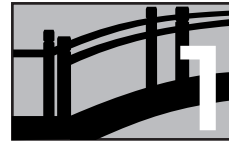


Part I

ON WRITING

*Writers in Process—
Finding the Words,
the Forms, and the
Reasons to Write*



On Reading

As the photograph on page 1 implies, writing is a complicated process that involves reading—immersing oneself in others' ideas—whether you're reading a hardcopy book or a computer screen; whether you're looking at words or visual images: photographs, cartoons, graphic novels. Part of this intellectual context of reading involves evoking what you already know about the subject—from firsthand experience, hearsay, media presentations, or other reading. Reading also involves immersing yourself in the conventions of the genre: we read poetry, short stories, and creative nonfiction somewhat differently from the way we read essays, as will be discussed on pages 2–12.

Who Is the Author?

- When did the author live? Where? Is the author's class, ethnic origin, gender or sexual preference, or regional or national background relevant to understanding this essay?
- What is the author's educational background? Job experience? Do these or other significant life experiences make him or her an authority on the subject of the essay?
- Does the author have political, religious, economic, cultural, or other biases that affect the essay's treatment of the subject? The author's credibility? The author's choice of language?

What Are the Context and Audience of the Essay?

- When was the essay first published? Is it dated, or is it still relevant?
- Where (in what magazine, professional journal, book, or website, if at all) was the essay first published?
- For what audience was the essay originally intended? How much did the author expect the original readers to know about the subject? To what extent did the author expect the original readers to share his or her point of view? To resist that view?
- Why would the original audience have read this essay? What ideas on the subject were current at the time?
- What similarities and differences exist between the essay's original audience and the student audience now reading it?
- What am I as a student reader expected to bring to my reading of this essay? My own or others' beliefs, values, past history, personal experience? Other reading? My own writing, previous or in an essay I will write in response to the essay(s) I am reading?

What Are the Purposes of the Essay?

- Why did the author write the essay? To inform, entertain, describe, define, explain, argue, or for some other reason or combination of reasons?
- Is the purpose explicitly stated anywhere in the essay? If so, where? Is this the thesis of the essay? Or is the thesis different?
- If the purpose is not stated explicitly, how can I tell what the purpose is? Through examples? Emphasis? Tone? Other means?
- Does the form of the essay suit the purpose? Would other forms or combinations of forms have been more appropriate?

What Are the Strategies of the Essay?

- What does the author do to make the essay interesting? Is he or she successful?
- What organizational pattern (and subpatterns, if any) does the author use? How do these patterns fit the subject? The author's purpose?
- What emphasis do the organization and proportioning provide to reinforce the author's purpose?
- What evidence, arguments, and illustrations, verbal or graphic, does the author employ to illustrate or demonstrate the thesis?
- On what level of language (formal, informal, slangy) and in what tone (serious, satiric, sincere, etc.) does the author write?
- Have I enjoyed the essay or found it stimulating or otherwise provocative? Why or why not?
- If I disagree with the author's thesis or am not convinced by or attracted to the author's evidence, illustrations, or use of language, am I nevertheless impelled to continue reading? If so, why? If not, why not?

The ways we read and write, and how we think about the ways we read and write, have been dramatically altered in the past thirty years. The New Critics, whose views dominated the teaching of reading and writing during the early and mid-twentieth century, promoted a sense of the text as a static, often enigmatic entity, whose sleeping secrets awaited a master critic or brilliant teacher to arrive, like Prince Charming on a white horse, and awaken their meaning. The numerous courses and textbooks encouraging students to read for experience, information, ideas, understanding, and appreciation reflect that view.

Yet contemporary literary theory encourages the sense of collaboration among author, text, and readers to make meaning. How we interpret any written material, whether a recipe, computer manual, love letter, or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (444–57) depends, in part, on our prior knowledge of the subject, our opinion of the author, our experience with other works of the genre under consideration (what

other recipes, or love letters, have we known?), and the context in which we're reading. We read Dr. King's "Letter" differently today than when he wrote it, jailed in Birmingham in 1963 for civil rights protests; liberals read it differently than conservatives; African-Americans may read it differently than whites, Southern or Northern. Where readers encounter a piece of writing greatly influences their interpretation, as well. Readers might read Dr. King's "Letter" as a document of news, history, social protest, argument, literary style—or some combination of these—depending on whether they encounter it in a newspaper of the time, in a history of the United States or of the civil rights movement, or in *The Essay Connection*.

A variety of critical theories reinforce the view that a work invites multiple readings, claiming that strong readers indeed bring powerful meanings to the texts they read. The selections in *The Essay Connection*, supplemented by photographs, cartoons, and visual essays by Art Spiegelman (116–17), Linda Villarosa (246–47), and Lynda Barry (354–63), open up a world of possibilities in interpreting not only what's on the page, but also what is *not* on the page. What's there for the writer, as for the reader, is not just another story but an assemblage of stories, all that has occurred in one's life and thought, waiting to bleed through and into the paper on which these stories, in all their variations, will be told. Readers and writers alike are always in process, always in flux, no matter what their sources of inspiration or places to think.

There are many ways to learn a language and to learn to read, determined by age, culture, and physical and intellectual circumstances. In "Living Without/With Words" (19–21), B. K. Loren, an aphasic for a decade, writes of the difficulties in finding the words themselves. Amy Tan's mother ("Mother Tongue" 13–18), Ning Yu ("Red and Black, or One English Major's Beginning" 173–82), and David Sedaris ("Make That a Double" 306–8) deal with issues and difficulties of learning to speak a new language and learning to "read" the culture embodied in that language. Sherman Alexie, in "What Sacagawea Means to Me" (93–95), like Tan and Sedaris and a host of other writers throughout *The Essay Connection*, demonstrates the influences of our cultural heritage on providing not only the words, but our understanding—of both the language and its cultural connotations. Writers, in any language, any culture are looking for ideal readers, people who share the author's attitude toward the subject and love the style, readers who, as Eudora Welty says of her mother, "read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him." Yet most writers can't count on such automatic adoration or agreement. So they load their work with information, evidence, appeals to ethics, the senses, the imagination (see Chapters 11 and 12) to win readers to their point of view.

Working with the conventions of a genre will soon become as automatic for experienced readers as working with the conventions of reading are for new readers. In English, these familiar conventions include reading from left to right, with pauses dictated, in part, by punctuation: short

ones for commas, slightly longer ones for periods, perhaps a bit more time out at the end of the paragraph.

When several (or more) readers share a background, common values, and a common language, they may be considered a *discourse community*. In “Mother Tongue” (13–18), Amy Tan explores how her writing reflects her Chinese-American discourse community. She understands, and uses, “all the Englishes I grew up with”—one for formal writing, another for intimate conversation with Chinese family members, and a combination of public and private languages for storytelling. Tan also understands, very well, the conventions of a professional American discourse community. When she speaks to her mother’s stockbroker (§s 10–12) or hospital personnel (§ 14), she knows that her impeccable standard English will get the respect—and results—that prejudice denies to her mother’s Chinese-accented English.

What Is an Essay?

What do we talk about when we talk about essays? Just what are we reading and writing? As a rule, in both college and high school, we’re writing either literary nonfiction or a more academic essay. Both do the following.

- Essays are *prose*—they may lack poetic meter and usually don’t rhyme, but the sentences, paragraphs, and whole work flow from beginning to end.
- Essays usually focus on a central *theme* or *subject*.
- Essays are *short*, ranging from a single paragraph to a book chapter.
- Essays are *true*—hence the term “nonfiction.” Essayists claim and readers believe that what they’re reading is the truth.
- Thus essays *present evidence from real life or research* that either the author or the readers can verify.
- Essays are *organized into recognizable patterns*, such as definition, comparison and contrast, argument; *most of the time these patterns appear in combination and serve multiple purposes*. Thus Suzanne Britt’s “That Lean and Hungry Look” (261–63) *describes* thin and fat people through *comparison and contrast*, thereby *defining* each type as a way to *argue* that the fat are decidedly superior to the thin.
- The *essay’s author has a point of view*, either expressed or implied, even if the author is unobtrusive or not identifiable as a character in the work (known as an authorial persona). This viewpoint governs the choice of evidence (and counterevidence), organization, and language. In general, the author is asking the reader to, in the words of Joan Didion, “*Listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.*”

As later chapters will illustrate, much of your writing in college will be articles in the language and conventions of the particular subjects you

study—critical interpretations of literature, position papers in philosophy or political science, interpretive presentations of information in history, case histories in psychology or business or law, explanations of processes in computer science or auto mechanics. For instance, in the course of explaining what’s “Inside the Engine” (142–46), master mechanics Tom and Ray Magliozzi tell readers how and why motor oil keeps the engine humming smoothly. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (444–57) uses evidence from world religions, his own life experience and that of numerous other African-Americans, theology, history, and the law to make the case for civil disobedience. And in “Blaming the Family for Economic Decline” (213–16), Stephanie Coontz interprets American public policy as it affects the way the American public conceives of the relationship between family stability and economic status—a confusion, she contends, between cause and effect.

Articles such as these do not have to be dry or devoid of a point of view. For instance, the science writings of Isaac Asimov (132–40), Atul Gawande (218–23), Natalie Angier (291–94), Sherry Turkle (397–402), and Bill McKibben (413–23) are known for their reader-friendly clarity as well as their absolute accuracy. We can count on them to have a point of view—Angier invariably favors what is moderate and healthful. Even academic essays don’t have to be deadly serious (or dull), plodding along under the weight of obscure jargon, as all of these essays indicate.

Why a person writes often determines his or her point of view on a particular subject. George Orwell claims that people write for four main reasons: “sheer egoism,” “esthetic enthusiasm,” “historical impulse,” and—his primary motive—“political purpose, the desire to push the world in a certain direction.”

In “Why I Write” (29), student Matt Nocton identifies the reasons many of us write: to dispel lies, to seek the truth, to discover new things about one’s self and one’s life, to express oneself, or to wage war with written words “while eluding enemy fire, at least temporarily.”

In “Why I Write: Making No Become Yes” (23–27), Elie Wiesel interprets “*see it my way*” as the role of the writer as witness. The survivor of imprisonment in several Nazi concentration camps, Wiesel explains, “I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. . . . Not to transmit an experience is to betray it.” In this eloquent essay Wiesel, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, demonstrates his continuing commitment to make survivors, the entire world, continually remember the meaning of the Holocaust: “Why do I write? To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death”—a purpose also served by the museum at the Dachau concentration camp (see photo page 24).

In addition to articles, *The Essay Connection* includes many types of essays that include elements of creative nonfiction. These include *memoir* and *partial autobiography*, such as Scott Russell Sanders’s “The Inheritance

of Tools" (148–54); *character sketches*, like Chang-rae Lee's "Coming Home Again" (156–64); *descriptions of a place*, as in Linda Hogan's "Dwellings" (273–76), or of *an experience*, such as the excerpts from Zitkala-Sa's *The School Days of an Indian Girl* (196–202); *narratives of events*, including Frederick Douglass's account of how he stood up to his cruel overseer ("You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.") (109–13); *interpretations of phenomena*, such as Scott Russell Sanders's "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze" (249–59); and *social commentary*, such as Jonathan Kozol's "The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society" (204–11).

Creative Nonfiction

Creative nonfiction (sometimes called literary nonfiction) does everything that essays in general do, but in ways that make the writing look like fiction. Creative nonfiction speaks through a human face, a human voice, and has the following characteristics.

- A conspicuous, individual recognizable *voice*—usually the voice of the *narrator* or *the central character*, who is often a conspicuous commentator or actor in the narrative. Sometimes more than one voice speaks—for example, when there are several characters or the narrator is at different stages of life, as in autobiographies.
- A *plot*, a causal relationship among events that tells a story, usually with a beginning; a middle that may lead to a climax in the action or a profound (or less earthshaking) understanding of events or phenomena; and an ending.
- *Dialogue*. Sometimes, not always.
- *Shifting time*, departures from logical or chronological order; events may be narrated through flashback or flash forward.
- *Setting*—usually a place or combination of places, or an interior, a mental landscape.
- *Symbolism*—any character and anything in the environment may stand for something larger than itself, as well as for its intrinsic qualities.
- An *argument that is implied*, rather than stated explicitly, if in fact an argument is presented at all. This is made more often through indirect or emotional means than through evidence from research or scientific investigation. "Show, don't tell" is the advice that creative writers follow.

Each of these characteristics may appear in more academic essays. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to "blurred genres," in which documentaries "read like true confessions," and scientific discussions contain novelistic elements. Every writer in *The Essay Connection*, for instance, has

a distinctive voice, a recognizable style. But not every essayist combines most of these techniques in a single work unless he or she is writing creative nonfiction. *The Essay Connection* highlights two creative nonfiction essays. In “On the Banks of the Bogue Chitto” (191–95), student Amanda Cagle presents an evocative portrait of her beloved Choctaw father, his many strengths ultimately unable to overcome the difficulties of poverty and racism in Louisiana bayou country. In “Killing Chickens” (242–45), Meredith Hall tells the story of the day when paradise is lost, as the inevitability of divorce snaps into sharp focus for a young mother and her two children. The experience of reading—and writing—a piece of creative nonfiction is very much like that of reading a short story: we respond to the characters in the narrative as we would to people we know; we may identify with them or be repelled by their fully human experiences. But because we believe in the truth of the creative nonfiction, if the tale is well told, we will not only care deeply about the characters, but we will want to know how their fate extends beyond the narrative.

Creative Nonfiction and Short Stories

The main difference between reading and writing creative nonfiction, as opposed to a short story, is the unspoken pact between writer and reader.

- In creative nonfiction, the writer claims to be telling a true story, whether literally or psychologically true, or both.
- The reader accepts the work as true and responds to it as to other real-world events as capable of external verification.

Fiction—including the short stories in *The Essay Connection*—employs the same techniques as creative nonfiction: characters, narrative voice(s), plot, dialogue, shifts of time, settings, symbols, and implied argument or message. But these are the main difference between creative nonfiction and fiction, whether short story or novel.

- Fiction is not expected to be true. The narrator, even one who claims to be telling a true story—as does Robinson Crusoe or Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*—is conceived of as the author’s invented creation. Most authors and readers agree on this point.
- Thus events, even true ones, like the Vietnam War, can be altered to make a point or a “good story” in fiction. They do not require external corroboration, though internal consistency provides a coherence that helps readers’ interpretations.

Readers of stories (and novels) accept their characters and events as fictional, even if they seem to be slightly changed versions of reality. The reader of fiction exercises a “willing suspension of disbelief,” plunges into the story, and—if it’s a good one—for the duration of its reading, enters

the world of the narrative—down the rabbit hole of *Alice in Wonderland*, up in the hot air balloon of *Around the World in 80 Days*, cast away on Robinson Crusoe's desert island. The title of Elizabeth Tallent's "No One's A Mystery" (388–90) comes from the lyrics of a Rosanne Cash song and conveys to readers country music's eternal theme of love, betrayal, and heartbreak. We are not surprised to learn—in two brief pages of dialogue—that the anonymous, eighteen-year-old narrator's view of her future differs considerably from that of her lover, an older man who is currently cheating on his wife as the couple speeds down the road at "eighty miles an hour" in a dirty pickup, smoking cigarettes and drinking tequila to the pulsating beat of country music on the radio. Whereas she creates a romantic scenario of her marriage ("grandmother's linen and her old silver") and two darling children born within three years, Jack predicts that "in two years you'll write, 'I wonder what that old guy's name was, the one with the curly hair and the filthy dirty pickup truck and time on his hands.'" Whether readers are world-weary cynics or not, we know whose version we'll believe—clued in by the story's first "fact": Jack's birthday gift of a "five-year diary" with a broken lock. It doesn't matter to us whether these specific characters ever existed in real life; what we see and hear and smell in that pickup (note the pun on the style of that truck) is enough.

Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" (from *The Things They Carried*, a collection of narratives about the Vietnam War) intermingles good advice on writing a war story that rings true with characters—soldiers in the Vietnam war—and events presented as fiction. Whether or not the characters are real people, or are even based on real people, or whether or not the events actually happened, they illustrate O'Brien's points about true war stories because the reader will check the truth of O'Brien's advice against his or her own understanding of reality: "In any [true] war story . . . it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed" (545). If we haven't been in a war—although the events of 9/11 brought war into our very homes—we can check its truth against what we already know is plausible in war and also against the fictional evidence O'Brien gives us: "And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. . . . It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (550). In this work, which O'Brien calls fiction despite its compelling recreation of characters in a grimly surreal Vietnam jungle setting, factual truth doesn't matter. But O'Brien's kind of truth matters greatly: "You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, 'Is it true?' and if the answer matters, you've got your answer" (548).

Poetry

Poetry has conventions of its own; its meaning is compact, compressed. Whether or not it rhymes—and lots of poems don't—a poem is held together by its metrical pattern (rhythm), sounds, and often a dominating image or emotion. The poems in *The Essay Connection* are short and sufficiently straightforward so readers can understand them without a lot of outside explanation. These poems usually depict a character (Penelope Pelizzon's "Clever and Poor"), relationship (Jenny Spinner's "Together in the Old Square Print, 1976"), emotion (Mary Oliver's "August"), event (Seamus Heaney's "Horace and Thunder"), experience (Marilyn Nelson's "Asparagus"), social principle (Martín Espada's "The Community College Revises its Curriculum in Response to Changing Demographics"), or world view (Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider").

Children who are reared on Dr. Seuss and nursery rhymes learn to love poetry at an early age. Too often, however, as they proceed through school, they learn to dislike it in formal contexts (say, textbooks) while nevertheless responding informally to the lyrics of rap, reggae, hip-hop, rhythm and blues, and rock music. Whereas memorizing and reciting poetry may become an embarrassment in the elementary grades, there are at least thirty-five high school Precision Poetry Drill Teams who compete and award school letters. In and out of college, poetry readings, poetry slams, and online poetry sources abound. A Google search for "poetry" on April 23, 2005 (Shakespeare's birthday!) listed 68,600,000 hits—a lively subject indeed. Thus one aspect of a college education is to reintroduce students as adults to poetry—in case you might have tuned out the more literary versions while tuning in on your iPod.

The Glossary contains terminology useful for discussing poetry: rhyme, meter, stanzaic form, imagery, and more (639). Some of your concerns as a reader surface whether you're reading any genre, in prose or in poetry.

- Who is the *author*? When did she or he write the poem?
- Who is the *speaker* in the poem? Unlike essays, where the speaker or narrative voice is usually the author, this is not necessarily the case in poetry.
- What is the *poem about*? What is its point? Try paraphrasing it, perhaps line by line or sentence by sentence. What evidence in the poem itself supports your interpretation? Does any evidence contradict your interpretation? If so, reread the poem to accommodate as much evidence as possible.
- What does the *title* signify?
- What is the prevailing *tone*? What does this tell you about the author's attitude toward the subject?

Because poetry is concentrated, often allusive, some additional considerations can help you as you read.

- Read the poem more than once, more than twice—give it a chance for the meaning to sink in.
- Read the poem aloud. Try this, listening to its sounds, and to the sounds of silence.
- Read the poem according to the punctuation, rather than according to the end of the line. Poetic sentences don't necessarily end at the line ends.
- Read the poem according to the meter but with gentle grace to convey its subtle heartbeat—though not the force of a heart attack.
- Many poems are full of ambiguity. If you've caught some of the meanings and have arrived at an interpretation that satisfies you, be prepared to enjoy what you've discovered—and to argue your case with people whose interpretations differ from your own.

Indeed, the best advice for all readers, and for all writers, is to enjoy yourself. As long as you're in the right ballpark, don't worry about touching all the bases. There's more than one way to play the game, more than one way to read the essays and the creative nonfiction, the stories and the poems. And don't forget the pictures, cartoons, and graphic essays.

Illustrations

"Reading" a photograph or cartoon involves many of the same considerations you bring to poetry. You look at it, once, twice, several times, sort of like watching a polaroid develop, and the meaning gradually becomes clear. In many cases, the longer you look or the more often you revisit the picture, multiple meanings emerge.

- *Subject.* What's in the picture? What's missing from it that the viewer would ordinarily expect to find and have to supply? In a joke, for instance, as in Istvan Banyai's "Inflation" (264) what changes—in the figure and in the cost of the postage stamp—occur in the successive panels?
- *Artist's attitude toward the subject.* What is the point? How do you know? Does the artist tell a story in a single illustration or in a sequence?
- If there are *captions* or *dialogue blocks*, what is the relation of these to the visual art? How can you tell when these are straightforward, as in Linda Villarosa's "How Much of the Body Is Replaceable?" (246–47) or satiric, as in Evan Eisenberg's "Dialogue Boxes You Should Have Read More Carefully" (469)?

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- *Context.* If you can tell, where did the illustrations originally appear? How large were they? Full page? Small boxes? Are they free-standing or intended to accompany a written text? When there is a cartoon sequence, as in Lynda Barry's graphic narrative "Common Scents," what story do the pictures, speech balloons, and captions tell?
- *Design*—overall visual sense. How does the artist's use of color, light and dark, sunshine and shadows, balance, and general layout affect your interpretation?
- *Ambiguities, uncertainties.* How can you be certain that your interpretation of the figures, ground, context is accurate? Do you need any additional information to understand what you're seeing?

There is no single right way to view an illustration, just as there is no single way to write about it. Indeed, there are as many ways to write as there are writers, for style is as individual as a fingerprint, and just as distinctive, as we'll see in the chapters that follow.

 AMY TAN

Tan was born in Oakland, California, in 1952. Fascinated with language, she earned a BA in English (1972) and an MA in linguistics (1973) from San Jose State University. As a language development specialist working with disabled children, Tan's sensitivity to languages both spoken (conversation) and unspoken (behavior) was translated into the stories of complex relationships between Chinese-born mothers and their American-born daughters that comprise *The Joy Luck Club*, whose publication in 1989 brought her immediate fame, fortune, and critical esteem.

Tan followed this book with the equally successful *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), a novel modeled on her mother's traumatic life in China before she emigrated to the United States after World War II; *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995); and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). Indeed, as Tan explains in the essay "Mother Tongue," originally published in *Threepenny Review* in 1990, her ideal reader became her mother, "because these were stories about mothers." Tan wrote "using all the Englishes [she] grew up with"—the "simple" English she used when speaking to her mother, the "broken" English her mother used when speaking to her, her "watered down" translation of her mother's Chinese, and her mother's passionate, rhythmic "internal language." Her mother paid the book the ultimate compliment: "So easy to read." Hearing these multiple languages by reading the essay aloud weds the words and the music.

Mother Tongue

I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more
 1 than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in
 this country or others.

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always
 2 loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great
 deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can
 evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Lan-
 guage is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew
 up with.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do
 3 use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had
 already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was
 about my writing, my life, and my book, *The Joy Luck Club*. The talk was
 going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that
 made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it
 was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using

the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, “The intersection of memory upon imagination” and “There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus”—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

4 Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: “Not waste money that way.” My husband was with us as well, and he didn’t notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It’s because over the twenty years we’ve been together I’ve often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

5 So you’ll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds like, I’ll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation which I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family’s, Du, and how the gangster in his early years wanted to be adopted by her family, which was rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother’s family, and one day showed up at my mother’s wedding to pay his respects. Here’s what she said in part:

6 “Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming Island people. The local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn’t look down on him, but didn’t take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don’t stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean give lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won’t have to stay too long. He come to my wedding. I didn’t see, I heard it. I gone to boy’s side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen.”

7 You should know that my mother’s expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the *Forbes* report, listens to *Wall Street Week*, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine’s books with ease—all kinds of things I can’t begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand 50 percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand 80 to 90 percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother’s English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and

imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I've been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as "broken" or "fractured" English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited *my* perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money."

And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week." And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they said

they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English—lo and behold—we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

15 I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A's and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

16 This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was _____, Mary thought he was _____." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming," with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous." Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that.

17 The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship—for example, "*Sunset* is to *nightfall* as _____ is to _____." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: *red* is to *spotlight*, *bus* is to *arrival*, *chills* is to *fever*, *yawn* is to *boring*. Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, "*sunset* is to *nightfall*"—and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain

of stars. And all the other pairs of words—red, bus, spotlight, boring—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: “A sunset precedes nightfall” is the same as “a chill precedes a fever.” The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an associative situation, for example, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother’s English, 18
about achievement tests. Because lately I’ve been asked as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can’t begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge 19
of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn’t until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at 20
first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here’s an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.” A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won’t get into today, I later decided I 21
should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language

ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

- 22 Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”
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Content

1. What connections does Tan make throughout the essay between speaking and writing? Why is it necessary for the writer to be “keenly aware of the different Englishes” she uses? In what English has Tan written “Mother Tongue”? Why?
2. What is Tan’s relationship with her mother? How can you tell?
3. What problems does Mrs. Tan experience as a result of not speaking standard English? Are her problems typical of other speakers of “limited” English?
4. Do you agree with Tan that “math is precise” but that English is “always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience” (§ 16)? Why or why not? If English is so subjective, how is it possible to write anything that is clear, “so easy to read” (§ 22)?

Strategies/Structures/Language

5. Tan uses illustrative examples: a story told in her mother’s speech (§ 6), her mother’s altercation with the stockbroker (§s 10–13), her mother’s encounter with rude and indifferent hospital workers who lost her CAT scan (§ 14). What is the point of each example? Does Tan have to explain them? Why or why not?
6. How do the “Englishes” that Tan and her mother use convey their characters, personalities, intelligence? In what ways are mother and daughter similar? Different?

For Writing

7. How many Englishes did you grow up with? Explain, either in speaking or in writing, to someone who doesn’t know you very well, two of the different languages—whether these are variations of English or another language—that you use and identify the circumstances under which you use each of them—perhaps at home, in conversation with friends, or in writing papers. Consider such features as vocabulary (and amount of slang or specialized words), sentence length, and simplicity or complexity of what you’re trying to say. How much can you count on your readers to understand without elaborate explanation on your part? Do you write papers for English classes in a different language than papers for some of your other courses?
8. If you are trying to communicate with someone whose native language or dialect is different from yours, how do you do it? To what extent does this communication depend on words? Other means (such as gestures, tone of voice, pictures)? As Tan does, tell the story of such an experience (to a reader who wasn’t there) in order to explain the nature of your communication. If there were any misunderstandings, what were they? How did they occur, and how did you resolve (or attempt to resolve) them? What advice would you offer to help others in similar situations to communicate clearly?

9. Present to an audience of college-educated readers an argument for or against the necessity of speaking in standard English for general, all-purpose communication. Are there any exceptions to your position?



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

B. K. LOREN

Loren is a widely published essayist, journalist, and environmental activist. *The Way of the River: Adventures and Meditations of a Female Martial Artist* was published in 2001. She attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she also taught workshops on editing and writing dialogue. Of "Learning to Write Great Dialogue," she comments, "I once earned my keep by transcribing, verbatim, conversations in psychoanalytic group therapy. I'm sworn to confidentiality, but I can tell you I learned how people talk. I also learned that 'real life' dialogue sometimes makes for bad fiction and nonfiction. There's a craft to writing dialogue that goes beyond words. Good dialogue moves the plot forward, develops character, creates voice and image, and in short, solidifies all the elements of descriptive prose, bringing the story to life. Bad dialogue often kills an otherwise great story." For a person such as Loren, who has "come into existence alongside words," when the words disappear, as they do in aphasia, or come out wrong, language "becomes holy."

Loren's Iowa Workshop descriptions reveal the concern for both silence and language apparent in "Living Without/With Words." This was initially published in *Parabola* and reprinted in *The Best American Spiritual Writing* of 2004. In re-creating the mental perspective of someone with aphasia, the fear and the frustration, she reminds us that to have the right words on hand and to be able to utter them is to live; to write is to live.

Living Without/With Words

Once, I became aphasic. "Synapses," my neurologist explained to me, "are an all or none proposition." Mine were none. 1

Fish: *Bagel*. 2

Lion: *Table*. 3

Pelican: *Funicular*. 4

This is the way I named things. *The funicular skimmed the surface of the ocean searching for bagels*. Ocean was big enough, usually, to fit on my tongue and palate, to dance on my tongue and groove. The rest of the words I've 5

filled in after the fact, like we usually do with memory (aphasic or not). We like to be understood. What I really might have said may have involved “funicular” and “bagel,” but the words between would have been gibberish. My brain was an unplanned language poem and I a woman who tires easily of language poetry for its insistence upon intrinsic ambiguity. When you don’t have it, language becomes unflinchingly precise.

6 Signifier: Signified: Bullshit.

7 Words carry on their backs their entire histories. This is what I learned the day they packed up and left me languageless. No forwarding address, no wish-you-were-here postcard.

8 Postcard: *Night Cream*.

9 Yard: *Breast*.

10 Water: *Orgasm*.

11 Holy shit. I was dead in the water without language.

12 As it is with any lover, I didn’t see my words packing their bags to go. If I had, I’d have tried to stop them. I’d have begged, “Let’s work this out, you and me. Let’s find a middle ground.”

13 I didn’t see the verbs colluding with the nouns, the adverbs separating off, the adjectives running like lemmings to the cliff of my lips. I went to bed one night with a congregation gathering in my throat to sing me awake the next morn, and I woke with a stale mix of nonsense in my mouth, Fruit Loops instead of the promise of eggs hatching thoughts in my brain for breakfast.

14 My doctors were flummoxed.

15 A year into it, and I was depressed. I do not mean sad. I mean looking for the word *gun* daily, something to put in my mouth. I’d studied classics instead of writing in college. I couldn’t stand to see words played with as they were in some writing workshops.

16 I needed to know the genetic origin of words. Their family tree. I mean, without that, all words are adopted. They grow up angry foster children wanting to burn things down. I wanted to know their mother and grandmother. I wanted to know their Adam, their Eve, their Eden, their original sin. Knowledge.

17 When you use the word *flummox*, for instance, your tongue rolls across the same territory of every person who has ever spoken that word. It carries every sentiment every flummoxed person has ever implied, plus your own.

18 Muriel Ruckeyser has said, “The world is made of stories, not atoms.” They say that every third breath you breathe contains at least one of the same molecules Caesar exhaled as he was dying. Think of the words, then, the same words you breathe that have been inhaled and exhaled throughout history. If you’re looking for a link, there it is. They are only shapes and noises formed into meaning. But how many shapes and sounds have crossed the tongues of those who have come before? And this exact shape and sound has crossed centuries to come to you, fully formed, Athene from Zeus’s head (or so you believe as it transforms itself even as it leaves

your lips). Words say simultaneously too much and too little. This is why they are perfect for communication, most people's lives operating in the balance between too much and too little. Nothing more precise.

In those years without language, I was limbless. I had no way to reach out. I had no way to touch others or myself. Water: *Orgasm*. My body had no reason to come or go anywhere.

Words are my nourishment. They are the molecules that seethe in my veins. They are the light that filters through the rods and cones of my eyes to create color and dimension. They are my resting heart rate, my tulips, my knives, my forks, my spoons.

My art, to me, means food. Means sustenance. If I had another choice, I tell you, I would make money. It's a catch-22. You must eat to live, must live to work. I eat my art for breakfast because I know what it is to go wordless, to be naked on the tongue and groping for a story that makes sense.

Towel: *Meridian*. 22

Apple: *Bird*. 23

Chalice: *Fly*. 24

Write: *Live*. 25

Silence: *Die*. 26

It's a cliché. But here's what I know. I have come into existence alongside words. Others have come into existence alongside business or sculpture or music or humor or science. Words carry with them a unique challenge. We use them daily, whether we love them or not. And so, loving them is a fix. Unless you're stuck in a Hollywood musical, people do not usually sing to you as a form of communication. Unless you are Neanderthal, they do not usually draw. But people will talk to you with words even when you're a writer. They'll toss your medium around willy-nilly. They'll use it to bad ends. They'll use it to create wars, to manipulate leaders, to rape people, to sell.

You will be tempted to think your medium mundane, sometimes evil. You will be forced to discipline yourself against this. It will make you poor.

Once, I was aphasic. The condition lasted, to some extent or another, nearly ten years. When I came back to words I came back like a loser who'd had a mistaken affair. Once the damage is done, it's done. But there's a carefulness that follows. You don't take things for granted. You speak from the soles of your feet, a current of meaning running through your body, each word carrying with it its history and the intimate mouths of your ancestors speaking it. Their lips touch yours as the word leaves you.

This is what connects you to who you are. What you love. What you caress. Whatever it is that leaves you and in its absence makes you lonelier than God.

When it returns, it becomes holy. When it returns, you see the sacred in the profane. You do not fall prostrate before it. You hold it close. You let it go. You live with it. You live.

ELIE WIESEL

Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, explains, "For me, literature abolishes the gap between [childhood and death]. . . . Auschwitz marks the decisive, ultimate turning point . . . of the human adventure. Nothing will ever again be as it was. Thousands and thousands of deaths weigh upon every word. How speak of redemption after Treblinka? and how speak of anything else?" As a survivor, he became a writer in order to become a witness: "I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it." Wiesel has developed a literary style that reflects the distilled experience of concentration camps, in which "a sentence is worth a page, a word is worth a sentence. The unspoken weighs heavier than the spoken. . . . Say only the essential—say only what no other would say . . . a style sharp, hard, strong, in a word, pared. Suppress the imagination. And feeling, and philosophy. Speak as a witness on the stand speaks. With no indulgence to others or oneself."

In May 1944, when he was fifteen, Wiesel was forcibly removed from his native town of Sighet, Hungary ("which no longer exists," he says, "except in the memory of those it expelled"), to the first of several concentration camps. Although six million Jews died in the camps, including members of his family, Wiesel was liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945 and sent to Paris, where he studied philosophy. For twenty years he worked as a journalist for Jewish newspapers, but the turning point in his career as a writer came in 1954 when he met novelist François Mauriac, who urged him to speak on behalf of the children in concentration camps. This encouraged Wiesel (who has lived in New York since 1956) to write some forty books of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama, starting in 1958 with *Night*, which opens, "In the beginning was faith, confidence, illusion." He published his memoirs *All the Rivers Run to the Sea* in 1996, and *And the Sea Is Never Full* in 1999. Wiesel, true citizen of the world, named Jewish "Humanitarian of the Century," received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his efforts epitomized in "Why I Write: Making No Become Yes," originally published in the *New York Times Book Review*, April 14, 1986.

Why I Write: Making No Become Yes

Why do I write? 1
Perhaps in order not to go mad. Or, on the contrary, to touch the 2
bottom of madness. Like Samuel Beckett, the survivor expresses himself
“en désespoir de cause”—out of desperation. 3

Speaking of the solitude of the survivor, the great Yiddish and Hebrew 3
poet and thinker Aaron Zeitlin addresses those—his father, his brother,
his friends—who have died and left him: “You have abandoned me,” he
says to them. “You are together, without me. I am here. Alone. And I make
words.”

So do I, just like him. I also say words, write words, reluctantly. 4

There are easier occupations, far more pleasant ones. But for the 5
survivor, writing is not a profession, but an occupation, a duty. Camus
calls it “an honor.” As he puts it: “I entered literature through worship.”
Other writers have said they did so through anger, through love. Speak-
ing for myself, I would say—through silence.

It was by seeking, by probing silence that I began to discover the 6
perils and power of the word. I never intended to be a philosopher, or a theo-
logian. The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having
survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to
justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to trans-
mit an experience is to betray it. This is what Jewish tradition teaches us.
But how to do this? “When Israel is in exile, so is the word,” says the Zohar.
The word has deserted the meaning it was intended to convey—impossible
to make them coincide. The displacement, the shift, is irrevocable.

This was never more true than right after the upheaval. We all knew 7
that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never
express in words, coherent, intelligible words, our experience of madness
on an absolute scale. The walk through flaming night, the silence before
and after the selection, the monotonous praying of the condemned, the
Kaddish of the dying, the fear and hunger of the sick, the shame and suffer-
ing, the haunted eyes, the demented stares. I thought that I would never
be able to speak of them. All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish,
lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing.

Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? 8
The language of night was not human, it was primitive, almost animal—
hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sound
of beating. A brute strikes out wildly, a body falls. An officer raises his arm
and a whole community walks toward a common grave. A soldier shrugs
his shoulders, and a thousand families are torn apart, to be reunited only
by death. This was the concentration camp language. It negated all other



The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides ongoing exhibits of “man’s inhumanity to man” wherever, whenever it occurs in the world. These exhibits serve as witnesses to genocide, through photographs, sound and text, background information, and suggestions about how people worldwide can help the living victims, and “help the dead vanquish death,” as Wiesel explains. Brian Steidle’s photograph from the exhibit “In Darfur my camera was not nearly enough,” shows the beginning of the burning of the village of Um Zeifa, Darfur, Sudan in 2004, after being looted and attacked by the Janjaweed. This government-supported militia, along with Sudanese government soldiers, has waged ethnic war, murdering tens of thousands of African ethnic groups, raping thousands of women, and has driven over 1.5 million civilians from their homes, torching their villages and looting their property. What is the point, the hope, the expectation of exposing audiences in America—including yourselves as students—to such pictures?

language and took its place. Rather than a link, it became a wall. Could it be surmounted? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer was negative, and yet I knew that “no” had to become “yes.” It was the last wish of the dead.

- 9 The fear of forgetting remains the main obsession of all those who have passed through the universe of the damned. The enemy counted on people’s incredulity and forgetfulness. How could one foil this plot? And if memory grew hollow, empty of substance, what would happen to all we had accumulated along the way? Remember, said the father to his son, and the son to his friend. Gather the names, the faces, the tears. We had all taken an oath: “If, by some miracle, I emerge alive, I will devote my life

to testifying on behalf of those whose shadow will fall on mine forever and ever.”

That is why I write certain things rather than others—to remain faithful. 10

Of course, there are times of doubt for the survivor, times when one gives in to weakness, or longs for comfort. I hear a voice within me telling me to stop mourning the past. I too want to sing of love and of its magic. I too want to celebrate the sun, and the dawn that heralds the sun. I would like to shout, and shout loudly: “Listen, listen well! I too am capable of victory, do you hear? I too am open to laughter and joy! I want to stride, head high, my face unguarded, without having to point to the ashes over there on the horizon, without having to tamper with facts to hide their tragic ugliness. For a man born blind, God himself is blind, but look, I see, I am not blind.” One feels like shouting this, but the shout changes to a murmur. One must make a choice; one must remain faithful. A big word, I know. Nevertheless, I use it, it suits me. Having written the things I have written, I feel I can afford no longer to play with words. If I say that the writer in me wants to remain loyal, it is because it is true. This sentiment moves all survivors; they owe nothing to anyone, but everything to the dead. 11

I owe them my roots and my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself. And since I am incapable of communicating their cry by shouting, I simply look at them. I see them and I write. 12

While writing, I question them as I question myself. I believe I have said it before, elsewhere. I write to understand as much as to be understood. Will I succeed one day? Wherever one starts, one reaches darkness. God? He remains the God of darkness. Man? The source of darkness. The killers’ derision, their victims’ tears, the onlookers’ indifference, their complicity and complacency—the divine role in all that I do not understand. A million children massacred—I shall never understand. 13

Jewish children—they haunt my writings. I see them again and again. I shall always see them. Hounded, humiliated, bent like the old men who surround them as though to protect them, unable to do so. They are thirsty, the children, and there is no one to give them water. They are hungry, but there is no one to give them a crust of bread. They are afraid, and there is no one to reassure them. 14

They walk in the middle of the road, like vagabonds. They are on the way to the station, and they will never return. In sealed cars, without air or food, they travel toward another world. They guess where they are going, they know it, and they keep silent. Tense, thoughtful, they listen to the wind, the call of death in the distance. 15

All these children, these old people, I see them. I never stop seeing them. I belong to them. 16

17 But they, to whom do they belong?

18 People tend to think that a murderer weakens when facing a child. The child reawakens the killer's lost humanity. The killer can no longer kill the child before him, the child inside him.

19 But with us it happened differently. Our Jewish children had no effect upon the killers. Nor upon the world. Nor upon God.

20 I think of them, I think of their childhood. Their childhood is a small Jewish town, and this town is no more. They frighten me; they reflect an image of myself, one that I pursue and run from at the same time—the image of a Jewish adolescent who knew no fear, except the fear of God, whose faith was whole, comforting, and not marked by anxiety.

21 No, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either. "You will not understand, you will never understand," were the words heard everywhere during the reign of night. I can only echo them. You, who never lived under a sky of blood, will never know what it was like. Even if you read all the books ever written, even if you listen to all the testimonies ever given, you will remain on this side of the wall, you will view the agony and death of a people from afar, through the screen of a memory that is not your own.

22 An admission of impotence and guilt? I do not know. All I know is that Treblinka and Auschwitz cannot be told. And yet I have tried. God knows I have tried.

23 Have I attempted too much or not enough? Among some twenty-five volumes, only three or four penetrate the phantasmagoric realm of the dead. In my other books, through my other books, I have tried to follow other roads. For it is dangerous to linger among the dead, they hold on to you and you run the risk of speaking only to them. And so I have forced myself to turn away from them and study other periods, explore other destinies and teach other tales—the Bible and the Talmud, Hasidism and its fervor, the shtetl and its songs, Jerusalem and its echoes, the Russian Jews and their anguish, their awakening, their courage. At times, it has seemed to me that I was speaking of other things with the sole purpose of keeping the essential—the personal experience—unspoken. At times I have wondered: And what if I was wrong? Perhaps I should not have heeded my own advice and stayed in my own world with the dead.

24 But then, I have not forgotten the dead. They have their rightful place even in the works about the Hasidic capitals Ruzhany and Korets, and Jerusalem. Even in my biblical and Midrashic tales, I pursue their presence, mute and motionless. The presence of the dead then beckons in such tangible ways that it affects even the most removed characters. Thus they appear on Mount Moriah, where Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, a burnt offering to their common God. They appear on Mount Nebo, where Moses enters solitude and death. They appear in Hasidic and Talmudic legends in which victims forever need defending against forces that would crush them. Technically, so to speak, they are of course elsewhere, in time

and space, but on a deeper, truer plane, the dead are part of every story, of every scene.

"But what is the connection?" you will ask. Believe me, there is one. 25
After Auschwitz everything brings us back to Auschwitz. When I speak of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, when I invoke Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba, it is the better to understand them in the light of Auschwitz. As for the Maggid of Mezeritch and his disciples, it is in order to encounter the followers of their followers that I reconstruct their spellbound, spellbinding universe. I like to imagine them alive, exuberant, celebrating life and hope. Their happiness is as necessary to me as it was once to themselves.

And yet—how did they manage to keep their faith intact? How did 26
they manage to sing as they went to meet the Angel of Death? I know Hasidim who never vacillated—I respect their strength. I know others who chose rebellion, protest, rage—I respect their courage. For there comes a time when only those who do not believe in God will not cry out to him in wrath and anguish.

Do not judge either group. Even the heroes perished as martyrs, even 27
the martyrs died as heroes. Who would dare oppose knives to prayers? The faith of some matters as much as the strength of others. It is not ours to judge, it is only ours to tell the tale.

But where is one to begin? Whom is one to include? One meets a 28
Hasid in all my novels. And a child. And an old man. And a beggar. And a madman. They are all part of my inner landscape. The reason why? Pursued and persecuted by the killers, I offer them shelter. The enemy wanted to create a society purged of their presence, and I have brought some of them back. The world denied them, repudiated them, so I let them live at least within the feverish dreams of my characters.

It is for them that I write, and yet the survivor may experience re- 29
morse. He has tried to bear witness; it was all in vain.

After the liberation, we had illusions. We were convinced that a new 30
world would be built upon the ruins of Europe. A new civilization would see the light. No more wars, no more hate, no more intolerance, no fanaticism. And all this because the witnesses would speak. And speak they did, to no avail.

They will continue, for they cannot do otherwise. When man, in his 31
grief, falls silent, Goethe says, then God gives him the strength to sing his sorrows. From that moment on, he may no longer choose not to sing, whether his song is heard or not. What matters is to struggle against silence with words, or through another form of silence. What matters is to gather a smile here and there, a tear here and there, a word here and there, and thus justify the faith placed in you, a long time ago, by so many victims.

Why do I write? To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the 32
dead vanquish death.

(Translated from the French by Rosette C. Lamont)

Content

1. Wiesel says, “The only role I sought [as a writer] was that of witness” (§ 6). What does he mean by “witness”? Find examples of this role throughout the essay.
2. What does Wiesel mean by “not to transmit an experience is to betray it” (§ 6)? What experience does his writing transmit? Why is this important to Wiesel? To humanity? Does “Why I Write” fulfill Wiesel’s commitment to “make no become yes” (§ 8)? Explain.

Strategies/Structures/Language

3. Identify some of Wiesel’s major ethical appeals in this essay. Does he want to move his readers to action as well as to thought?
4. Why would Wiesel use paradoxes in an effort to explain and clarify? Explain the meaning of the following paradoxes:
 - a. “No, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either” (§ 21).
 - b. I write “to help the dead vanquish death” (§ 32).
5. For what audience does Wiesel want to explain “Why I Write”? What understanding of Judaism does Wiesel expect his readers to have? Of World War II? Of the operation of concentration camps? Why does he expect his reasons to matter to these readers, whether or not they have extensive knowledge of any of them?
6. Does Wiesel’s style here fulfill his goals of a style that is “sharp, hard, strong, pared”? Why is such a style appropriate to the subject?
7. Explain the meaning of “concentration camp language” (§ 8). Why did it negate all other language and take its place (§ 8)?

For Writing

8. Make two lists: (1) reasons to write and (2) reasons not to write. You could divide each list into categories: good reasons, real reasons, bad or irrelevant reasons. Which reasons appeal to you the most? Why?
9. Are there some occasions on which it’s easier, and preferable, to write? Others in which it’s impossible to write, or that you know in advance that the writing will be uninspired, off the mark? Discuss with friends, or classmates and a sympathetic teacher, ways to jump-start your writing. Here are some suggestions.
 - a. Reading or watching something you enjoy.
 - b. Listening to music. Is so, what kind?
 - c. Eating. Exercising. Followed by a brief nap.
 - d. Debating ideas with others.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

MATT NOCTON

Nocton (born 1975) has spent most of his life in the vicinity of his hometown, Simsbury, Connecticut, except for a year's sojourn in California—a cross-country trek that stimulated some of his best writing. An English major at the University of Connecticut (BA 2002), he now lives in western Massachusetts, selling online advertising.

❁ *Why I Write*

I write to dispel lies. I write because I seek the truth. Writing for me is a source of discovery. I write because I feel a sense of freedom and adventure in writing. To me writing is a place that I can return to again and again where the scenery of my life is always new and exciting. I write because I am always in the process of changing, and writing is a way to take a snapshot of who I am today. I want to rediscover myself and remind myself of who I was. I like to discover where I am going and where I am coming from. I write because I find it relaxing and it takes my mind off the dreadful events in the world today. I write to prove that I exist.

I write because I can express myself in ways I find impossible with spoken words. I write to prove a fact or sway an opinion. Through writing, I find that I can put things in perspective and see things differently, more clearly. I write to express my ideas or feelings. I write to emulate the styles of writers I admire. I write to delve into places that I have never been, and to explore new places within myself. I also write for others. I write to apologize and I write to forgive. I write to greet people and I write to amuse. I write to sustain my mind with the exercise and nourishment that it needs to stay healthy.

Being a quiet person, one thing I most enjoy about writing is the ability to avoid interruptions that occur in conversation. Arguing with words on paper can be an excellent method for waging war while eluding enemy fire, at least temporarily.