

## Writing an Essay of Place

"What is a 'Place'?" Is that strip of grass between the lanes on the interstate highway a place? Is an internet website a place? Is McDonalds a place?

What about the Little Big Horn Battlefield? Chief Charlo's grave? The camping spot on Lolo Creek that Lewis and Clark called Travelers' Rest? Your favorite summer swimming hole?

Some "places" are really no place. That is, we pass them without seeing them. When we are there they have no meaning for us. We don't remember them when we are gone. But other places are part of the landscapes in our minds. When we are homesick, we remember them. Sometimes we feel an urge to go to them. When we think of important events, times full of life, we see in our minds the places where they occurred, which are inseparable from what happened.

Other places are storied with events of national significance, so the entire country remembers important events by remembering the place where they occurred. Gettysburg. Wounded Knee. Pearl Harbor. Thousands of people visit such places so that they can forge a personal connection with events that matter. At such places, monuments and signs and plaques usually re-tell the story.

And yet other places have more personal meaning. The place where a brother died, or the place where a friend shared a secret, or the place where you thought through a hard problem and decided to change your life. In these places, no memorials make the story public, but the story is real and important, nonetheless.

For this essay, you can choose to explore either a public place with which you want to have a better connection, or you can explore a personal place, to which you want to give a richer and deeper reality.

Does your family have a special place it goes for picnics or reunions?  
Is there a place where you had an important conversation with a friend?  
Is there a place where something traumatic happened to you?  
Do you know where, exactly, your parents got married or got engaged?  
Do you know where the first members of your family to come to this town slept the first night they got here?  
Is there a special place you go with friends to be happy together?

Or maybe a place where something happened that changed your town or state or nation:  
Are there places nearby where something of historical significance to the state or nation happened.  
Are there places that are the subjects of debates today about what is going to happen to them?  
Are there places that have cultural significance to groups who live in your community?  
Don't pick a place that is completely private, about which you won't be able to gather any history or other people's stories.

There are a few simple ways that you can listen for what a place has to teach:

- \* you can find out something about its history,
- \* you can learn more about the natural or the built environment that exists there,
- \* and you can gather insights, either by interviews or by readings, from other people who have something to say about it.

Before you are done, you might do all of these things.

**But first, go to your place and listen as carefully as you can** for what secrets it might be holding, for what it might teach you directly.

**First, Listen**

Gather information for all five of your senses. What do you hear? What can you feel with your skin? Are there any tastes associated with the place? What do you smell? What do you see? Be specific: your writing is more vivid if you see a "grand fir, about forty feet high" than if you see simply a "tree."

Consider taking field guides along to identify trees, plants and birds you may not know.

## **Second, Ask Questions**

Make a list of questions that you might be able to answer by visiting a library or interviewing someone. Here are the sort of questions you may attempt to answer. These are suggestions. If other questions, more closely related to your interests, occur to you, try writing preliminary answers to them.

How old are the trees that are there? How did they get planted? Are there any non-native tree growing there? Who might have planted them? Is the vegetation different than it would have been fifty years ago, or a hundred years ago?

Are there other lives that were connected with your place, that you wonder about? Try to imagine who was here, and what being here felt like for them. If there are buildings, where did the material to build them come from? Who built the buildings, and why? Who else has used the site, and what did it mean to them?

Avoid words like "beautiful" or "majestic" which are abstract nouns and don't let us see, smell, hear, feel, and taste the world that is present. Pass on the information that your senses pass on to you.

But simple description, as important as it is sometimes, stops short of the most powerful writing, which aims for meaning. By now, you should have some general idea of what you would like to tell about your place.

**With this general idea in mind, do a bit of research into ecosystems like the one that exists at your place.** If your place is a lake, read some scientific articles about lakes. If there are deer at your place, gather and read articles about the lives of deer.

Read background science on the sort of place it is: is it a creek, a mountain, a lake or a pond? How long has it existed? What caused it to exist?

**Now the time has come to turn your journal writings into a draft of an essay.** What you need to do is to tell the reader a story.

To make a story, you need to include three elements: a protagonist who cares about something, events that touch upon what he or she cares about, and a moment at which some new meaning is made.

Since the foundation of a personal essay is your first-hand experiences, you will want to tell the story of your search for the meaning of a place. In an essay, you, the writer, will be the protagonist.

So, you are the protagonist. Tell us the story of a visit to your place. Include clues as to what is on your mind. Include details from nature and from history that let us know what you think is important. Include at least one conversation with another person that moves us closer to understanding what you want us to understand about your place. Use the journal entries you wrote earlier when they fit, but don't hesitate to change them or to write new scenes.

What is happening to the site today? Is it changing? In what ways? Is this good or bad?