The Field Trip Within

Good writing is grounded in detail. This idea is central to Peter Trenouth's article in which he describes the process he uses to help his student-writers develop a "writer's eye." Under Trenouth's direction, the students learn to take in more of what they see, finding novelty even in the familiar. Their new perspective, reflected in their writing, moves these students a huge step toward better writing.

Peter Trenouth

Ralph Fletcher writes about "a kind of food chain," a hierarchy of thought ranging from the lofty and abstract down to the ordinary and concrete. "Writing," he asserts, "needs to be grounded in plenty of physical details. Without them the whole food chain falls apart" (Fletcher 1992, 45). Central to Fletcher's theory is a concept all teachers of writing and their students need to grasp: good writing embraces interpretations and conclusions together with the specifics from which they evolve—what Ann E. Berthoff in her books calls "the generalities and the particulars." Although the proportions between the two can vary, no matter the subject matter or genre, in composing, the little stuff must get first attention.

With "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," we are touched when Robert Frost's speaker senses he is in "the darkest evening of the year" and decides sleep should only come after his "miles to go," but without the "woods," "snow," "frozen lake," "little horse," "harness bells," "easy wind and downy flake," the poem would not have its loveliness and depth. Attentive readers devour a great work's entire chain, sometimes unconscious of the interdependence that gives it wholeness. Writers, however, are not mere table setters. Instead, they must become forces of nature who discover various elements and forge them into something unified and essential, maybe even mystical and wise, often unsure at the outset of the generalities and purpose their composing will create. Like the speaker in Frost's poem, writers are first drawn to the details and the arresting implications they suggest.

To achieve this level of detail in their work, writers must first employ what Scott Peterson calls "the writer's eye," which is the same close, patient examination all careful artists employ. A teacher and writer with his notebook always handy, Peterson jots away, focusing his lens: "When I view things through the eyes of a photographer, I am more aware of the world around me" (Peterson 2000, 27). Often in a Sherlock Holmes mystery, a bumbler from the local police force gives the crime scene a cursory look and dashes off to catch the wrong man, while Holmes, down on all fours with magnifying glass in hand, examines what no one else stops to see. The observant detective discovers novelty in the familiar. With so much emphasis on accountability in education these days, we could easily push our students into formulaic practices that reduce observation to quick glances neatly arranged, as though this were good writing. It is not. Before students can syn-
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findings to the class. Although two of the criteria—action verbs and figures of speech—were objective, two others called for subjective assessments. After all, just what is a “vivid expression” or “excellent use of vocabulary”? Is, for example, “the taste of light” a fascinating, sensuous image or is it silly? When students respond to questions like this, they tend either to limit their imaginations or to liberate words and experience from conventional situations. Fortunately, most would rather do the latter and thereby invite themselves to merge their recordings of whatever is out there with frank, personal responses. That is how perception works. A good model, especially one written in a voice like their own, can encourage students to combine some risk taking and fun with their close observations. Eventually, the dynamic will produce a conclusion, if only implied, about something not previously or recently considered. For Casey Braun, it is: “I realized once again the power of light to change everything.”

As architectural splendors, school buildings almost always fail, often looking like factories—a telltale sign of what some people think schools should be. Inside, despite the steady progression of rigid, pale rectangles, one can also find myriad softer shapes, brighter colors, and evidence of spontaneous energy. My previous school, a suburban high school, is fifty years old and looks it, but it is still a vibrant place. Last winter, I tried an “in-school field trip” as a way to generate descriptive writing. With the freshmen, my goal was primarily to get each to use the “close, patient observation” that is the writer’s eye.

In earlier classes, they had written sentence- and paragraph-length exercises in descriptive writing and read lengthy samples like “Bright Light.” They had become aware of technique in its most objective sense: action verbs, figures of speech, and images based on adjectives and nouns. But technique can still deliver lifeless prose when tethered to the editing process. Students need more than familiarity with linguistic devices. They need license to use these in their own natural ways whenever they endeavor to translate experience into language. Therefore, the original listing should draw on close observations recorded with immediate, subjective impressions, which almost automatically will beckon action verbs, figures of speech, and workable images for completion. So, with notebooks and pens in hand one January morning, we darted down the back stairway, hurried outside and around to the school’s main entrance, and from there we walked, stopped, and recorded. I told them to delay writing complete sentences, unless impulsively compelled, and to keep looking and writing about anything they saw, heard, touched, or smelled. Give no thought to how “lame” or “fancy” an observation seemed, I told them, and feel free to overrecord. Decisions about what to keep and what to trash would come later.

Once inside the main lobby, the students shook off the winter chill and busily recorded. Patrick’s notes later became sentences describing the field trip’s first stops:

In the lobby there was a warm glass trophy case in which I could see my dulled reflection. I could hear squeaks from people in gym class slipping on the floor. There was a trash barrel in the corner of the room that was half way full. On the ceiling there was a

the size their perceptions or even arrange them, they first must perceive. One way to initiate this habit is through descriptive writing. The subject matter is always nearby. We need only open the classroom door, step outside, and go for a walk.

The walk can provide students with opportunities to observe and record. Such an opportunity, however, will yield little more than a collection of details reorganized into sentences. Preceding the listing must come a sense of what constitutes specific sense stimuli and how those can inspire lively, perceptive writing. In other words, a model is needed. Many anthologies provide such examples; a few include samples written by students. The best samples demonstrate another quality—the author’s willingness to feel as well as think. “Bright Light” by Carey Braun, an eight-paragraph essay about a day at the beach, became an excellent model for my freshman class. Working in cooperative groups, each with a separate paragraph, students were asked to find action verbs, vivid expressions, figures of speech, and excellent uses of vocabulary in a passage like this:

I couldn’t taste the sun, but as I walked back to my blanket, I licked the salt off my lips which had dried quickly in the heat. Salt, I decided, must be the taste of light, at least this morning. The salt on my skin made it feel like stretched leather, tight across my cheekbones and shoulders and stiffening at my joints. I walked across the glinting sand, through midday air heated to luminous, shimmering waves to the outdoor shower. (Braun 1995, 367)

Each group quickly found examples to fit the categories and presented their
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painting of a globe and a sentence that read: “Through these halls walk the greatest people on earth.” As we left the lobby, we passed a crimson colored coke machine and a man with brown eyes, brown hair, a flannel shirt, a beard, a brown leather belt, and jeans. . . . We walked down the main hallway of the building, passing the office, guidance office, library, and a disgusting trash barrel which left an odor chasing us through the hall. There were ancient rusty lockers on both sides of the hall and different shades of dusty green tiles on the floor.

Patrick began with a pile of loose observations, yet most were colored with personal interpretation from the beginning: “warm glass trophy case,” “dulled reflection,” and “dusty green tiles.” His composing process deleted details about some spaces we visited during this stretch. What became important to him were gym noises, athletic trophies, a slogan, and a workman or visitor he had never seen before. Because he owned these decisions, his paper gained a genuine tone. He can be a playful writer who likes “crimson” (and alliteration) and deems fifty-year-old lockers “ancient,” yet his voice remained authentic. His writer’s eye joined with his artist’s sensibilities to personify an unpleasant odor. An adult observer might conclude Patrick tends towards hyperbole (What high school freshman does not?); nevertheless, he stayed within bounds and blended accuracy with personal authenticity and style very well. The editing process alone did not impose these qualities. Patrick began developing them at the outset, having given himself permission to “taste the light” of his observations. Since our field trip took in nearly the entire campus, his “topic” became only those observations that most provoked his sensibilities. The other students made similar choices. Since there wasn’t an assigned topic, each case depended on a defined mode of discourse, an ordinary subject matter, and a huge resource of specific details requiring selected observation and response. Later would come further selection, development, and revision.

At one point, we exited the building again, the morning sun now warm enough to keep us outdoors for a while. A circular driveway around a patch of lawn affected Jenna’s imagination in a way that prompted her to be especially vivid:

As I take a step outside, the glaring sun shines in my eyes as if it was trying to blind me. Our bodies and many other objects make imprinting shadows on the rough pavement. The road has a curving look with a center of grace in the middle. The grass . . . is wilting to a shade of brown in the cold, misty air.

The sunshine was quite bright, making shadows sharp and dark, forceful enough to justify “imprinting,” although such conditions meant the day had ceased to be “misty,” reminding me how vulnerable to inaccuracies writers become when translating experience into language. Nevertheless, her overall sense of contrast drove Jenna’s attempts to capture what she saw and what she felt, both physically and emotionally. Her original list contained her key nouns, verbs, and participles and her touching image, “a center of grace.”

For Patrick and Jenna, writing about something else became, in part, self-defining because there truly was something to write about. Their depth of thought emerged from the abundance of observations and its metamorphosis into words. Whatever physics and chemistry go into the making of a photograph, a similarly complex human dynamic needed to be involved with these students. Without the dualism of objective and personal responses, the observations would have been less intense and the compositions less worthwhile. Essential to the process are three criteria: plentiful available details, the students’ familiarity with successful technique, and the students’ willingness to chance self-revelation and verbal extravagance. These young writers implied more than stated their conclusions about what they saw, but, given the minimum length of their assignment—three well-developed paragraphs—they discovered and expressed much more than mere listing and sentence-combining would have accomplished.

About two months later, my senior advanced placement students were reading essays by E. B. White, Joan Didion, and others. With such works, we saw quite clearly how writers can take their close observations and use them to form grand concepts loaded with emotional power. These models demonstrated Fletcher’s food chain with lively style. Rather than have my seniors write analyses of these works, the usual kind of paper in this course, I opted for a version of the assignment the freshmen completed. With both groups, I wanted students to observe physical details with the writer’s eye, record as much as they could, and compose an essay about what they encountered, maintaining an authentic voice. The seniors could go to another level of thought, as their models did, and develop explicit interpretations. In other
words, the seniors would demonstrate their understanding of essay writing through imitation, but this would be a replication of a presumed process rather than of a precise form. In a very real sense, this became an assessment of all their literary studies this past year and previously, because literary studies devoid of personal responses do a grave disservice and leave students no better off than Clevinger in Catch-22: “He knew everything about literature except how to enjoy it” (Heller 1994, 78). The issue became whether they could approach the eloquence and insights the assigned essays in their anthology had achieved. In “Ring of Time,” for example, White describes a teenage girl who is rehearsing her circus acrobatics on a horse without the gaudy glare of the performance setting.

Under the bright lights of the finished show, a performer need only reflect the electric candle power that is directed upon him; but in the dark and dirty old training rings and in the makeshift cages, whatever light is generated, whatever excitement, whatever beauty, must come from original sources—from internal fires of professional hunger and delight, from the exuberance and gravity of youth. (White 1986, 1416)

What to some observers might have seemed bland compared to the lavishness we expect to find at a circus, White saw the profound in a “dark and dirty” barn. It is this openness to such possibilities that we want students to practice. A similar shift from the particulars to a generality happens in Didion’s “Los Angeles Notebook” when she describes the hot, dry Santa Ana winds of Southern California and their effects on the atmosphere and people there.

I have never heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too. We know it because we feel it. The baby frets. The maid sulks. I rekindle a waning argument with the electric company, then cut my losses and lie down, given over to whatever it is in the air. To live with the Santa Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of humanity. (Didion 1986, 1433)

These writers exhibit how observed details generate personal responses leading to a literary form in which the author’s voice should be prominent. As with the freshmen, I urged the seniors to be “personal and daring” with their first impressions. It is difficult to imagine White and Didion, both highly disciplined writers, being self-censuring in their notetaking; rather we sense how the details and the writers’ reactions formed the topics instead of the other way around. Because the assignment for the seniors required lengthier and more mature insights, they had to categorize their lists into whatever clusters they deemed appropriate as a way of forming associations leading to complex thought.

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but this transformation came only after the initial listing was complete, and it needed no precise form. Almost any variety of relisting or webbing would do. The key was first to generate a mess of detailed observations, the bigger the better. Judgments about similarities and differences among the items would follow when the writer developed the clusters, one of which might well be a trash bin for all the stuff deemed weak or irrelevant.

Such prewriting begins the evolution toward sentences and paragraphs, especially when the writer notes the reasons for these new associations. As the seniors decided the hows and whys that transform lists into cohesive concepts, they somewhat reversed the formalist approach we employed when analyzing prose passages and poems. Instead of discerning, they were forging the parts that make up a whole, this time encouraged to use personal more than academic perceptions. Notice, for example, how Julie observed much about the building’s exterior as we headed toward the main entrance, and how what she saw could yield judgments.

Bits of trash and bags adorning the parking lot, having drifted out of the nearby dumpster, circulate in small tight circles as the current of the wind takes them in several directions, tugging and pulling at them all at once without ever really getting them anywhere. The bags and wrappers, though never still for more than a moment, do not travel more than a few feet from their original location, and no one pays much attention to them or cares enough to pick them up.

Here we see a more mature writer at work, and her point about the lack of attention became a central thesis in her essay: indifference breeds neglect, and evidence of disrepair generates disrespect, a condition she found difficult because, in many other ways, the school has functioned very well.

Ryan noticed how measured time regulates school activity. Places once still became busy at the sound of a bell. As he moved from the observable to the interpretive, his imagination constructed a simile to complete the connection in the same way that Patrick, Jenna, and Julie quite naturally used poetic expressions.

Doors open, lockers slam, and the pattern of chalky white dust on the floor begins taking on a new intricate design. Time seems to have started again in the hall. The school is like a water-smoothed pebble. The students wash over the school after every bell like the tide and give it new shape.

Ryan’s classmate Alexis can spot details and use her gift for language to reproduce them beautifully, though her ruminations about time took a different turn than Ryan’s. Perhaps the “Time Passes” section of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, which we had read the previous term, influenced her, or finding herself three-quarters through her senior year prompted thoughts of life’s progression. Whatever her motivation, the point is that, when we form generalities in particulars, we should draw not only from the subject matter but also from very personal and perhaps unknown wells. Of course, bogus profundity sometimes gets imposed in the transition from fragments to sentences and paragraphs. That is why the personal and objective should be joined from the beginning, and this combination will likely yield thoughtful editing, which should be a process of cutting and tempering prose, not expanding and decorating it. This is when decisions about diction and style come in. No matter the grade level, teacher-made handouts for editing, carefully structured peer editing, teacher corrections and subsequent revisions, and other activities can join the editing procedures we would employ under any circumstances. The best editing retains authenticity. We can see the genuine in Alexis’s responses.

Now the mismatching lockers are blotchy and dented. The walls are dingy yellow and green, and the paint is chipping and peeling away. . . . The floors have unsightly gouges in them, like little craters formed by tiny meteorites. There are cracks running up the wall with gnarled spider-like fingers branching out. The old furnaces are beaten and decrepit yet still manage to wearily crank out heat. The dim fluorescent lights create a buzzing that echoes eerily through the otherwise silent hallways. The speckled white ceiling tiles are sagging with age and yellowing with spreading water stains. Time continues, and the school deteriorates with it. Its fate cannot be avoided. Time will win the battle overall. For time is immortal and tireless, and nothing can outlast time.

Anyone who can so skillfully weave details and conclusions has a potential for great learning. Alexis would inspire any teacher. She demonstrated Berthoff’s central maxim: “We can best help students develop their own powers by assuring that they have occasions to discover that composing is itself a process of discovery and interpretation, of naming and stating,
of seeing relationships and making meanings" (Berthoff 1981, 20).

All the seniors submitted final papers at least a thousand words long. They examined other details within the school. The passages cited here capture the controlling idea of the compositions. Each paper sometimes veered from an exact focus on the details and offered reflections about the issues the students' descriptions had revealed, yet the best compositions avoided lengthy, vague contemplations because the broad concepts, through process, evolved and remained inseparable from the specific.

In all our endeavors to make students better writers, we must remember that the purpose of education is engagement with, not exposure to, life. Writing often combines spontaneity with patience as it works toward something as wonderful and comprehensive as a literary food chain. The emotional connection with the precisely observed makes descriptive writing forceful. "Writing is about learning to pay attention," writes Anne Lamott, "and to communicate what is going on" (Lamott 1995, 97). Woven between the paying attention and the communicating are the writer's words, knowledge, and desires — the emanation of self when language and stimuli collide. Even an old building worn by age and use can be the arena for such essential activities. Another senior, Callie, discovered this during her in-school field trip.

... we cannot judge the quality of the school by the warped and stained floors or the chipping paint, because life can be hard on us in the same way. Our experiences with others, with business, with careers, with co-workers will leave stains on us, will do a little chipping of our paint as well. Life is education.

Callie demonstrates how the writer's eye can perceive beyond the stars and into the soul. Whether the resulting composition occupies many pages or just enough space to answer a mandated assessment question, the composing process must begin with the little things. Within them, and within our students, waits the profound.

References


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