

Reading in Writing

Use the data provided by Frey to write your own essay entitled “Our Shrinking Language Tapestry.” Make your essay more argumentative than Frey’s. Take a stand on the demographics Frey provides, and back up your claim with at least three good reasons or minor propositions.

If you belong to a family in which members normally speak a language other than English, tell about their attitude toward the use of English. Or imagine that you are part of such a household. What would your perception of your native language and this second language—English—be?

In the last paragraphs, Frey implies that it is important to learn English to become “fully integrated” into one’s community. In an argumentative essay, agree or disagree with his statement.

Working

In groups of four, obtain a copy of the 2000 United States Census, and focus on the data about immigration patterns and language use that this document provides. Then construct a group report of approximately 1,000 words highlighting and interpreting this data.

Go to one or more search engines and type in “English only” or “English Only Movement.” Try other combinations if necessary. Download relevant information, and then participate in a class discussion of this controversy.

Reading the History of the World

Isabel
ALLENDE

Isabel Allende, the daughter of a Chilean diplomat, was born in 1942 in Lima, Peru. Isabel moved from Peru to Chile, where she was living and working at the time her uncle, Salvador Allende, the president of Chile, was assassinated during an army coup, assisted by the CIA, in 1973. “In that moment,” she says, “I realized that everything was possible—that violence was a dimension that was always around you.” The Allende family did not think that the new regime would last, and Isabel Allende continued to work as a noted journalist. However, when it became too dangerous to remain in Chile, the family went into exile in Venezuela. Allende’s first novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1985), established her as a significant writer in the tradition of “magic realism” associated with the Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez. Other novels include *Of Love and Shadows* (1987), *Eva Luna* (1988), *Daughter of*

From The New World Reader, Ed. Muller,
2nd ed.
Boston:
Houghton/
Mifflin, 2008.

Fortune (1999), and *Zorro* (2005). Allende has also written an autobiography, *Paula* (1995), and stories for children. Allende has spoken of the “wind of exile” that makes it necessary to recover memories of one’s native land. In this essay, which appears in a collection of essays on reading by well-known writers, *Speaking of Reading* (1995), she invokes the act of reading as one way to salvage these memories.

Before Reading

Allende declares that only through reading can we fully become aware of “injustice and misery and violence.” Would you agree or disagree, and why?

Reading is like looking through several windows which open to an infinite landscape. I abandon myself to the pleasure of the journey. How could I know about other people, how could I know about the history of the world, how could my mind expand and grow if I could not read? I began to read when I was very small; I learned to read and write practically when I was a baby. For me, life without reading would be like being in prison, it would be as if my spirit were in a straitjacket; life would be a very dark and narrow place.

I was brought up in a house full of books. It was a big, strange, somber house, the house of my grandparents. My uncle, who lived in the house, had a lot of books—he collected them like holy relics. His room held a ton of books. Few newspapers were allowed in that house because my grandfather was a very patriarchal, conservative man who thought that newspapers, as well as the radio, were full of vulgar ideas (at that time we didn’t have TV), so the only contact I had with the world, really, was through my uncle’s books. No one censored or guided my reading; I read anything I wanted.

I began reading Shakespeare when I was nine, not because of the language or the beauty, but because of the plot and the great characters. I have always been interested in adventure, plot, strong characters, history, animals. As a child, I read children’s books, most of the Russian literature, many French authors, and later, Latin American writers. I think I belong to the first generation of writers in Latin America who were brought up reading Latin American literature; earlier generations read European and North American literature. Our books were very badly distributed.

Books allow me to see my feelings put into words. After I read the feminist authors from North America, I could finally find words for the anger that I had all my life. I was brought up in a male chauvinist society and I had accumulated much anger, yet I couldn’t express it. I could only be

angry and do crazy things, but I couldn't put my anger into words and use it in a rational, articulate way. After I read those books, things became clearer to me, I could talk about that anger and express it in a more positive way.

The same thing happened with politics. I was aware of injustice and misery and political violence, but I couldn't express my feelings until I read about those issues and realized that other people had been dealing with them for centuries, and had already invented the words to express what I was feeling.

I have often been separated from my mother, whom I love very much. She now lives in Chile and we write a letter to each other every day. We talk about what we've read or what we are writing. I do it the first thing every morning of my life, even when I'm traveling. It's as if I were writing a journal. It's like having a long conversation with her; we are connected with a strong bond. This same bond also connects me with my daughter, who is living in Spain, because when I write the letter to my mother, I make a copy that goes to my daughter, and they do the same. This is becoming a very strange network of letters.

My mother is a much better reader than I. My reading is very fast, hectic, disorganized, and impatient. If I'm not caught in the first pages I abandon the book. My mother, however, is very patient and goes very slowly. She is the only person who reads my manuscripts, helping me to edit, revise, and correct them. She has a strong sense of poetry and such good taste. She's very well informed, very cultivated, very sensitive, and loves reading.

I have tried to give my children the love of books. My daughter is a good reader. She's a psychologist and has to read a lot of professional books, but she loves novels, short stories, poetry. My son, however, doesn't read any fiction. He's a scientific person with a mathematical mentality. I've tried to imagine how his mind and heart work, without nourishment from books, but I can't. He's a great boy, but how can he do it? I don't know.

My uncle, Salvador Allende, who was President of Chile before he was assassinated during the military coup, hardly affected my life. I liked him and loved him, but only as I do other relatives. He was the best man at my wedding. I was never involved in politics, and never participated in his government. (I became interested in politics only after the coup.) He was not a very strong reader of fiction, actually. He was always reading reports, essays, books about politics, sociology, economy, etc. He was a very well-informed person and he read very fast, his eyes practically skimming across the page to get the necessary information, but when he wanted to relax, he would rather watch a movie than read.

During the three years of Allende's government, any Chilean could buy books of "Quimantu," the state publishing house, for very little money, the equivalent of two newspapers. In this way he hoped to promote culture. His goal was that every single Chilean could read and write and be able to buy as many books as he or she wanted by the end of his term.

My own experience of life, my biography, my feelings, my self as a person, affect my reading. The writer puts out half of the book, but then I read the book in my own unique manner. This is why reading is so interesting; we as readers don't have passive roles, but very active ones. We must integrate into the text our own experiences of life and our own feelings. While reading a book, we are constantly applying our own knowledge.

Our backgrounds determine our strengths and interests as readers. Many themes that are extremely popular in North America are impossible for me to read because they aren't part of my culture—I just don't care about them. For example, I can't relate to those books by daughters who write against their mothers. But if I read a book by Toni Morrison or Louise Erdrich that deals with being a woman and part of an ethnic minority, I can relate to its content. Also, I like Latin American authors very much, especially Jorge Amado, García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, Jorge Luis Borges, and many others. There are a few Latin American women writers that I enjoy as well, but they have been badly distributed and poorly reviewed. Latin American literature has been an exclusively male club, to say the least.

I have met many people, including well-informed, educated people, who actually take pride in the fact that they haven't read anything by a woman. Recently, I received a clipping from a newspaper in Chile. It was a public letter to me from a Chilean entertainer apologizing that he had never before read any of my books because I am a woman. He wrote that he never read literature written by women. After he made a special effort to read my books, he felt he must apologize to me and say that I could actually write.

I will always be interested in programs of illiteracy because it is such a common problem in my continent: 50 percent of the population of Latin America cannot read or write, and of those who can, only a few can afford books or have the habit of reading. To me, not reading is like having the spirit imprisoned.

Thinking About the Essay

1. List the images, metaphors, and **similes** that Allende presents in her introductory paragraph. What is her purpose? What is the effect?
2. State Allende's thesis. Is it stated or implied? Explain.