Location, Location, Location: A Way into Descriptive Writing

by

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It’s a fall day and dark storm clouds are blowing over our school. The wind picks up dramatically and student eyes (reading up until this time) drift toward the windows. “Let’s go to locations,” I say. Students jump up, grab their writing notebooks, and run out the door, scattering in all directions. I had hoped we could find five minutes to write before the storm actually hit, some quiet time for new understanding: something about motion or light or shading or sound, maybe a memory recalled or perhaps an observation of how our earthly places respond to the mystery of wind. Or most importantly, how a particular part of the world had become a different place from the last time students had written about it, either because they had changed or because the place had changed. But the storm hit earlier than expected, and very quickly a group of wet, laughing eighth-graders run back into the classroom — all except Simon, who had calmly taken a folding chair to his location and now doesn’t want to budge. When I call to him and tell him to come in, he does, slowly wiping steam from his glasses. He is smiling, happy that he has extended himself, but a little worried that his writing has been washed away. And then almost every hand shoots up. They all want to read aloud even though most of their writing had ended abruptly.

What were we doing? This was one scene from a yearlong writing experiment in what I call “location writing.” The goal of “location writing” is to sharpen observation skills: to help students learn that what is “out there” is partly “us” and partly “it,” and we must be careful to look closely if we are going to “see” it; to know the importance of the small detail; to choose
verbs and adjectives for their accuracy and their sensory impact; to move slowly, avoiding quick, subjective judgments about what we see or think.

I have always used paintings, photographs, films and nature to sharpen student thinking, seeing and writing, but last year I tried this new idea. I presented each student with a “location” that would be used for various observing and writing activities throughout the year.

To prepare students for this experience, I needed to push them to believe that they always have more to say than they think they do. I prodded them in this direction, introducing them to the concept of “form” and its subcategories — depth, size, shading, light, color, lines and motion — as these apply to visual arts. These ways of seeing help students come at an observation from many different directions. I contrasted these surface features with “content,” that is, such concepts as ideas, morality, intellect and memory, approaches to observation that get under the surface. We observed and wrote about paintings and photographs with these concepts in mind. I chose to use many visual examples that revealed intricate or unusually small detail. I looked for works which left a mysterious or possibly unexplainable impact. Brueghel and Magritte worked especially well. I used William Carlos Williams’ “Pictures From Brueghel” and other poems as illustrations of a kind of location writing (a poet looking at a painting). I gave a variety of directions to help them shift the focus of their observations: find an important detail that someone else might not see; or establish an emotion for someone in the painting or photograph and then conjecture about how this feeling would affect that person’s perception of other things in the work; or focus on a particular sense, deciding what sounds or smells, for instance, might emanate from this scene.

I was now ready to assign the fifteen sites. Now I admit that when it comes to writing locations, my school is not typical. This K-8 private school enjoys a semi-rural setting. An urban teacher adapting these ideas would need to choose among less bucolic, if no less interesting locations. Further, fifteen locations were possible because I meet an average of fifteen students per section. So readers will need to consider what I describe here not as a blueprint but as a template in need of some creative variations.

I planned that one student in each of my four sections would have one location; thus four students who were not working together could ostensibly be doing the “same” work and — at intervals — we could compare how they had “seen” the same thing. As it turned out, some classes had more or fewer than fifteen, so I sometimes needed to omit a location or double up the participants.

What can students learn from this activity? It’s not just that we all see things in different ways; it’s really that we all choose a moment of time or an angle of perception that influences everything that follows. That’s the force that allows infinite possibilities in writing.

Here are the locations as I defined them: the lock on the lower field; lower school, grassy area; red barn; picnic bench by middle school sandbox; bench behind the library; art shrine; bench around the tree in the art quad; step up area; downhill slope below room 22; between creek and room 28; doorway of room 33; new building; sandbox behind Mr. Densmore’s room; rocks in front of the shed; the creek, halfway to the dam. I put these titles on strips of paper and placed them in a hat. Every member of each class drew randomly, and then I had them record their locations on the inside covers of their writing notebooks.

When I first assigned location writing, some students felt uneasy about it. Of course, they enjoyed the idea of leaving class and sitting outside. But, while students were intrigued by the novelty of this plan, they had to adjust to the responsibility of working as “real” writers, making choices without my constant direction. They asked the same question that might occur to any reasonable person: “Won’t observing and writing about the same location every couple of weeks get boring?” To convince them that this need not be the case, I regularly tried to give them a starting place for their observations: a small detail at their location or a change in the season or weather or physical environment. Sometimes I asked them to
look for changes in their own way of seeing the same thing or changes in their ability to write about what they saw.

At first some students gave me the classic line, "I'm done, what do I do now?" I would always reply, "You can't be done. There is more to see." Or, "Just start over. Try it another way. You're just going to write for the next 30 minutes. If you get stuck, that's O.K. But you're always trying out new ways. Move around. I mean physically. Actually move away from your location. Or turn 180 degrees. Or do the same things you did when you wrote about paintings. Just start with one detail and see where it goes."

As the year went on, they adjusted to the idea, and I began to suggest ways of writing that paralleled work we were doing in class. I suggested they concentrate on active verbs, or begin with a subordinating conjunction and see where it leads, or write about the sounds, or look at an old writing and compare it to the present scene.

As we wrote my sense of what the activity should be became clearer. I realized students should read aloud as much as possible so that they could learn from each other and gain confidence in their work. On a few occasions when I planned to have students write and not read aloud, their vocal protests convinced me to always leave time for reading. I found that I should visit with each student during the process, maybe to keep them on task, but mostly to suggest, advise, encourage and keep them aware of time. I walked constantly during these sessions. I always saw everyone once, and generally saw most people twice during a class period. I made some lucky guesses about what might be some good spots and we had delightful surprises in almost every location.

"The lock on the lower field," a huge sculpture of a typical padlock with a keyhole facing San Quentin, suddenly disappeared during the last month of school. The "new building" was being finished as we began our writing and the spirit of its place developed as the year went on. Students with creek locations could actually sit in the creek in September, October, May and June, but observed raging water much of the rest of the year during California's fall and winter months.

Students really did learn to slow down. They began to appreciate the varied ways of seeing the uneventful and commonplace. As early as September, and before they had the skill with sentences they would develop later on, students were making careful and fresh observations. Of the "art shrine" (a fancifully-designed kiosk near the art buildings), Justine wrote:

The Art shrine is very bright and all the colors go together. Shapes are cut out of the sides. There is room inside for three or four people. On the front are two French doors. The top is pointed and has two wide shingles on it. Red slabs of wood extend from the roof. The shapes cut out of the side, are abstract. Blue fringe surrounds them.

In another class on the same day, Lorna saw a rather different art shrine:

On the back there is a long smear of yellow, green and blue paint. In the top left hand corner there's a cut out
circle. The colors make it look like an eclipse of the sun. The trees and bushes blow in the wind. Blossoms are falling around to the ground from the tree above, over the shingled roof of the Art shrine.

I see a thin layer of dust all over the windows on the door of the shrine. It’s smeared by the fingerprints of kids.

I made sure that all the “art shrine” writers read each other’s sharp and complementary work on that day.

Lauren wrote:

I can hear James Nagle’s voice talking about the number 122. I can hear the people on the upper field playing soccer. It is dirty and dusty around here. I am sitting at the beginning of the concrete part of the creek. I don’t like my spot much. I am sitting under a tree in the line of room 33. The creek is dry right now. . Many people walk past me and can’t see me. I am behind a fence sort of hidden. On top of Mr. Denimore’s room there is a gadget with 3 sticks and at the end of 3 sticks are three balls. I think this is very odd. I just moved inside. I am looking at the pictures. I like the one with the three old ladies by the flowers and the one of the lady floating.

What can students learn from this activity? It’s not just that we all see things in different ways; it’s really that we all choose a moment of time or an angle of perception that influences everything that follows. That’s the force that allows infinite possibilities in writing. On a particular day, “The creek, halfway to the dam” was one experience to Danielle:

I’m sitting on a tree branch that crosses over the water. Right now the creek is dry.

Another to Andrew:

It is a dismal Thursday morning with fog covering the sky.

and yet another to Rory:

There is a big leafy tree with lots of ants on it.

As the year went on, students learned to “use” their locations. At “lower school, grassy area,” Talia concentrated on a single tree. At “between creek and room 28,” Simon kept moving up a hill to get different angles on the same scene. He saw connections. He began to reflect on the sometimes uneasy relationship between humanity and nature.
Here two worlds meet: the world of cement and noise with the world of grass and tranquility. A bird calls, then stops, harshly interrupted by the laughter of students. An ant crawls across my page searching, probing, judging. A dry cement creek bed is silently defied by sticks, rocks, dry grass and the occasional green plant sprouting out of the cracks. … Some of the other effects of humanity can be seen, a piece of cardboard, a plastic wrapper. Even my sitting here will someday have an effect on the erosion and life on the hill.

In May, as part of a concluding response, I asked for a detailed color drawing. The assignment would also include a written observation, one that could be selected from earlier work. Like the writing the visual work could be close and detailed, focused on specifics, distant, abstract or fanciful.

Rebecca looked through “the lock on the lower field” and drew San Quentin in the distance. Ryan sat with his back to the lock, blurred the image of San Francisco Bay and drew small details of the field in the opposite direction. He never drew the lock. Evan sort of suspended himself in the air over the right shoulder of the lock, so close that the image almost escaped me when I first looked at it. I saw the surprise, the thinking angle of his image, and sensed that this is the scene he would like to have written, even though at this point his writing couldn’t match his seeing. Reflecting on Evan’s work I reminded myself once more about the necessity of honoring differences. Evan is a smart and observant young man who did not yet have the words and sentence structures to say what he was seeing. But he did see it.

Other student art revealed unique perceptions. Jarreau’s “red barn” was much different than the one portrayed by others who took in the same scene. His was an absolutely realistic portrayal of the barn, with careful attention to detail, but above the barn he has rendered a fantastic image with tree branches going through it. The effect was to juxtapose the ordinary and the surreal, much like Margritte.

At “the rocks in front of the shed,” Andrew P. looked across the field and accurately drew a detailed sculpture, an abstract obelisk placed flatly against a generalized blue sky, brown hills and green grass. Alison viewed an entire playing field with soccer goals, school buildings, weeds, rocks and staircases. She left out the sculpture entirely. Kristen looked straight down and drew a large, inspired thistle.

Some time after the last location writing, I asked students what they had gained from the experience. They said that being alone on location helped them think of themselves as writers, finding ways to get started, learning from the silences. There was no more “writer’s block.” They had learned to follow small threads of thought.

The Doorway of Room 33: Lauren’s View

There were some complaints. Some believed we should have changed locations halfway through the year. Others thought some locations were too close together and that sometimes distracted. They didn’t want two people in the same place at the same time. Next year, I will make changes to remedy these problems.

In retrospect I find that perhaps the most memorable aspect of location writing was the informal mood that is normally not part of school. There was an easiness, a comfortable pattern that we all seemed to enjoy. I loved chatting with my students. I loved walking the campus and giving a verbal nudge one way or another, or helping someone see some “hidden” details.

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This informal atmosphere contributed to liberating perceptions. By the end of the year the students assigned to “doorway, room 33” (our classroom), who had once felt a bit cheated, now allowed their perceptions to roam free. Liz looked up at the shrubs on the hillside, Brad looked into the room and drew geometric patterns of desks, walls, and file cabinets. Noah looked the opposite direction and made our room black and white, but used bright color for the burst of nature out the doorway. Lauren, who earlier had felt particularly chained in by the location, zoomed toward the large, venerable, blooming Ceanothus plant. Her drawing of the “doorway” was nothing but bright, purple blotches of Ceanothus flowers. It was lovely.

Like my students, I too brought a perspective to my seeing. I remember a sunny day last year. The class was outside and Simon was reading about his location. My attention was on a hummingbird hovering above as Simon angled through the English language. Other students also noticed the hummingbird, but Simon was so intent on his words he did not see it. It was the only thing he did not see.

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