in creating these topics, we explicitly linked enduring themes to contemporary issues. Moreover, each anthology chapter includes a Collaboration Activity and two resource lists: Making Connections and Cross-Chapter Connections, linking themes and literature selections.

ORGANIZATION

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce and explain the terms and tools of argument. Chapters 3–6 present literature pieces centered on four enduring themes: "Individuality and Community," "Nature and Place," Family and Identity," "Power and Responsibility." Following each reading selection are questions that invite students to apply the argument terms and tools from Chapters 1 and 2. In this way, the literature pieces offer a practice field for the tools of critical thinking. Also, a number of writing topics are provided to generate longer written responses and, thus, to prompt students' ideas for writing their own arguments. Following Chapter 6, the appendices, "Notes on the Writing Process" and "Notes on Using Sources and Creating a Draft," address specific challenges of writing an argument and include references to sample student essays in Chapter 2. Finally, two sample student essays, a research-based argument and a Rogerian argument, are presented in Appendix A.

Chapter 1, "Reading to Explore and Examine," opens with a brief discussion of academic argument and presents a core concept: reading literature is a prompt for rooting out and exploring the underlying values that inform our responses to the world around us. We introduce basic argument structure and several rhetorical concepts that relate argument to audience appeal and tone. In selecting terms and concepts to feature, we chose the tools our classroom experiences have shown to be particularly useful for our students, both as readers and as writers. The Chapter Activities reinforce the argument terms and concepts by giving students a chance to practice applying them to their reading of several literature pieces.

Chapter 2, "Writing to Evaluate and Articulate," features the reasoning process—how we form opinions and arrive at conclusions. To begin, we challenge students to develop a habit of questioning the foundation of their opinions by evaluating their thinking processes. Again, taking a lead from our experiences in the composition classroom, we highlight the common fallacy of hasty generalization. Also, a brief overview of deduction and induction helps students examine the reasoning process in argumentation and gives them an additional tool for evaluating their own thinking, ideas, and opinions, as well as those of others—from a speaker in a poem to a character in a play.

In Chapter 2, we move from the reasoning process to the process of writing argument, which we present as five basic tasks. We offer illustrations of writers, both professional and student, applying these tasks. The last section of the chapter presents a four-part written exploration and articulation, a process that draws on the concepts from Chapters 1 and 2 and culminates in the students' writing their own arguments. The four-part activity directs students to explore their own thinking about a designated subject; to explore the subject in the context of several literature pieces; to explore the subject by doing some research; and, finally, to articulate an issue and claim, gather support, and compose their own arguments. The chapter presents four sample student essays, including two longer research projects: one illustrates the process of the four-part written exploration and articulation and one features the final product, the research-based argument paper. Lastly, Chapter Activities provide students with some hands-on engagement with the concepts introduced in the chapter.

For the anthology chapters 3–6, we purposefully created theme headings that are broad and that directly affect students' lives. To echo Katherine Anne Porter's testimony, we believe that students appreciate the opportunity to explore their own thinking processes within these contexts. Also, the themes invite students to draw connections, not only among the readings within a single chapter, but also among readings throughout the four chapters. For example, some family issues that students may identify in Chapter 5 readings can be related to responsibility issues in Chapter 6 readings. Students may draw on their reading experiences from several chapters as they explore an issue and move toward the writing of their own arguments. Chapter Activities are designed to stimulate students' thinking about their reading experiences and about potential issues for writing an argument.

To borrow from Robert Frost's statement on poetry, *Reading Literature and Writing Argument* is designed to bring both "delight" and "wisdom" to the first-year college student's composition experience. We believe that students will enjoy reading the literature pieces, practicing critical thinking skills, and exploring different perspectives on issues close to their own lives. And finally, students will discover they have a wealth of ideas as well as the critical acumen to compose a written argument that will compel their readers to think. The blank page or computer screen will present a welcome invitation to speak out and to be heard, to make choices and to make a difference in one's own life and in the lives of others.

TEACHING NOTES AND RESOURCES

An accompanying *Teaching Notes and Resources* manual provides 1) notes on teaching Chapter 1, including an outline for collaborative learning and writing a focus journal; 2) notes on Chapter 2, including an outline for a research-based argument, a Rogerian argument plan, and suggestions for peer critiques; 3) notes on chapters 3–6, including a list of argument terms and related literature, as well as teaching notes for each literature selection. Finally, the manual offers a list connecting chapter themes to films.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the following composition teachers whose comments and suggestions provided both encouragement and constructive guidance for the changes in this second edition: Michelle Bellavia, Southeastern Louisiana University; Arnold J. Bradford; Delpha Charles, Miami-Dade Community College, Wolfson Campus; Alan P. Church, University of Texas at Brownsville; Roger Jones, Southwest Texas State University; Alison Kuehner, Ohlone College; Frederick Miller, Pamlico Community College; Kent C. Richmond, California State University, Long Beach; and Annabel Servat, Southeastern Louisiana University. Also, we thank our friend and companion, Victoria Merickel, for her enduring support.

To our persistent permissions editor, Mary Dalton-Hoffman, and to project manager, Jessica Balch, we offer a hearty thank you. At Prentice Hall, we thank literature acquisitions editor, Vivian Garcia, for her support and guidance. And most of all, we are ever grateful to Leah Jewell, editor-in-chief. Were it not for her early-on interest, this book may not have gone past the conceptualization stage.

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