

ESSAY #2: A SENSE OF PLACE

We Southerners have a sense of place, and a sense of place gives you a sense of self.
(Cokie Roberts, news analyst)

It is place, the permanent position in both the social and topographical sense that gives us our identity.
(J. B. Jackson, geographer)

If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.
(Wendell Berry, bio-regionalist)

INTRODUCTION

Essay #2 (A Sense of Place) is a project essay on a place of interest to you and your personal response to that place. Journey to a site (one that you have not been to already), take notes, make your fundamental decisions (purpose, audience, tone/persona, strategies, tentative thesis, rough draft, and outline) to state your writing intentions and plan your response, collect any brochures or websites associated with the place, and write an essay that will engage an HCCS student body eager to explore and learn about diverse sites.

In your essay you want to give the reader “a sense of place,” perhaps even tap into the “soul” of the place, its *genius loci*, or what you perceive to be “the distinctive atmosphere or pervading spirit of the place” (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Ultimately, your essay is about the place you visit **and** your personal response to that place.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Write a 750-word essay in which you respond to one of the topics listed below or invent a topic of your own. Place yourself at the center of your experience at the site.

Essay #2 is a **multi-purpose** essay. Having recently visited the site, you will be recalling memory; therefore, as you prepare to write your essay, **reflect** on your experience at the site. Furthermore, **express** an attitude (emotion or **tone/persona**) about your visit to this site. As you “go public” with this essay, **inform** your audience about the site you selected to visit. Also **explain** why this site exists.

Your **audience** is the HCCS student body reading your essay published in the school newspaper *The Egalitarian*. Assume that your audience has not visited your particular site.

One hallmark of the sample essays we will read in this unit is a strong, personal **style** or writer’s **voice** or **persona**. Carefully consider the **elements of style: diction (imagery, figurative language, allusion, word connotation), sentence variety, emphasis, tone/persona, and selection of details** in our sample essays.

As we study how to write a sense of place essay, we will be reading the following sample essays:

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "Rope Burn"

N. Scott Momaday's "The Way to Rainy Mountain"

Lars Eighner's "On Dumpster Diving"

Brent Staples' "Just Walk on By"

Jack London's "To Build a Fire"

SuzAnne C. Cole's "Walking into Horror"

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Type your essay in 12-point Times New Roman font. Double-space it. Follow the **MLA manuscript mechanics**. Use your **header** feature. **Attach** (do not type in the submission box) your essay, planning page, critiques, and outline as Word documents no later than 11:45 pm on the assigned due date.

A SENSE OF PLACE
POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO THE WRITING TOPIC

1. In his novel *Look Homeward Angel*, Thomas Wolf writes, “You can’t go home again.” Test the truth of this statement. Go home again—to an old home, neighborhood, school, park, or some site associated with your past. Sketch in a “sense of place.” Perhaps compare and contrast the site as it is today with the site as you knew it in the past. What did you learn from your visit? Like N. Scott Momaday in “The Way to Rainy Mountain,” give plenty of description and offer “cultural critique” or reflective conclusions.
2. Visit a cultural or community site such as a historical museum or art museum/gallery. First, give the “big picture” by taking us there. Next narrow down your experience to one painting, photograph, sculpture, or historical object. Spend maybe a third to a half of your essay on this one object. Make observations on the value or meaning of your visit. Give plenty of description. Consider SuzAnne Cole’s “Walking into Horror.”
3. Visit a site of natural surroundings such as a park, lake, or forest. Like Henry David Thoreau in “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” not only describe, but offer a cultural critique on modern life, the environment, or other thoughtful subject inspired by the natural surroundings. Create a “sense of place.”
4. Make a pilgrimage to one of Houston’s spiritual sites such as a church, mosque, temple, chapel, meeting house, or contemplative place. Give plenty of description as you create a “sense of place.” Reflect on your experience. Consider the Rothko Chapel or the Live Oak Quaker Meeting House (Friday evening sunset viewing). Also consider Henry Louis Gates’ essay “Rope Burn” where we read of his journey of discovery to the monastery at Debra Damo, which lies atop a fifty-foot cliff accessible only by a rope ladder.
5. Also consider N. Scott Momaday’s pilgrimage to his grandmother’s grave. Make a journey to a cemetery to connect with an ancestor. Focus on one specific grave marker that attracts your interest.
6. Visit a folk art site such as Flowerman’s House, Art Car Museum, or Orange Show. Give plenty of description. Inform your reader. Explain why the site exists. Offer cultural critique: what comment does the site make about our culture?
7. Visit a “one-of-a-kind” site that interests you. Maybe no one in our class has ever heard of it! Consider a folk art store/gallery. Make sure it is indeed “one-of-a-kind.” Consider Casa Ramirez on 19th Street in the Houston Heights.
8. You might have an idea of your own not suggested in the above possibilities. Students in past semesters have written about a prison, funeral home, tattoo parlor, and homeless shelter. One student even wrote about his front yard ... through the lens

of a blind man. He blind folded himself and described a sense of place through his senses.

A SENSE OF PLACE PLANNING PAGE

FUNDAMENTAL DECISIONS:

1. **PURPOSE(S)** Your essay will be **multi-purpose** as you reflect (look back on), express (reveal a tone or mood that becomes an important part of your essay), inform, explain, and raise awareness. Flesh out your specific purpose.

2. **AUDIENCE** (Your audience is the HCCS student body reading your essay published in the school newspaper *The Egalitarian*.)

3. **TONE/PERSONA** (What is your attitude about the place you visited? Did your initial attitude change during the course of your visit? Select a **tone** (or tones) appropriate for your attitude about your visit to the place. Your tone might be one of fascination at discovering a new and interesting place that you feel serves a valuable function. It could be one of respect and awe, even sorrow, at what you find there. You might experience a change in tone as you make your journey to and through your site.)

4. **STRATEGY/STRATEGIES** (Your essay will be part **narrative** (but may not include rising action, conflict, and climax). Instead, your essay might be narrative in the sense that you take your readers step by step through the site you visit. You definitely want to include description so the readers can experience the place you visit. You might also want to include **facts and details, examples, definitions, classifications, and comparisons/contrasts**. Carefully decide on how you will structure your essay.)

5. **TENTATIVE THESIS SENTENCE** (Write a tentative thesis sentence that reveals the main point of your essay. If you have a **primary strategy** such as narration, description, or comparison/contrast, try to suggest that strategy in your thesis. Consider the sample thesis sentences in the essays you read for this unit. In particular, note the thesis sentences in our sample essays: Henry Lewis Gates' "Rope Burn" and N. Scott Momaday's "The Way to Rainy Mountain.")

6. OUTLINE

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Peer Evaluation Sheet--Assignment #2 (Part I)

EXTRA CREDIT: There will be extra credit awarded to responses that give useful, intelligent advice on how to make the essay stronger. However, vague or hard to understand responses, or mere description, will not receive any extra credit.

TO BEGIN: Read your partner's essay carefully, placing checkmarks in the left margin where you believe the thesis and topic sentences are. Also, underline anything you are **certain** is explanation. Then answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper (do not merely respond with "yes" or "no" answers . . . explain your opinions):

- 1] Analyze the introductory material: Describe **at least** one way the opening sentences could be changed to more effectively capture the reader's attention.
- 2] Authority: Evaluate the writer's ethos. Has the writer given you any reason to feel that he/she should be trusted or knows enough about the subject that he/she should be listened to? Suggest **at least** one way that such credibility could be created.
- 3] Analyze the thesis statement: How can the thesis more clearly respond to the wording of the actual assignment? Does it make any of the mistakes that I described when I went over thesis statements?
- 4] Structure: Has the introduction been developed? If not, describe how it might be effectively expanded; if it has, describe **at least** one way that it could be better organized.

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Peer Evaluation Sheet--Assignment #2 (Part II)

SECOND ESSAY: Read the essay carefully, drawing straight lines beneath any word, phrase, sentence, or passage that you feel is especially effective, wavy lines beneath those that you feel to be especially awkward, and circle (do not correct) any grammatical or spelling mistakes that you see. Then answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper (do not merely respond with “yes” or “no” answers . . . explain your opinions):

1] Transitions: Do all the body paragraphs have transitions? Suggest at least one option for each of those that do not; For those that do, is there a link to the previous paragraph? Describe how each one can be made stronger.

2] Topic Sentences: Do all of the topic sentences directly support the thesis (i.e. they are clearly reasons why the thesis is true)? Suggest ways to make each one stronger and clearer.

3] Explanations: Which paragraphs need more thorough explanations? Offer suggestions on what ideas need further clarification. Has the writer answered the proper question in each paragraph? If not, suggest what needs to be discussed.

4] Examples: Are the examples all specific? Suggest ways to make them all as specific as possible. Suggest alternative real life examples that you feel could work better.

5] Finally: Look for words, phrases, or sentences that could be cut in order to make the piece “leaner” and “tighter.”

LASTLY: When the three of you have finished, spend 5 minutes or so talking about each other’s paper, trying to find ways to expand and improve each other’s argument (sometimes it is easier to talk about an essay than to write about it).

NOTE: Your responses should be given to the writer of the original essay. He/she will turn them in with the final draft.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

This essay will be evaluated on a scale of 1-10 for each of the following criteria:

Content: Clearly define site and engage audience(s). Give reader a “sense of place.” Write a minimum of 750 words. Inform your audience about the site you visited. Your thesis statement should be impressive and your details should be abundant and vivid.

Organization: Provide specific and relevant background information (historical, medical, visual, etc.) about the site you visited. Plan clearly develops analysis from thesis. Pay consistent attention to logical order. Your paragraphs should be effectively coherent, unified, and developed and you should have a strong title, introduction, and conclusion.

Sentences and Paragraphs: Clear topic sentences; Compound and complex sentences. Varied sentence lengths; Varied patterns of paragraph development.

Word Use and Tone: Use clear, concrete diction, precise denotations, interesting metaphors or similes, and parallel sentence structure.

Punctuation and Mechanics: Pages are numbered. Proper manuscript form is used. Correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are used. There is clear evidence of editing or rewriting.

DEDUCTIONS

- 10 = Missing first and last name (1st page information)
- 10 = Missing professor’s name (1st page information)
- 10 = Missing class name (1st page information)
- 10 = Missing date (1st page information)
- 10 = Missing headers
- 10 = Missing title
- 5 = Any font other than 12 pt.
- 1 = each instance of spacing issues (this includes extra spacing between paragraphs)

A Sense of Place Criteria Sheet

Content: Clearly define site and engage audience(s). Give reader a “sense of place.” Write a minimum of 750 words. Inform your audience about the site you visited. Your thesis statement should be impressive and your details should be abundant and vivid.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

Organization: Provide specific and relevant background information (historical, medical, visual, etc.) about the site you visited. Plan clearly develops analysis from thesis. Pay consistent attention to logical order. Your paragraphs should be effectively coherent, unified, and developed and you should have a strong title, introduction, and conclusion.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

Sentences and Paragraphs: Clear topic sentences. Compound and complex sentences. Varied sentence lengths. Varied patterns of paragraph development.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

Word Use and Tone: Use clear, concrete diction, precise denotations, interesting metaphors or similes, and parallel sentence structure.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

Punctuation and Mechanics: Pages are numbered. Proper manuscript form is used. Correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are used. There is clear evidence of editing or rewriting.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

Average Score:

GRADE: