

REAL WORK, NOT BUSY WORK: THE PLACE PAPER

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We know the complaints well: This reading is boring, the assignment doesn't make sense, and those random facts must be memorized. Students receive homework and must force themselves to complete it. They agonize for hours in front of the computer writing a paper, yet they eagerly spend even longer creating and updating their web pages. Why?

Other complaints are even more familiar because we teachers often make them: so much grading to do, so many superficial essays to read, so many maps to scrutinize. We see grading as the worst part of our job and, if possible, we dump the task on teaching assistants. For hours we wade through blue books piled high on our desks, yet we relish spending even more time with our seminar students. Why?

Of course I have exaggerated here—not all students hate their assignments and not all teachers dread grading—but I trust you recognize the examples. To answer the question of why we sometimes flee from work and other times embrace it, we should look more closely at what we mean by “work.” The work we dislike tends to be “busy work,” work that seems pointless and must be assigned in order for it to be completed.¹ Students see no larger significance to the facts that must be memorized, and so they forget these dates and names soon after the test. We tackle the piles of final exams not because we look forward to what we will learn, but because we must submit grades before the registrar releases us for the summer. On the other side, the work that students and teachers enjoy can be called “real work,” something done not necessarily for a class, but to enrich our own lives. People make the responsible decision and choose to do “real work”—it does not have to be assigned. Students immerse themselves in web design because it challenges their creativity, expresses their identity, and links them to the wider world through cyberspace. Teachers love seminars because they care deeply about that particular topic, love to share that interest with others, and crave the information their students are able to unearth.²

If our assignments can take the form of “real work” by speaking more directly to our interests and lives, then both we and our students will engage the material more deeply, expend more effort, and learn more. This journal has published many examples of such assignments, but I would like to offer another one that gets students to see their surroundings in new ways.

¹The work might *seem* pointless, but of course it might well have an important point. In this essay I do not argue that all of what students see as “busy work” is necessarily pointless. I would like to focus instead on two assignments that I hope students will *not* see as “busy work.”

²I first came across many of these ideas during discussions with Dr. Eric S. Rabkin, Department of English, University of Michigan, and in his unpublished paper, “A Principle for Pedagogic Reform: Real Work is Better than Homework.”

The Place Paper

Students and teachers alike tend to rush through life, eyes fixed on the immediate goal (getting to the bank, to the next class, to graduation) and somewhat oblivious to the surroundings. We live in the world, but do not really "see" it. As Sherlock Holmes gently chided Dr. Watson, "You see, but you do not observe."³ We have a record of human history set out before us but often we cannot "read" it clearly. My "Place Paper" assignment asks students to look closely and think imaginatively about a specific place, speculate about what humans did there (and why), and then carry out research to confirm or correct the speculation. I have used this assignment in my introductory survey "North American Environmental History," but it could be applied to any history course because issues of place, location, and geography have relevance in all time periods and with any topic.

I ask students to choose a specific place on or around campus and typically they select something with a ten-mile radius.⁴ I deliberately use the open-ended word "place" because I want students to choose a location they find interesting. The size of the place does not matter too much; something as small as a yard or a house allows students to look very closely, while something as big as a mountain gives students many topics to explore. After students read articles that will help them "see" and think about landscapes generally,⁵ they visit their place with only a pen and paper and observe for at least thirty minutes, taking notes all the while. Students then spend another thirty minutes fleshing out their notes and brainstorming, on paper, about the connections between the things they have seen, the broader relationships between humans and the environment, and the historical context in which all of this takes place.

For example, a sizeable river flows through my town. If you were to stand on one of the bridges that spans the river, you would take in a number of sights: the river bottom; railroad tracks that run along the north bank; a town park along the south bank; and a big levee across the street from the park that protects the rear of a strip mall. You

³Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1930), 162.

⁴For a more detailed description of the assignment, please see the appendix.

⁵Some works I have found useful include John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), especially the chapter "Country Towns for a New Part of the Country," 73–81; John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), especially the chapter "Roads Belong in the Landscape," 189–205; Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11–32; and May Theilgaard Watts, *Reading the Landscape of America*, revised ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1975), especially the chapters "Canyon Story, or Following a Stream in Southern Indiana," 38–52; and "Camp Sites, Fires, and Cud-Chewers, or How the Upland Forest Changes from Illinois to Wisconsin," 174–194.

would also note the absence of some things you might expect to see: There are no docks, piers, or boat launches, no tourist shops or restaurants with outdoor seating to take in a view of the river. With observations such as these, students then write a five-page paper speculating about the environmental and human history of the location. In particular, they must answer the larger “So what?” questions—why would anyone care about this spot? How does it fit into the larger patterns of American history?

Given the example above, students might note that being able to see the river’s bottom means a shallowness that would have limited commercial shipping and explain the absence of any docks. They might also see that the river’s gentle flow suggests a flat bed, ideal for a railroad that would then spur the town’s growth. The park speaks to ideas dating back to the nineteenth century that humans have much to gain—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—by spending time outdoors, especially near striking natural features such as rivers.⁶ The big levee serves as a clue that at sometime in the past the river flooded and threatened or damaged the strip mall. The levee also speaks to the realm of ideas: that humans should be able to build anywhere they wish, even in a flood plain; that nature can be controlled by human actions; and that malls are worth the time and money spent to build the levee.⁷ Finally, the bridge itself speaks to our desire to move freely and to the dominance of the automobile, with the two paved lanes dwarfing the narrow sidewalk that pedestrians and bicyclists must share.⁸

Once I comment on and return the students’ papers, they conduct research to see if they were correct in their educated guesses about the location’s environmental history. Their revised and expanded papers constitute “real work” in a number of ways. First, students develop a better understanding of a place they care about or at least a place in which they live during the school year. The assignment opens their eyes so that they see familiar things in new ways. My deepest wish is that students never look at a place, in this case the river, the same way again. Second, students come to realize that “seeing” is a useful skill to have in life. Should they (or their employer) invest in this property over here, or that one over there? Why should they buy a house in this neighborhood rather than that one? Third, students become better historians by forming hypotheses

⁶See, for example, Henry David Thoreau’s many writings from the 1840s to the 1860s, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949, available in many editions), and Roderick Nash’s useful overview, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁷For eloquent and forceful arguments along these lines, consider some of Donald Worster’s writings, such as *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸For example, see Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America, and How We Can Take It Back* (New York: Crown, 1997).

grounded in direct observations and then testing them through research. This process should help them make better hypotheses in the future. Furthermore, a teacher might consider this assignment to be “real work” too. My eyes are opened along with the students’—I learned about new places in the area and different human–environment relationships, and I had the background information in hand for a host of potential field trips.

Several students were initially confused by the assignment, but it helped to walk them through examples like the one mentioned above (literally “walk,” for we spent one class period on the bridge, in the park, and climbing the levee). Their evaluations at the end of the class showed enthusiasm for this assignment. For example, one said, “The place papers were meaningful” and another wrote, “The assignments, while unusual, have caused me to think a lot in ways I don’t usually think, taking quantifiable science courses.” In the future, I might shift this assignment in different directions. For example, a group of students writing a single “Place Paper” should produce a more sophisticated analysis than a student working alone. Or a paper could compare two similar locations to provide different insights. Or the “Place Paper” could be linked with a reading that will be discussed in subsequent weeks. For example, I might ask students to focus on the built environment and then read a monograph on urbanization and suburbanization. When they return home at the end of the term, perhaps they will see their old, familiar neighborhood in new and more imaginative ways. If so personal a location as their home can take on new meanings because of this assignment, then both the students and I have accomplished “real work.”

(**Editor’s Note:** A second part of David Hsiung’s essay on “Real Work, Not Busy Work” will follow in the spring 2004 issue of *Teaching History*. The second segment will describe another “real work” activity that Hsiung calls “The Primary Source Paper.”)

APPENDIX

The Place Paper

Please follow these steps for completing the assignment:

1. *Select a specific place in central Pennsylvania.* I have used this open-ended wording to give you the most flexibility in choosing a location. The size of the place does not matter too much; it can be as small as a yard and as big as a mountain range (certain advantages and disadvantages exist with either end of the scale). Choose a place you are already familiar with and can visit several times during the semester.
2. *Consult the readings on reserve at the library;* they will help you “see” and think about the landscape. Depending on the place you have chosen to study, some of the readings might be more useful to you than others. The readings include:

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), the chapter "Country Towns for a New Part of the Country."

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), the chapter "Roads Belong in the Landscape."

Pierce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

May Theilgaard Watts, *Reading the Landscape of America*, revised ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1975), the chapters "Canyon Story, or Following a Stream in Southern Indiana" and "Camp Sites, Fires, and Cud-Chewers, or How the Upland Forest Changes from Illinois to Wisconsin."

3. *Go to the place you have selected with only a pen and paper.* Keeping in mind the key themes, developments, ideas, and questions we have addressed in class and in the readings, observe your place for at least thirty minutes, taking brief notes all the while. Then spend at least thirty minutes filling out your notes and brainstorming, on paper, about connections between the things you have seen, about the relationship between humans and the environment, and about the historical context in which all of this takes place.

4. *Please write a 5–6 page paper discussing the environmental history of your location.* Because you only have these few pages, think carefully about the elements you wish to explore—far better that you explain a few things clearly and thoroughly instead of many things superficially. Explain to the reader how this place probably came to have the shape and characteristics it has today. Use your imagination and "read" your piece of the landscape as a historical document of past environmental change. In addition: Be sure to answer the question: "Why are this place and its environmental history important in the larger scheme of things?" Why would anyone besides you be interested in this place? In other words, you need to answer two basic question, "So what?" and "Who cares?"

5. *Take a classmate to your location and then have that person comment on your paper.* Revise as you see fit.

6. *Turn in your paper at the start of class on Friday, February 8.* For every three spelling and/or basic grammatical errors, your grade will drop by as much as one full letter. This will form half of the grade for the assignment (or 10% of your course grade).

7. *Once you get your paper back, conduct research to verify or revise your initial thinking.* You made an educated guess about your location's environmental history; now you need to determine if you were right. Consult at least three sources, one of which must be scholarly (defined as something that provides you the source of its information), and turn in a revised 6–7 page paper. Cite your sources using the Chicago style. The same penalty for poor writing applies. This paper is due Friday, March 22, and is worth the other half of the grade for the assignment (another 10% of your course grade).