

## BEST BRIEF STRATEGIES

### “On Wednesdays”

by  
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I like to send student writers out into the communities where they live so that they will become better versed in both the dynamics of the community and in the writing process. Once a week in a class that meets four days per week, or once every two weeks in a class that meets three days per week, or one hour every two weeks in a class that meets twice weekly for periods of more than 50 minutes, students move their writing skills, interests, and questions out into the community in which they live.

I do set out weekly writing goals, sometimes in the form of requirements, sometimes as invitations to be considered. For example, I might require two interviews and a review of literature published about/by the community group being studied; I might also require that this week's write-up be composed of only simple sentences or as one long sentence; and sometimes I require students to swap places for a week and write about their perceptions of a place/group they'd previously experienced only in a classmate's writing. In the middle of this project, I require students to draft an essay, the shape of which we discuss in conferences. Some time past midterm, each student will turn from weekly site observations to weekly peer-writing and editing groups. At the end of the project, students turn in a polished essay – the purpose, audience, organization, and rhetorical character of the paper developed via peer group discussions and student-teacher conferences. While students are out for “On Wednesdays” assignments, I'm in my office – just a phone call away for a student who wants to try out an interview question, and an open door for students who want to stop by to brainstorm ideas.

“On Wednesdays” is the most basic of three such assignment series I've developed over the past three years; spread over an entire term in an introduc-

tory writing class, the project challenges students to sharpen observation skills, to develop appropriate questions for interviews with a variety of persons, to consider the character both of the place being observed and of the audience the writers address, and to assess the contributions of this place to the community in which it is located. For advanced composition courses I will require more – research, interviews, analysis – and I require that the piece be written for a non-classroom audience.

I include here the first memo students receive for this assignment:

#### On Wednesdays

On Wednesdays we won't meet as a class; rather, each of you will use this hour of time in pursuit of ideas for an essay about place. More on the essay itself as we draw closer to the midterm days. For now, I want to set out some basic guidelines for the use of this found hour:

Select a specific place, a kind of place, a well-known place, a place with sights, sounds, people, and atmosphere that are of interest to you—perhaps a place which you know only second or third hand. Carefully consider your options and interests, for you'll be spending one hour a week here until at least the midterm – you'll need to sustain an interest in the place and in the group of people you find at this place.

Go to this place for one hour each week – it might be the same time from week to week, or you may want to vary the times you observe/participate in this place. I'll offer you some ideas for focusing weekly writing assignments. I'll set up times for you to meet with a peer group and in conference with me; during these meetings we'll focus on developing an essay from these weekly writings.

From week to week, while you are at this place you will sometimes sit back and observe, only to write after you have moved away from the subject of your writing; you will sometimes write while you overhear, move about to observe, and enjoin others in conversation. During some weeks of your writing

process, I'll give you specific writing tasks or prompts; most often I'll suggest things that you may consider, or not. Along the way I will often ask you to consider whether you are focusing on the place, on the people you find there, on the work being done at this place, or on some combination of these things.

Every Thursday you will bring an exploratory piece of writing to class; sometimes we'll draw the material into class activities, and sometimes we'll hold the piece of writing until the next week. Still and always the weekly freewriting about place will be due in class on Thursday.

This week, for the first assignment, I want you to shop around for a place to write while you are at the places you're considering as your site for this assignment. Write what enters your mind, what will come from your pen(cil). Look, observe, overhear, and in between, write. Consider what interests, questions, information, description, analysis you could pursue in a paper about this place and the people you find there. Re-read your freewriting and come to class prepared to discuss/select the place you will observe for this assignment and the reasons you've selected this (type of) place, as well as additional ideas and observations that you might come back to in future writings.

Some ideas: you might select a kind of place – say the several family-owned drug stores in town – and visit several of them in order to write about ambiance and characters you find there. Or perhaps you'll observe the daily cycle of a local mall, mega-mall, antique mall or a coffee hang out – and the people who use or inhabit these places. Maybe you notice that the public library is a lively place that's always looking for volunteers – and you've wanted to be one of those volunteers; become one and write about that.

Maybe you want to know more about a particular public service agency, and you find out on a first visit that this agency will welcome your attentions. How about the local HIV/AIDS coalition, meals on wheels, emergency food and housing services, a free medical clinic, the parent-training program, or a women's center. Please enter such places respectfully and honestly: tell people you intend to write about the place for our class and that I will be happy to work

with them and with you to set out boundaries for this project. Again, if you have been considering becoming a volunteer, that may shape your project and weekly writings.

You might venture to a specific public place and observe it at several times of the day or night: hear conversations, watch for regular customers and visitors, and change your point of observation —from inside to outside, from a remote table to a front window. The possibilities are countless.

Off limits places include your personal living space, dorm cafeterias, your sport team or Greek house, daily family dwellings and places that offer primarily confidential services unless they also engage in public outreach/education and you secure permissions that are appended to your first or second entry. While there is much to be seen in the places we know well, or that seem particularly hidden from us, that is a task for a later writing.