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Original Readings for ESL Learners

Robert G. Schnelle Jr.
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ORIGINAL READINGS FOR ESL LEARNERS

Robert G. Schnelle, Jr.
B.A. University of Vermont 1982

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Project Advisor Michael Gerald

Project Reader Paul Lovette

ABSTRACT

Readings for ESL students are too often simplified and controlled. Literature that has been thus tampered with cannot bring satisfaction to learners who have achieved the intermediate levels of proficiency. They need pieces which are authentic in usage. Furthermore, if they are to be actively engaged in what they read, students must have access to material which touches their experience and invites them to reflect upon their values. This collection of original fiction attempts to address both concerns: a) the passages are written with the intent that they be affectively stimulating; and b) they replace simplicity of structure with brevity, making for manageable overnight readings for the typical intermediate ESL learner. The project also includes activity suggestions for the teacher in the form of writing assignments or discussion questions addressed to students.

ERIC descriptors:
English (Second Language)
Reading Comprehension
Writing (Composition)

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INTRODUCTION

The written word is one of the cornerstones upon which language skills are built. In my own experience as a foreign language student, reading and writing have acted as vital components of my learning program in at least three ways. First, they expand and reinforce awareness of target language structures and vocabulary (and their relation to those of my native language); secondly, they serve to broaden my understanding of the cultural system and social values operating within that language; and finally, they allow me to participate without risk in the target language and culture, thereby heightening my new sense of self within the "arena of meaningful action"¹ that these comprise. For people like me, who use reading and writing as tools of enrichment in their first language, the two skills provide a natural bridge to fluency in a foreign language. We are motivated to learn not only by the obvious rewards that follow upon achieving communicative competence; moreover, we are spurred by the prospect of exploring the world through written language with the fresh perspective of a new idiom.

This collection of original passages will appeal most to learners who already like to read and write, and who have developed the ability to communicate ideas as a result.

Like most writers of fiction, however, I have set myself the goal of making these materials as widely accessible as possible. My primary criterion was that the passages should be intellectually or affectively stimulating. If you, the teacher, find them to be so, you may assume your students will concur.

The range of topics I explore is varied. Four of the readings ("A Sympathetic Notion," "Jimena," "Jimena's Story," and "Homestay Sickness") address what I perceive to be typical concerns of ESL students. Another group that seems to form a category is "Alison's People" and "Hiking Trips and Hikers." Each presents the reader with more challenging levels of usage, and both deal with subject matter that is of general human interest. "On the Wharf," a very brief passage, is suitable for use with lower level students because of its structural simplicity, and because of the type of activity its theme can lend it to (see p. 9). The collection is rounded out by a personal interpretation of the legend of an American folk hero ("The Story of Johnny Appleseed"). Its purpose is to provide exposure to the cultural aspect of American English, but in a different sense than the passages grouped in the first category above.

A second objective of this project--beyond providing relevant material for reading practice--is to serve as a springboard for student writing. To this end, I have tried to create encapsulated models of written American English which are not only varied in style and format, but are authentic.²

"Homestay Sickness" is entirely a dialogue; second language learners must recognize the importance of having an ear for the vernacular as much as native writers do. "Johnny Appleseed" is written in the voice of a folk teller. The opening paragraphs of "Hiking Trips" argue conflicting points of view, and may be isolated or expanded on by the teacher whose students are working with exposition. "Jimena's Story" is written in the first person. Although it tells a story, its protagonist speaks as one who might be writing for an ESL class journal. Teachers who intend to use journal writing as a part of their composition course may find this passage applicable. "Alison's People" encourages student readers to acquire an eye for description as we use it in English.

I have included activity suggestions after each piece. Caleb Gattegno's Short Passages, which was a seminal inspiration for this project, contains neither introductory explanation nor teaching techniques. I found it useful, however, to write the activities as a way of clarifying how I use the "Original Readings" in my work with students. Several of these ideas were borrowed or adapted from sources noted on page 31. Others, especially those which have values clarification as their purpose, were composed to suit my own instinct for what is salient. The activity suggestions can easily be revised or replaced to conform to the needs of a particular class.

Reading and writing in a foreign language can be vivifying and fun. These passages are meant to convey such possibilities to students.

A SYMPATHETIC NOTION

Humberto walked into class ten minutes late, as usual. The door squeaked on its hinges as it closed behind him, and he muttered an apology as he went by the teacher to take a seat near the wall. All of the other students were busy working in pairs, so that Humberto had to wait for the teacher to come over and explain the activity they were working on.

This was something Humberto disliked more than anything else about English class. It made him feel like a dolt. To begin with, his father had forced him to enroll in the Institute's advanced conversation group, which was far above his level. Sitting in class every night, Humberto would get a headache just trying to follow what the teacher said and understand what he wanted the students to do. Sometimes Humberto would simply stop listening, and instead draw cartoons of the teacher in his funny American pants and wrinkled shirt. But now the teacher stood beside him, explaining directions again and again in different words, and using examples so that Humberto would understand. "Always explaining!" he thought to himself. Humberto nodded his head to show that he knew what to do, even though he had actually been too exasperated to listen at all.

Somehow, Humberto managed to endure the remaining forty five minutes of class. On the long table beneath the window

were copies of TIME magazine. Humberto looked at pictures of cars for a while. He pretended to use the magazine as a reference for the task that the teacher had given. Next, he sat down and wrote into his notebook some song lyrics he had memorized. He thought about how easy it was to collect these poems in his mind. He just listened to his sister's cassette tapes sometimes and sang to himself as he bicycled through the park to school. Humberto felt that music made everything effortless. Studying became a pleasure when he played music, despite his sister's complaints about the noise.

After class Humberto went below to the street to wait for the bus. He was thinking how awful it was to sit in English class every evening feeling stupid. "I'm not stupid outside of English class," he thought. At that moment the teacher appeared at the gate. Humberto watched him cross the street from the Institute and begin walking toward one of the shabbier districts in town. He looked very tired. Humberto wasn't sure exactly where he lived. It was clear, at any rate, that he spoke little Spanish. Humberto guessed that this was the reason for his long, complicated explanations in class when a few words of Spanish would have been more helpful.

All of a sudden Humberto felt sorry for the teacher as he saw him disappear around the corner of the Hotel Trueba. "What does he do on weekends?" he wondered. A lonely picture came into Humberto's mind. He imagined himself living alone

in a foreign country where he couldn't speak the language. How would he ask for directions or buy his food? The teacher was quite young. Maybe he had a lot of friends at home in the United States, but he certainly hadn't any here.

The bus arrived, rumbling to a halt in a cloud of exhaust. "Tomorrow I'll invite him to spend Sunday with my family." Humberto felt at ease as he climbed aboard and rode through the crowded streets of the city. Supper waited at home.

Activity Suggestions

1. Briefly, write or tell the story using your own words.
2. What change happens in Humberto's mind? What told you it was happening?
3. What were your feelings about a teacher you have had on the first day of class? Did your feelings change during the term? If so, why?

ON THE WHARF

Paul lived near a long wharf where fishing boats tied up. Every afternoon in summer he waited for the boats to come in, then watched as they unloaded their catch. From far out across the water he could see them coming: they were always trailed by scores of gulls that hoped for an easy meal. To Paul, the birds looked like pieces of trash flying about in the wind.

Standing with his back to a post, Paul watched the fishermen lift the boxes of fish with their thick brown arms. After they passed the boxes up to their mates on the wharf, another man shoveled crushed ice over the contents. Paul looked at them working and pretended that he was doing the same. He imagined the cool sensation of a wooden shovel in his hands. He was almost able to feel the texture of the ice as his imaginary shovel dug into it.

When the fishermen got used to Paul, they invited him to be their wharf-hand. From his place on the wharf's edge he helped the boats tie up when they arrived. He caught the heavy ropes that the men threw to him. He pulled with all his might and wrapped them around wooden posts. When the captain gave a signal, Paul jumped down onto the boat to begin transporting the boxes of fish.

As time passed, Paul's own arms grew thick from work and brown from the sun. He learned everything he needed to know

by watching, listening, and then doing.

Activity Suggestions

1. Miming: Listen while your teacher reads the passage. Next, stand up with a partner. The teacher will read the story a second time, and you and your partner can demonstrate its actions as they are described. (Note to the teacher: The challenge of this activity lies in being able to demonstrate fine understanding through physical response. It can be facilitated by the use of taped sound affects and other Suggestopaedic elements.)³

JIMENA

Jimena looked up from her book again. She opened the desk drawer and took out a picture of her boyfriend Ramon, who was at home in Colombia. Placing a finger across his forehead, she imagined how he would look with a different hairstyle. Then she set the picture down and began rummaging under some papers until her hand touched the plastic surface of her passport. She took this out too, and thumbed through the pages until reaching the front of the booklet. The smiling expression of an eager young woman of six months ago beamed at her from the I.D. photo.

With a quiet sigh, Jimena put away the passport, shut the drawer, and returned to her textbook. It was no use, however; she just couldn't concentrate. More and more often in the past few weeks, Jimena had been troubled by this problem. Out of nowhere would appear irresistible daydreams which seemed to suspend time. When she awoke from them, her will to meet the challenges of the present was sapped. During the mornings and afternoons, when busy with classes and other university obligations, Jimena was able to remain focused on her tasks. But as soon as she was alone in her dorm room at night, thoughts of home seeped into her mind. They carried her away from biochemistry and computer science to a place where Ramon held her close, where she ate dinner with her parents and brothers and sisters, where the bouganvillia flowered in the square of

her little town. At such times, it felt as though a calming wind swept over her, smoothing away the cares that creased her brow.

All at once she would hear the click of her digital alarm clock. Inevitably, it showed that another ten or fifteen minutes had passed without any addition being made to the daily record of accomplishments that she kept in her head. Some days life was like a race to achieve, and she felt herself dropping farther and farther back from her goal--a goal which she had once been able to perceive, but which was now out of sight. The night before Jimena had even dreamed that she was trying to run, but couldn't move her body.

Homesick visions got the better of Jimena this evening. It didn't help to know that she would once again go unprepared to classes in the morning. To continue studying tonight would be as beneficial as beating her head against a wall. "You can't squeeze blood from a stone," she thought, recalling the words of one of her teachers. Resigning herself to what she could not control--not this time anyway--Jimena rose, switched off her desk lamp, and prepared to go to bed.

Activity Suggestions

1. Discuss or write: Jimena has been in the United States for six months. In your opinion, how long does it take for a student from a foreign country to become well-adjusted to life in the U.S.? What factors effect how well people get used to a foreign culture?
2. Write: Pretend you are like Jimena, studying at an American university. You are being distracted by daydreams about home. While you sit at your desk at night, what thoughts and feelings run through your mind?

THE STORY OF JOHNNY APPLESEED

Johnny Appleseed was cut from a different cloth, as they say. He first appeared in the frontier territory of Ohio around 1800, planting apple seeds from a leather bag wherever he went. During the next fifty years he turned up regularly at lonely settlements, government forts, and Indian villages, so that everybody came to know him.

A cooking pot cap and a coffee sack were Johnny Appleseed's clothes; nobody ever saw him wear shoes on his feet. The reply he gave to those who met him walking barefoot through the snow was: "I don't need anything that's gonna' come between me and God's good earth!" Hollow logs were where he made his bed, and he dined on nuts and plants alone all the days of his life.

Johnny was a teacher of a special sort, and his mission was twofold: he meant to bring forth fruit in the wilderness, and to awaken others to the splendor of creation. He accomplished the first purpose by planting apple seeds in every meadow and beside every stream he came to throughout the vast region he roamed. And he showed his love for God's creation by kindness to all creatures, by generosity to all people, and by distributing pages of all of the world's sacred books as he traveled.

Most of Johnny Appleseed's teaching was done by example. He rarely spoke at length except to little children. He was shy and humble, yet his eyes sparkled with good humor and

flashed with the simple courage of one who depends only on himself. He was good to people who were good and he was good to people who were bad. When a man asked why he bought dinner for a thief, Johnny Appleseed said, "He was hungry." Johnny loved humankind, and he always had faith, even in people who were faithless. Once a farmer gave him a pair of shoes. The next day, Johnny gave the shoes to a man who had cursed him and thrown his seedbag in the Mississippi. "Faithfulness means havin' faith," said Johnny. To the world he was confusing, yet everyone respected him: Johnny Appleseed was a man who knew how to teach with just a few words.

The Indians knew Johnny Appleseed as a "medicine man" of great power. They saw him talk to ferocious bears and mountain lions, telling them not to harm Indian children. When government soldiers burned a Mohawk town one winter, Johnny Appleseed walked through walls of fire to rescue people who were trapped inside. An old Chippewa chief tells of how Johnny once smiled while sticking pins in his own face on a dare. The Indians knew it was impossible for him to feel pain.

But Johnny Appleseed's work had practical results. The enormous orchards of Ohio are descended from the seeds he planted. Some people say his spirit is in those apple trees, and if you eat their fruit you will receive the gifts of long life and eternal hope. Other people insist that Johnny Appleseed is still alive and walking the earth, farther west where the sun shines last and most brightly.

Activity Suggestions

1. Write about a folk hero from your own country. If you like, invent some "facts" about this person's life to make the story more interesting.⁴
2. Nobody knows about Johnny Appleseed's childhood. Construct a past for him which might explain why he became the kind of man he was.
3. See if you can recall the details of "The Story of Johnny Appleseed." Write or tell the story in your own words.

JIMENA'S STORY

My name is Jimena. I was born and raised in Colombia, but I have come to the United States to study and perhaps to begin my career. I don't know how long I'll be here.

When I first arrived in this city, I was excited and full of confidence. I had taken six years of English courses at home, so I thought it would be easy to communicate with people. School work was never difficult for me; I didn't expect to have any trouble writing papers or reading books in English. But that was six months ago. I was wrong in both cases.

In the first place, the English that is taught in Colombian schools is not what people speak in the streets and in their homes in the U.S. Here, people use words in ways I never heard before. For instance, "I go" is often used to mean "I said." And then, pronunciation is very different from spelling. Most of our teachers had never been to the States, so they taught us to pronounce words exactly as they are spelled. This is the Spanish way. It's certainly not English.

Reading textbooks is also a challenge. Last night I sat and looked at one page of my biochemistry text for twenty minutes. Biochem was one of my best subjects in the University at home.

Even academic problems are not so bad though. It's only a question of time before my skills improve, as my teacher says,

so I just have to be patient. What troubles me more is homesickness. I waste a lot of time daydreaming and looking at pictures of my family and my boyfriend. Perhaps the reason for it is that I'm not really close to anyone here. I think its the American way to know lots of people whom you can call by their first name. It's important here to seem friendly and open. Everybody behaves as though he or she wants to become your friend, but actually, people seldom make time to be together. At least that's my impression of university students. It's always "How you doing?" and "See you later," but I wonder how much is meant by those expressions.

Back in November we had several days vacation for Thanksgiving. I was beginning to think about where I would go, because we were not allowed to remain in the dorms during that time. A couple of days before the break, I was invited by Jennifer--who lives two doors down from my room--to stay with her parents. I was relieved and excited. Jennifer and I didn't know each other very well, but this would give us an opportunity to become friends. I would also get to learn something about the customs of an American family.

The holiday was nice and Jennifer's family was very kind. Her older brother spoke Spanish to me, so I felt really at home. The grandmother was also there; Jennifer's dad picked her up from the nursing home on Thanksgiving day. Everyone was surprised when I told about my grandparents, who lived at home with us until they died. In the evenings we ate popcorn in front of

the fireplace and talked about the U.S. and Colombia. Jennifer's parents asked me questions like, "Is America different than you thought it would be?" This was natural I guess; people always want to know what foreigners think of their country.

By the end of the vacation, I remember feeling that I had finally found some friends to visit often and spend time with, and that Jennifer and I would be like sisters. But I was thinking like a Colombian, not an American. To tell the truth, I haven't once been back to visit Jennifer's family. Jennifer herself has continued to be friendly with me, but only in the same way as before vacation. I would say we are casual friends. For a while I wondered whether I did something impolite at Thanksgiving that made the family ashamed to know me. Now I realize it's just the way of this society to have more acquaintances than friendships.

So I expect I'm going to be homesick until I get used to being with people in the American style. Meanwhile, I try not to form expectations about those I come in contact with. I'm trying to learn the American way of communication which is not taught in English language textbooks. Eventually, I believe I'll succeed. It's just that I get so lonely for the present.

-
1. What is Jimena's view of friendship in the U.S.A.? Do you agree with her? What's your view?
 2. Consider the question Jennifer's parents asked of Jimena. Has anyone ever asked you this question? What was the situation and how did it effect your answer? If you

answer the question only for yourself, what will your answer be?

3. Choose one sentence from the text that interested you. What thoughts or feelings did it make you have? Write about these for fifteen minutes.
4. Journal Writing: In "Jimena's Story" it is Jimena herself who speaks (or writes). When a character tells the story, we say it's "in the first person." The advantage of a first person account is that it is more immediate and more personal than when the main character is referred to as "he" or "she" ("third person"). Such a story is often easier to relate to our own experience.

A second advantage of a first person account is from the writer's point of view. Does it seem to you that Jimena has learned something about herself and her problems from writing about them? Try writing your own story as a daily journal: just a few sentences each time, or as many as you like. The important point to remember is that you only have to write about what matters to you.

HIKING TRIPS AND HIKERS

A hiking trip in the mountains can be one of two very different experiences, depending on whether you hike with other people or by yourself. Those who go to the wilderness alone may feel they need to escape the predictability of daily life by meeting new challenges. Or they might be thinking about personal problems which can best be understood by placing oneself in different surroundings. Still other people hike alone because it helps them recall their place in the design of life. Whatever the reason, nature's sounds and forms complement one another, and this has a calming effect on those who seek it.

People who prefer going to the mountains in groups often have other motives. Recreation need not be a solitary activity; changing views and the rhythm of walking stimulate conversation among friends, just as they stimulate reflection in the solitary hiker. Hiking with friends also leads to a shared sense of achievement when the summit is reached or the trip is completed. As the loner feels himself to be part of the surrounding environment, the group tripper feels connected to other people. The question is, are these two types compatible on a hike?

* * * * *

Tony was feeling frustrated and impatient. Being very athletic and experienced in mountain hiking, it seemed to him a crime that he should be held back by the slow pace of the

group. He knew that if he were hiking alone his progress would be much faster. And he might even have stumbled upon some wildlife if the others weren't making so much noise. At least he could have listened to bird calls and heard the wind singing in the spruce trees. Yet here he waited, watching the others catch their breath, chat about school, and fill up on peanuts and chocolate.

"You'd better not eat too much of that or you'll get sick," he said to the chubby girl, who had sweat running down her face. Tony felt a mixture of sympathy and disgust when he looked at her: she was as red as a tomato.

"Why don't we get moving," he said finally. "The day won't last forever."

The group leader, an older man, gave Tony a look of concern, but then stood up while the others did the same. "Onward and upward," he said encouragingly. The leader was responsible for the safety of the group, but moreover, he wanted everyone to have a good time. The line of hikers began to stretch out along the trail ahead of him. Meanwhile, he looked off at some clouds in the west, recalling a period in his life when he had felt as Tony did now. In his youth, the leader had himself been bothered by the noise and clumsiness of other people whom he chanced to go hiking with. It had been impossible for him then to understand why certain of these people seemed to disregard the wonders of nature altogether, so busy were they with snapping pictures of each other, gabbing, and singing songs.

The leader couldn't remember when or how his views had changed, but now he enjoyed hiking trips without exception. It didn't matter to him anymore whether he went by himself or in the company of a dozen people, for he realized that each was an activity with value, and that each was valuable for different reasons.

What happened later that afternoon was so quick to occur that everyone in the party was taken by surprise. Having reached the summit in the early afternoon and begun their downward climb, the hikers were descending carefully over the last of several tricky ledges. As the leader helped the chubby girl over some loose rocks he heard a short cry, and looked up just in time to see Tony drop backwards over the edge of a cliff. Telling the others to stay put, the leader picked his way nimbly to where Tony lay--nearly unharmed--in a bog, twenty feet below.

Although his ankle was not badly hurt, Tony was forced to limp, and therefore the progress of the group was slowed. Poor Tony couldn't help but be aware of this. The western sky was golden when at last they all arrived at the base lodge. The leader noticed that everyone had been quiet and meditative during the final two hours of the trip. Whether this was due to thoughtfulness or fatigue he didn't know, but he welcomed the peace it brought. While evening sounds of woods filled his ears, he looked at Tony. The boy's thoughts were those of one who has been taken by surprise, and is beginning to see himself in a new perspective.

Activity Suggestions

1. Discuss with a partner: How do the first two paragraphs of the story contrast with those which follow it? What purpose do they serve, and how are they connected with the rest of the story? Report your findings to the class.
2. Write: At the end of the story, the author suggests that Tony is undergoing a change in his mind. Tell what you think it might be.
3. Can you think of an incident in your life that caused you to change a value you used to hold, or a way you used to behave?
4. Your teacher will give you a copy of "Hiking Trips and Hikers" in which the ending has been omitted. With another student, or by yourself, write your own ending. After you finish, listen while the other students read their endings aloud. Read your ending. Then the class can vote on which is most appropriate or most appealing. Finally, listen as your teacher reads the author's ending. (Note to the teacher: Omit all lines after sentence #1 in paragraph #8, or those after sentence #3 in paragraph #8.)⁵

HOMESTAY SICKNESS

"Morning, Manuel. How did you sleep?"

"Well, I was sick a couple of times in the night."

"Again? Gosh, did you take your medicine?"

"Yes, but it's very slow...I mean, it doesn't control the illness very quickly."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do you feel like eating breakfast?"

"Yes, please. Maybe some eggs."

"Okay, I'm fixing cheese omelettes. Can you make a couple of pieces of toast?"

"Sure, but I forget where your mother keeps the bread."

"It's in the refrigerator. We have to chill it now that it's summer or else it goes bad. By the way, the mailman came while you were in the shower. There's a big package for you from Mexico."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. I put it over there on the piano. Why don't you open it up?"

"Oh great, it's from my mother. Let's see."

"It was really heavy to lift. What did she send you--a bunch of books?"

"Are you kidding, Brad? I've got enough of those already. It looks like food."

"Food?"

"Yeah. There are frijoles--I mean beans--and some dried

chiles, and her own tortillas, and even a jar of salsa. She says in this note that she wanted to send avacados but it's illegal."

"Is there anything else?"

"She also sent some coffee from Cordoba."

"But Manuel, you can buy coffee and tacos and all that stuff in the supermarkets right here."

"Of course, but it's not the same. You see, Brad, the food where I live is very special. I never thought it was so important to me, but now that I've lived in the States for five weeks I miss Mexican dinners a lot."

"Is the food here that bad?"

"Not at all. I love your mother's pot roast, and chowder... And her pizza's great. But it's very different from what I'm used to. Maybe I'll come to like everything else after a while too. It's just that my stomach has to have time to adjust."

"Here's your omelette. Let's sit down."

"Thanks, Brad."

"Well, I hope you get better soon. It's no fun being sick, especially when you've got a lot of work to do. What classes do you have today?"

"Statistical Analysis at eleven o'clock, then Calculus 250 after lunch. My English class is at five."

"Okay. I'll ask my mother to have dinner ready at six-thirty."

"Oh, but Brad, I made a date to go to the Italian restaurant with some friends from class."

"Couldn't you go with them another night? We're having swordfish and corn on the cob."

"I don't know. See, we planned this get-together last week. I think I told your mother about it then."

"All right. I'll remind her. Maybe she could buy the swordfish for tomorrow."

"That would be great. I'll look forward to it."

"I think you'll like it. It's a real treat."

"Here, let me clear the plates."

"No, you go ahead or you'll miss your bus."

"Thanks. See you later then, Brad."

"Have a good day."

Activity Suggestions

1. Listen to the tape of the dialogue. For homework, memorize one of the roles. At the end of the week, you and a partner can perform the dialogue in class.
2. Write: Do you think Manuel is a good guest? Is Brad a good host? Why?
3. What misunderstandings happen between Brad and Manuel? What do they say to each other in order to resolve these misunderstandings?
4. Have you ever lived with a family in a foreign country? What difficulties were there between you and your hosts? How did you respond to the difficulties?

5. Perhaps you are going to have a homestay with an American family in the near future. Imagine your thoughts and feelings as you sit down to your first dinner with them. What will you tell them about yourself, and what questions will you ask them about their life?
6. Think of a situation from your own experience which involved a conflict or misunderstanding. If you cannot recall a particular situation, your teacher can suggest one to you. (Note to the teacher: An example might be a conversation between a teacher and a student regarding class conduct, or on a lighter note, that between a waiter and a guest with respect to a fly in the soup du jour.)

ALISON'S PEOPLE

From her window on the fourth floor, high above the Greek restaurant and the photography shop, Alison looks out over Main Street. Her writing desk is situated between a pair of tall bay windows framed with heavy drapes. Today the drapes are drawn back tightly to let the sun in. Alison can keep an eye on what's happening in the street as she works. Like any serious writer, she is curious about her surroundings. One of her favorite pastimes is to watch people in her neighborhood and invent personalities for them. Based on their habits and appearance, she invents their pasts and futures. In the afternoon, when she gets tired of sitting, Alison takes a walk to the park: past the cafes and pubs on Elliot Street, past the Korean grocery, browsing in shop windows as she goes, and looking--always looking--into people's faces.

Today the words seem to be stuck in Alison's pen. Not more than a dozen lines are printed on the pad before her. But rather than worry about what isn't happening, Alison appreciates what is. With a glass of apricot juice in hand and morning sunlight flooding the room, she lets her attention wander out the window.

Down below, ordinary people go about their business in the street. She doesn't see anyone familiar to her. Soon, however, "Long John" appears. This is the name Alison has given to the extremely tall, gaunt-looking gentleman who walks from his flat above the donut shop to the train station and back again, at

precisely the same hours every day. (Alison timed and followed him once.) As always, Long John wears several shirts and a heavy tweed coat despite the heat of the day. He walks with a broken gait. His left hand stretches out before him as though he were receiving support from an invisible cane, or patting the heads of dogs only he can see. Alison has seen Long John close up. His skin, hair, and eyes are all the color of sand on an overcast day. Although he is wrinkled, his face looks somehow youthful. The man's movements are jittery, yet his body seems to be nearly weightless. In her journal Alison wrote, "What is it in life that makes some people old at thirty, keeps others young at seventy, and removes a few from time altogether?"

Long John is heading toward the railroad station--a deserted place now that passenger service has been discontinued. Alison imagines that when he gets there he will wait for somebody to arrive. He will sit on a bench rubbing his hands, and patiently wait until the Boston and Maine freight train passes without stopping. Perhaps it's a long-lost daughter he's expecting, or a carload of invisible dogs.

Alison watches Long John vanish around a corner with one eye. With the other she sees "Baggy-Bag Baggins" pop out of an alley. Baggy-Bag Baggins is a shriveled troll of a woman, dressed in rags and sacks of all sizes, whose occupation is collecting bottles and cans for redemption. The contents of the plastic bags she carries make a clinking sound as she scrambles from trash can to park bench to fire escape staircase. When the bags are full, she hurries to the supermarket to trade the bottles for cash--a

nickle a piece. It's amazing that Baggy-Bag can move through the crowds and traffic: with chin locked in position against chest, her scope of vision is limited to a small area around her feet. This is an advantage, however, to one who makes a living from what lies on the ground.

Baggy-Bag's appearances are not as predictable as Long John's. But Alison sees enough of the old woman to know that her bags are as full when she leaves the market as when she enters it to redeem her bottles. Curious to find out more, Alison followed Baggy-Bag into the store one day. After the cashier had counted Baggy-Bag's bottles and given her three crisp dollar bills, Alison watched the crone take a quart of milk from the dairy cooler, then a half dozen cans of cat food from the pet supplies shelf. "The question is," Alison later wrote, "does she feed it to cats or eat it herself?"

Alison swallows the last of her juice and stands up to stretch. No more work today; it's time for a walk.

At high noon the sidewalks on Main Street are flowing with people. The crowds are vexing to those among them who are in a hurry. Maybe these people are rushing to arrive at lunch appointments, or just trying to do errands before they have to go back to work. For them, others are simply moving objects which must be out-maneuvered in walking from one point to another. For Alison, however, the crowd is a wonderfully sensual phenomenon. It is made of diverse colors, sounds, odors, forms, and motion. It is an identity composed of identities. There go the Vietnamese

women who live in the building next door; they have been shopping at Woolworth's for kitchenware. Coming out of the bank is a neatly-tailored businessman with a copy of The Wall Street Journal tucked under his arm. A particularly lively center of activity is the hot dog cart. Beneath his blue and orange umbrella, Casey Driscoll serves franks in steaming hot buns to a mixed group of quick-lunch customers. Alison digs through her handbag for change, glancing at the motto printed on Casey's cart: "Each Hot Dog A Work Of Art."

"That'll be seventy-five cents, sweetheart."

As Alison hands Casey the money she makes a mental note of his face--the funny beak-like nose, the bushy brows, the gaps between his white teeth as he smiles, and the dancing sparkle that lights up his eyes when he laughs.

"Thank you for the work of art," says Alison, turning to go. Casey replies, "Don't mention it, little sister," thinking she means the hot dog.

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1. Go back and underline all the parts of the story that describe people.
 2. Write a description of an unusual person you know. Choose a person you know only by sight. Invent your character's identity. Where does he (or she) live, what does he do, what does he look like, what does he think about? How does this person's appearance help you to answer the above questions?

ENDNOTES

¹Earl W. Stevick, Teaching Languages: A Way And Ways (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 45

²Regarding the issue of authenticity, I choose the same criteria in writing fiction for ESL students as I would for anyone: namely, integrity of the author (writing about what I know) and conceptual completeness.

³This activity was presented to the Master of Arts in Teaching degree candidates by Bonnie Mennell on 6/6/83 at the School for International Training. "On the Wharf," written with this activity in mind, owes its format to "Peter's Beach" from Caleb Gattegno's Short Passages, which was used as a model.

⁴This activity was suggested by Lori Gray.

⁵The technique of omission was generated by Caleb Gattegno's Educational Solutions, Inc., and was presented by Bonnie Mennell on 6/6/83 at the School for International Training.

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