Models for Writers

Short Essays for Composition

ELEVENTH EDITION

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Preface

Models for Writers, now in its eleventh editi
dents and instructors brief, accessible, high-i
cal elements, principles, and patterns. As imp
to read while they are learning to write co
for Writers offers more than a collection of e
dant study materials that accompany each s
the writing skills they will need for all thei
activities and assignments give students the
the various rhetorical elements into coheren
own. This approach, which has helped seve
1982 to become better writers, remains at the

In this eleventh edition, we continue to e
tures of *Models for Writers* that have won
students alike. In addition, we have strength
ducing new selections and new voices and by
tures that provide students with the tools the
readers and writers.

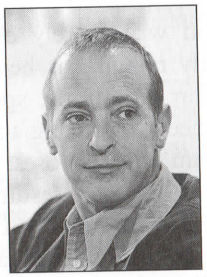
FAVORITE FEATURES OF *MODELS*

• **Brief, Lively Readings that Provide Out**
of the seventy-six selections in *Models for*
in length (two to three pages) to the essays st
selves, and each clearly illustrates a basic rheto
or pattern. Just as important, the essays dea
know from our own teaching experience will sp
college students. The range of voices, cultural
represented in the essays will resonate with tod
enjoy and benefit from reading and writing ab
well-known authors, including Annie Dillar
Stephen King, Anne Lamott, Brian Doyle, Di
Cisneros, Salman Rushdie, Martin Luther King

• **Introductory Chapters on Reading and W**
chapters in Part One, students review the writ

Me Talk Pretty One Day

David Sedaris



David Sedaris was born in 1956 in Binghamton, New York, and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. He briefly attended Western Carolina University and Kent State University but ultimately graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1987. Before becoming a writer, Sedaris *worked as a mover, an office temp, a housekeeper, and an elf in a department store Christmas display, an experience he wrote about in his celebrated essay "Santaland Diaries." He is a regular contributor to National Public Radio,* Harper's, Details, *the* New Yorker, *and* Esquire *and has won several awards, including the James Thurber Prize for American Humor. Sedaris often writes about his quirky Greek family and his travels with his partner, Hugh Hamrick, with whom he currently lives in London. His essays and stories have been collected in several best-selling books, including* Barrel Fever *(1994),* Holidays on Ice *(1997),* Naked *(1997),* Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim *(2004),* When You Are Engulfed in Flames *(2008), and most recently* Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary *(2010).*

The following essay about taking French language lessons in Paris first appeared in Esquire *in March 1999 and later became the title piece for Sedaris's fourth book,* Me Talk Pretty One Day *(2000). As you read, pay attention to how he uses his words to play with the ideas of language, understanding, and belonging.*

Reflecting on What You Know

Have you ever been in a situation where you did not speak the prevalent language—for example, in a foreign country, a language class, or a group of people who spoke a language other than yours? How did you feel about not being able to communicate? How, if at all, did you get your thoughts across to others?

At the age of forty-one, I am returning to school and having to think of myself as what my French textbook calls "a true debutant." After paying my tuition, I was issued a student ID, which allows me a discounted entry fee at movie theaters, puppet shows, and Festyland, a far-flung amusement park that advertises with billboards picturing a cartoon stegosaurus sitting in a canoe and eating what appears to be a ham sandwich. 1

I've moved to Paris in order to learn the language. My school is the Alliance Française, and on the first day of class, I arrived early, watching as the returning students greeted one another in the school lobby. Vacations were recounted, and questions were raised concerning mutual friends with names like Kang and Vlatnya. Regardless of their nationalities, everyone spoke what sounded to me like excellent French. Some accents were better than others, but the students exhibited an ease and confidence I found intimidating. As an added discomfort, they were all young, attractive, and well dressed, causing me to feel not unlike Pa Kettle[1] trapped backstage after a fashion show. 2

I remind myself that I am now a full-grown man. No one will ever again card me for a drink or demand that I weave a floor mat out of newspapers. At my age, a reasonable person should have completed his sentence in the prison of the nervous and the insecure—isn't that the great promise of adulthood? I can't help but think that, somewhere along the way, I made a wrong turn. My fears have not vanished. Rather, they have seasoned and multiplied with age. I am now twice as frightened as I was when, at the age of twenty, I allowed a failed nursing student to inject me with a horse tranquilizer, and eight times more anxious than I was the day my kindergarten teacher pried my fingers off my mother's ankle and led me screaming toward my desk. "You'll get used to it," the woman had said. 3

I'm still waiting. 4

The first day of class was nerve-racking because I knew I'd be expected to perform. That's the way they do it here—everyone into the language pool, sink or swim. The teacher marched in, deeply tanned from a recent vacation, and rattled off a series of administrative announcements. I've spent some time in Normandy,[2] and I took a monthlong French class last summer in New York. I'm not completely in the dark, yet I understood only half of what this teacher was saying. 5

[1] *Pa Kettle:* someone who is simple or unsophisticated; the name of a character in a series of comic movies popular in the 1950s.
[2] *Normandy:* a province in northwestern France.

"If you have not *meismslsxp* by this time, you should not be in this room. Has everybody *apzkiubjxow*? Everyone? Good, we shall proceed." She spread out her lesson plan and sighed, saying, "All right, then, who knows the alphabet?"

It was startling because a) I hadn't been asked that question in a while, and b) I realized, while laughing, that I myself did not know the alphabet. They're the same letters, but they're pronounced differently.

"Ahh." The teacher went to the board and sketched the letter *A*. "Do we have anyone in the room whose first name commences with an ahh?"

Two Polish Annas raised their hands, and the teacher instructed them to present themselves, giving their names, nationalities, occupations, and a list of things they liked and disliked in this world. The first Anna hailed from an industrial town outside of Warsaw and had front teeth the size of tombstones. She worked as a seamstress, enjoyed quiet times with friends, and hated the mosquito.

"Oh, really," the teacher said. "How very interesting. I thought that everyone loved the mosquito, but here, in front of all the world, you claim to detest him. How is it that we've been blessed with someone as unique and original as you? Tell us, please."

The seamstress did not understand what was being said, but she knew that this was an occasion for shame. Her rabbity mouth huffed for breath, and she stared down at her lap as though the appropriate comeback were stitched somewhere alongside the zipper of her slacks.

The second Anna learned from the first and claimed to love sunshine and detest lies. It sounded like a translation of one of those Playmate of the Month data sheets, the answers always written in the same loopy handwriting: "Turn-ons: Mom's famous five-alarm chili! Turnoffs: Insincerity and guys who come on too strong!!!"

The two Polish women surely had clear notions of what they liked and disliked, but, like the rest of us, they were limited in terms of vocabulary, and this made them appear less than sophisticated. The teacher forged on, and we learned that Carlos, the Argentine bandoneon[3] player, loved wine, music, and, in his words, "Making sex with the women of the world." Next came a beautiful young Yugoslavian who identified herself as an optimist, saying that she loved everything life had to offer.

The teacher licked her lips, revealing a hint of the sadist[4] we would later come to know. She crouched low for her attack, placed her hands

[3]*bandoneon:* a small accordion popular in South America.

[4]*sadist:* one who finds pleasure in being cruel to others.

on the young woman's desk, and said, "Oh, yeah? And do you love your little war?"[5]

While the optimist struggled to defend herself, I scrambled to think of an answer to what had obviously become a trick question. How often are you asked what you love in this world? More important, how often are you asked and then publicly ridiculed for your answer? I recalled my mother, flushed with wine, pounding the table late one night, saying, "Love? I love a good steak cooked rare. I love my cat, and I love . . ." My sisters and I leaned forward, waiting to hear our names. "Tums," our mother said. "I love Tums." The teacher killed some time accusing the Yugoslavian girl of masterminding a program of genocide, and I jotted frantic notes in the margins of my pad. While I can honestly say that I love leafing through medical textbooks devoted to severe dermatological conditions, it is beyond the reach of my French vocabulary, and acting it out would only have invited unwanted attention.

When called upon, I delivered an effortless list of things I detest: blood sausage, intestinal paté, brain pudding. I'd learned these words the hard way. Having given it some thought, I then declared my love for IBM typewriters, the French word for "bruise," and my electric floor waxer. It was a short list, but still I managed to mispronounce IBM and afford the wrong gender to both the floor waxer and the typewriter. Her reaction led me to believe that these mistakes were capital crimes in the country of France.

"Were you always this *palicmkrexjs*?" she asked. "Even a *fiuscrzsws tociwegixp* knows that a typewriter is feminine."

I absorbed as much of her abuse as I could understand, thinking, but not saying, that I find it ridiculous to assign a gender to an inanimate object incapable of disrobing and making an occasional fool of itself. Why refer to Lady Flesh Wound or Good Sir Dishrag when these things could never deliver in the sack?

The teacher proceeded to belittle everyone from German Eva, who hated laziness, to Japanese Yukari, who loved paintbrushes and soap. Italian, Thai, Dutch, Korean, Chinese—we all left class foolishly believing that the worst was over. We didn't know it then, but the coming months would teach us what it is like to spend time in the presence of a wild animal. We soon learned to dodge chalk and to cover our heads and stomachs whenever she approached us with a

[5]*". . . your little war":* the Balkan War (1991–2001), armed conflict and genocide in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

question. She hadn't yet punched anyone, but it seemed wise to prepare ourselves against the inevitable.

Though we were forbidden to speak anything but French, the 20
teacher would occasionally use us to practice any of her five fluent languages.

"I hate you," she said to me one afternoon. Her English was 21
flawless. "I really, really hate you." Call me sensitive, but I couldn't help taking it personally.

Learning French is a lot like joining a gang in that it involves a 22
long and intensive period of hazing. And it wasn't just my teacher; the entire population seemed to be in on it. Following brutal encounters with my local butcher and the concierge[6] of my building, I'd head off to class, where the teacher would hold my corrected paperwork high above her head, shouting, "Here's proof that *David* is an ignorant and uninspired *ensigiejsokhjx*."

Refusing to stand convicted on the teacher's charges of laziness, I'd 23
spend four hours a night on my homework, working even longer whenever we were assigned an essay. I suppose I could have gotten by with less, but I was determined to create some sort of an identity for myself. We'd have one of those "complete the sentence" exercises, and I'd fool with the thing for hours, invariably settling on something like, "A quick run around the lake? I'd love to. Just give me a minute to strap on my wooden leg." The teacher, through word and action, conveyed the message that, if this was my idea of an identity, she wanted nothing to do with it.

My fear and discomfort crept beyond the borders of my classroom 24
and accompanied me out onto the wide boulevards, where, no matter how hard I tried, there was no escaping the feeling of terror I felt whenever anyone asked me a question. I was safe in any kind of a store, as, at least in my neighborhood, one can stand beside the cash register for hours on end without being asked something so trivial as, "May I help you?" or "How would you like to pay for that?"

My only comfort was the knowledge that I was not alone. 25
Huddled in the smoky hallways and making the most of our pathetic French, my fellow students and I engaged in the sort of conversation commonly overheard in refugee camps.

"Sometimes me cry alone at night." 26

"That is common for me also, but be more strong, you. Much 27
work, and someday you talk pretty. People stop hate you soon. Maybe tomorrow, okay?"

[6]*concierge:* a doorman in a French apartment building.

Unlike other classes I have taken, here there was no sense of com- 28
petition. When the teacher poked a shy Korean woman in the eyelid with a freshly sharpened pencil, we took no comfort in the fact that, unlike Hyeyoon Cho, we all knew the irregular past tense of the verb "to defeat." In all fairness, the teacher hadn't meant to hurt the woman, but neither did she spend much time apologizing, saying only, "Well, you should have been paying more attention."

Over time, it became impossible to believe that any of us would 29
ever improve. Fall arrived, and it rained every day. It was mid-October when the teacher singled me out, saying, "Every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section." And it struck me that, for the first time since arriving in France, I could understand every word that someone was saying.

Understanding doesn't mean that you can suddenly speak the 30
language. Far from it. It's a small step, nothing more, yet its rewards are intoxicating and deceptive. The teacher continued her diatribe, and I settled back, bathing in the subtle beauty of each new curse and insult.

"You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts 31
with nothing but pain, do you understand me?"

The world opened up, and it was with great joy that I responded, 32
"I know the thing what you speak exact now. Talk me more, plus, please, plus."

Thinking Critically about This Reading

Sedaris's French teacher tells him that "every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section" (paragraph 29). Why is Sedaris's ability to recount this insult significant? What does the teacher's "cesarean section" metaphor mean?

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Sedaris's tone is humorous. (Glossary: *Tone*) What words in particular help him create this tone? Did you find yourself smiling or laughing out loud as you read his essay? If so, what specific passages affected you this way?
2. What is your impression of Sedaris and his classmates? What words and phrases does he use to describe himself and them?

3. Why do you think Sedaris uses nonsense jumbles of letters—*meismslsxp* and *palicmkrexjs*, for example—in several places? How would his essay be different had he used the real words instead?
4. What does Sedaris realize in the final three paragraphs? What evidence does he provide of his realization?

Classroom Activity Using Diction and Tone

Many restaurant menus use connotative language in an attempt to persuade patrons that they are about to have an exceptional dining experience: "skillfully seasoned," "festive and spicy," "fresh from the garden," "grilled to perfection," "freshly ground." Imagine that you are charged with the task of creating such a menu. Use connotative language to describe the following basic foods, making them sound as attractive and inviting as possible.

tomato juice	peas	pasta
onion soup	potatoes	ice cream
ground beef	salad	tea
chicken	bread and butter	cake

Suggested Writing Assignments

1. Write a narrative essay recounting a humorous incident in your life. (Glossary: *Narration*) Use the following questions to start thinking about the incident: Where were you? What happened? Who witnessed the incident? Did you think it was humorous at the time? Do you view it differently now? Why or why not? Choose words and phrases for your narrative that convey a humorous tone. (Glossary: *Tone*)
2. "Refusing to stand convicted on the teacher's charges of laziness," Sedaris explains, "I'd spend four hours a night on my homework, working even longer whenever we were assigned an essay" (23). Write an essay in which you evaluate Sedaris's teacher. Given that she inspired Sedaris to apply himself to his work, do you think she was an effective teacher? Would her methods have the same effect on you? Why or why not? (Glossary: *Cause and Effect*)

3. As Sedaris's essay and the following cartoon illustrate, fitting in often depends on our ability to communicate with authenticity—using the appropriate pronunciation, terminology, or slang—to a particular audience. (Glossary: *Audience; Slang*) Have you ever felt alienated by a group because you didn't use its lingo appropriately, or have you ever alienated someone else for the same reason? Write a narrative essay in which you recount one such event. (Glossary: *Narration*) Be sure to use diction and tone creatively to convey your meaning. Before you begin, you might find it helpful to refer to your response to the prereading prompt for this selection.