

## Nature Writing: Connecting to a Special Place

### Idea

Nature writing is usually associated with essays such as “Walden,” but it also embraces nature fiction, nature poetry, and nature reporting. Lyrical descriptions of sea or forest, adventure and wanderlust, personal narratives or sense of place draw readers in.

Connecting to place is an important concept for nature writers. We can dwell on the things that divide us, but we can also dwell within landscapes that connect us. Sometimes we feel a need to go farther afield to share our ideas and to listen to others. We’re made of the places where we have lived and visited.

### Goals

For this one-class activity, students think deeply about the landscapes and experiences that shaped their lives, then write about one of those special places.

One of the best ways to unleash creativity and lay the conceptual foundation for long-form narrative is by having students write a scene-based essay. At our school, students take several news writing courses before they tackle feature writing. By then, their creativity and writing voice have been drummed out of them. They find this activity liberating. It taps into their creativity. In fact, some students have crafted their best work doing this assignment.

### Implementation

This activity works well in classes that emphasize writing, such as feature/magazine writing, environmental journalism and travel writing.

### Preparation

For homework, students read short excerpts from the following books:

1. Aldo Leopold, “Thinking like a Mountain,” essay from *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949.
2. Rachel Carson, “The Shape of Ancient Seas,” chapter from *The Sea Around Us*, 1950.
3. Janisse Ray, “Child of Pine,” chapter from *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, 2000. This chapter is also available online:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeiJ8GBK0mk> (16:17).

As they read, students jot down answers to the following questions and bring their notes to class.

- What’s the landscape that formed you as a child? How did it shape you as you grew up?
- Have you found your place so you don’t have to wander anymore?
- Do you have a powerful place? Does the power come from its beauty, its loss or something else?
- Do you have a personal narrative in the vein of Aldo Leopold’s wolf experience?

### In-class activity

**STEP 1.** At the beginning of class, we talk about the readings and why certain *places* hold

special meaning for us. What creates a *sense of place*—a strong identity and character that is deeply felt by inhabitants as well as visitors? What characteristics make a place special? What traits foster a sense of authentic human attachment and belonging?

**STEP 2.** Next, I give students crayons and large sheets of paper. The students are surprised because most haven't colored since grade school. I ask them to make a map or sketch of an experience in their special place, a journey that strengthened their relationship with nature or a chance encounter with a wild animal like the one Aldo Leopold experienced with the wolf.

The map or sketch should be as detailed as possible. If it's a campsite, for example, show the trail, the tents, the campfire. Were there logs or rocks around the fire? Who was sleeping in which tent? Are there palms trees or ponderosa pines?

This activity is not graded, so students can be creative. They don't have to be an artist either. Stick figures are fine.

**STEP 3.** After 10 minutes of sketching, the students share their sketch with a classmate.

This is really a memory exercise, so I talk with the class about the memories that came flooding back. For some reason, drawing a map or sketch is a good way to access memories you may not have thought about for a long time. It works for anything—a campsite, a lakeside cabin, a secret spot to gaze up at the stars or down at insects skittering across a pond.

**STEP 4.** Now that some memories have been dislodged, I ask the students to write a story based on their map or sketch. They pick one experience that happened in that special place and write as quickly as possible without stopping, crossing things out or changing anything. Not on a computer, but pen to paper. This technique is known as free-writing. When describing personal experiences, it's a good way to deepen memories by describing the sights, sounds, smells and other sensory experiences.

I tell students that one of the hardest parts of writing is silencing our internal editor. It's our editor that drags us back over what we've written. The editor has an important purpose, but it can get in the way of the creative process. Free-writing helps separate the creative stage from the editing stage.

**STEP 5.** After 10 minutes of free-writing, ask for a few volunteers to read their stories.

**STEP 6.** Next, ask the students to fashion their free-writing into a scene. Encourage them to include any dialog they recall. Remind them of the journalist's mantra: Show, don't tell. Rather than write that the wilderness cabin is rundown, for example, describe the worn couch or rickety front steps.

**STEP 7:** For homework the students fashion their scene into a short essay rooted in a sense of place. Explain how short essays generally recount a small moment in which you had a flash of insight and came to understand someone, something or yourself differently. The event doesn't have to be monumental. It can be as simple as catching fireflies, but it must have emotional

resonance. (And, yes, humor is an emotion.) By the end, you should have changed or come to understand something differently. What did the incident mean to your life?

### **Student reaction**

This activity is a perennial student favorite that I have used for years. It helps student tap into their creative spirit and develop their writing voice. The essay they write for their first assignment grows out of this activity. Each semester, many of these essays are published, which gives students confidence and a sense of pride.