

STORIES OF PLACE: WRITING AND THE NATURAL WORLD

SESSION THREE—ASSIGNMENT

Below are the assignment prompts used for this session:

PROMPTS:

Local/Global Writing Exercise #1

Consider how Alexis C. Madrigal uses an exploration of a physical object (straws) as a lens to explore a massive and seemingly unrelated subject (the history of capitalism) in his essay "Disposable America" in *The Atlantic*.

For this exercise, I would like you to choose a concrete physical object as a jumping off point to explore a topic of cultural significance. This should be something with a physical existence in the world, and can either be a specific item, or a type of item. For example, this could be a piece of jewelry that has been in your family for generations (a specific item), or a style of pottery that is produced in your region (a type of item).

If you would like to make this a researched literary journalism essay in the style of Madrigal's piece, feel free, but you're also welcome to make this a personal essay (which may be more manageable in the scope of this short writing assignment). In either case, don't feel restricted to a simple history of the item—give yourself permission to make associations and cover a wide range of tangentially related topics.

The item itself need not be something that feels especially fraught or meaningful, just like a straw isn't an object that seems important at first consideration. Think about your life. Think about the place you live, and think about where you come from. Pick an object that touches your life and your region in some way, then go wild!

Peer Response Questions:

1. What did the author choose as their 'lens' (the physical object), and what subject(s) are they using it to explore? Describe the author's 'project' in your own words. (For example, "This writer chose pierogis, a type of Polish food, as a lens to explore her relationship with her Polish grandmother, the experience of moving to a gentrifying neighborhood that was once home to a large Polish immigrant population, and comfort eating.")
2. What was the most unexpected moment in this piece of writing? This could be an especially lovely physical description, a bit of humor, a surprising leap the author makes that you never would have thought of yourself, a new fact, etc.

Local/Global Writing Exercise #2

For this exercise, I would like you to write a piece of flash nonfiction in the mode of Chelsea Biondolillo's "Back to the Land". The subject matter is entirely up to you, and can either be personal, or impersonal, like Biondolillo's piece (she is writing about an experience of her own, but the subject is the research on human body decay being conducted by Texas State University, not her own life).

I would like you to work with a few constraints, because restrictions can—counterintuitively—help you achieve greater creativity.

- 1) Include yourself in scene in the essay. This means I want you to include not just your thoughts, but present yourself as a character who is interacting with the physical world. An example of this is when Biondolillo writes "My

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eyes stay wide open and my mouth stays mostly shut as we walk through the grass." She is there, and the reader is there with her.

2) Write in the present tense--i.e. "my eyes stay wide open", not "my eyes stayed wide open."

3) Feel free to include exposition (aka background information—the first paragraph of "Back to the Land" is an example of exposition) but don't include flashbacks. Stay in the present moment for the full essay.

4) Include dialogue—there doesn't need to be much, but direct quotations are a very powerful way for the reader to feel like action is unfolding in front of them.

Please keep to a flash essay length of 250 – 1,000 words (approximately 1 – 4 double spaced pages). Biondolillo's essay is fewer than 700 words, and that kind of compression can yield beautiful results!

Peer Response Questions:

1. What have you learned about the writer through this essay? What is their personality like, what are they interested in, and how do you know this? Remember that authors show us who they are in subtle ways, not just by telling us facts about themselves.
2. What was your favorite moment in this essay?
3. Does the compressed length work well for this piece, or does it feel rushed or incomplete? If the extremely short length was effective, what do you think contributed to this success?

Local/Global Writing #3

For this exercise, I would like you to change the essay you wrote for prompt #2 into the second person point of view ("you"). See the opening of Kia Krause's "What's Left Behind" for an example of second person narration.

You can either transform the entire piece, or, like Krause, you can choose to have only certain key passages in second person.

Consider this an experiment. The goal is to see if you can use second person to draw the reader into your narrative more fully and engage them emotionally.

Like any experiment, it might fail. It isn't as if second person point of view is "better" than first or third person, and you might decide you prefer your original version. But generally, the heavy lifting of writing happens during revision, and in order to revise effectively, you need to be able to see your work with fresh eyes. Changing the point of view can give you a fresh perspective.

Peer Response Question:

1. Were there any moments when the use of second person point of view caused you to have an emotional response to the piece? If so, was this emotional response positive or negative?
2. In your opinion, is the particular subject matter of the essay well-suited to the second person? Why or why not?