

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SCHOOL
ANTH480|SOC1480
IN-CLASS WRITING EXERCISE
PLACE-WRITING 2

In everyday writing, we tend to name places before we describe them. We write “the hospital waiting room” or “the corner store” and then fill in details. The name does work for us: it activates a stock image in the reader’s mind, and we fill around it. The problem is that the stock image substitutes for the actual place. The reader never has to arrive; they just retrieve a familiar picture.

Ethnographic place-writing works against this substitution. Its goal is to render the specific, felt experience of inhabiting a particular place (what it looks and sounds and smells like; how it organizes bodies and movement; what it makes possible and what it forecloses). This requires building the place for the reader through detail rather than handing them a label and letting them fill it in themselves.

KEY CONCEPT | PLACE EMERGES FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Yi-Fu Tuan argues that place is not a location on a map but space made meaningful through lived experience. A hospital corridor is a spatial coordinate; the specific spot outside a consultation room where a family waits together every Tuesday is a place. This means that writing place well means writing the experience of being there, not its address, its name, or its category.

Writing without naming also forces a discipline that is useful beyond this exercise: it requires you to show rather than gesture. You cannot write “the usual chaos of Main Mall on Imagine Day” and move on. You have to render the chaos specifically enough that the reader feels it. This is the work ethnographic writing always demands, and withholding the name is a way of making that demand unavoidable.

Finally, place implies a social world. The arrangement of chairs in a room (*think the two different arrangements on Monday and yesterday at the Learning Exchange*), the direction a counter faces, the presence or absence of a waiting area, the quality of the light... all of these encode decisions about who this space is for and how bodies are expected to move through it. Strong place-writing makes that social world legible without stating it directly.

WHAT TO WORK WITH

AVOID

- ✗ Opening with a spatial overview (“The room was large...”)
- ✗ Listing features without inhabiting them
- ✗ Naming adjacent things that identify the place too easily
- ✗ Telling the reader how to feel (“the oppressive atmosphere...”)
- ✗ Explaining the social world instead of rendering it

WORK TOWARD

- ✓ Movement through the place rather than description of it
- ✓ Sensory detail that carries social meaning
- ✓ Objects that tell you who uses this space and how
- ✓ What bodies are doing and what they are prevented from doing
- ✓ The unspoken rules the place enforces

THE TASK

Choose a place you know well (somewhere you have spent enough time to know how it works, not just what it looks like). Write a scene that makes the reader feel they are inside this place without ever naming it. Let the place emerge through movement, interaction, material detail, and sensory texture. As you write, hold two questions alongside each other: what does this place look like, and what does it feel like to inhabit it—that is, what it enables, what it prevents, and what it expects of the bodies that pass through it. Do not name the place. Make the reader arrive through detail.

Target: ~150 words | Stay at ground level; no overview shots

REFLECTION

After you finish your scene, take five minutes to respond in writing to the questions below. You are stepping back to read your own writing analytically. You do not need to write full paragraphs; notes are fine.

01

What does the place enable, and what does it prevent? Is this stated, or does it arrive through detail?

02

What history produced this particular arrangement of the space? Does your writing make any of that visible, even indirectly?

Feeling stuck? Here is a model.

The machines run in cycles you learn to stop hearing. The chairs are plastic, bolted together in rows of three, and most people sit with a gap between them even when the place is full. Heat comes from everywhere at once: the dryers along the back wall, the bright lights on the ceiling, and the glass door that traps the afternoon inside. Someone has left a magazine on the windowsill; it has been there long enough to curl at the edges. A woman folds a sheet by herself, walking it out to arm's length and then walking it back, the way you do when there is no one to hold the other end.