

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SCHOOL
ANTH480|SOC1480
IN-CLASS WRITING EXERCISE
PLACE-WRITING 4

The exercises so far have asked you to write place from the inside: staying at ground level, moving through the scene, withholding the name, letting history surface through texture. In each case, the implied reader has been an anonymous audience, someone who arrives at the place through your prose. The postcard changes this. It addresses a specific person directly. It opens with a declaration of place and time. It is brief by necessity, written under constraint, with full awareness that the reader is not there. And crucially, it carries a visual on the other side, an image that will be read alongside the words, not after them.

Margaret Mead observed that writing correspondence and letters from the field to friends and mentors demands a step of translation important to ethnography: it requires you to distil and convey a new or unfamiliar experience for a familiar audience. The postcard concentrates that demand into a very small space. What you choose to include, and how you say it to a specific person, reveals as much about your positionality as any fieldnote.

KEY CONCEPT | THE POSTCARD'S PARADOX

Jacques Derrida wrote about the postcard as a paradoxical form: it is personal, addressed to a specific individual, yet it travels through many hands and is open for anyone to read. It is intimate and exposed simultaneously. Writing to one person, you write in public; writing briefly, you leave more unsaid than said. Postcards (unlike sealed letters) make no pretence of privacy. The message is always already readable by others. This exposure is not a problem to be managed but a condition of the form itself, one that shapes what you write and how.

The second-person address also changes the compositional demands of place-writing. Instead of rendering a scene for an imagined general reader, you are writing to someone whom you know and perhaps knows you, which means you can assume some context, take shortcuts, use shorthand. But you also have to translate the field. The person you're writing to is not there; they don't have your eyes or your body. You still have to make the place arrive.

This tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity is what makes postcards a particularly useful ethnographic form. The brevity also forces you to choose. What you include will stand in for everything you leave out. The visual, if you add one, will sit beside the words and change what they mean, creating what Roland Barthes called a "third meaning": something that emerges from the interplay of text and image that neither alone would produce.

AS YOU WRITE

SET ASIDE

- ✗ Writing for everyone
- ✗ Describing the place in full

HOLD ONTO

- ✓ Writing to one specific person
- ✓ Choosing the one detail that does the most work

- ✗ Explaining what the place means
- ✗ A neutral or objective tone
- ✗ A complete account

- ✓ Letting the place arrive through what you show
- ✓ That you know the reader and vice versa
- ✓ The tension between what fits and what doesn't

THE TASK

Choose a place from your fieldwork: somewhere you have spent time, somewhere that has given you something to think with. It can be a site you have already written about in a previous exercise, in the draft of your first assignment, or somewhere new. Now choose a specific person to address: someone real, someone who matters to you, or someone who has never been to this place. Write a postcard to them about this place. Open with where you are (a declaration of place and time, however brief). Let the place arrive through one or two specific, concrete details (something seen, heard, or felt). Use what you have practised: stay at ground level, show rather than tell, let the detail carry more than its literal weight. Write in the second person, directly to your reader. Do not explain the place as if giving a report. Write as if you need them to be able to picture it. You will work on the written text in class today. You will transfer it to an actual postcard and submit it either today (if you end up having the time) or by our class next Monday. Drawing or adding a visual element to the front of the card (even if it's a basic diagram) is optional but encouraged. If you do, consider how the image changes what the words mean.

Target: ~60 words | Stay at ground level; no overview shots | Address a specific, real person`

REFELCTION

After you finish your postcard text, take five minutes to respond to the questions below. Notes are fine.

01

What did you have to leave out that you wanted to include? What does the omission do? Does it close something off, or does it leave something open for the reader?

02

How did addressing a specific person change the way you wrote about the place? What did you assume they already knew? What did you feel you had to translate?

03

If you added a visual (or imagined one): what does it do that the words alone don't? What would shift in the reader's interpretation if the image were different?

04

Derrida notes that once a postcard is sent, its meaning is no longer under the author's control. Does that feel true of what you wrote? What might a stranger, reading over the recipient's shoulder, make of it?

Feeling stuck? Here are some examples to explore and get inspired by:

<https://blogs.ubc.ca/multimodaethnography/2025/01/01/chapter-6-ethnographic-letters-and-postcards/>