

Writing and the Environment
Essay #1
(First version due Thursday, February 17th)

Your first essay should take the form of a personal narrative in which an encounter with the natural world plays a prominent role. A few of you may decide that you want to start fresh because you feel that you have already reached the limits of the material contained in the preceding exercises, but in most cases, the central elements of this essay will be those that emerged in your second exercise. Your new task will be to integrate these elements into a carefully composed whole, with an introduction, a conclusion, and a coherent narrative strategy. The introduction should lead us into your narrative and your conclusion should bring it to a satisfying close, but at no point should you propose some pat lesson that might reduce your engaging narrative to a moral fable.

Both David Quammen and Alice Walker use their narratives to explore particularly disturbing questions, but both avoid articulating simple answers to their original questions. At the same time, these writers clearly hope to alter the way their readers see the world they inhabit. You, too, can stop short of supplying answers; you need not aim for some grand insight. In this essay, as in the second exercise, “you can offer your readers something new and distinctive if you investigate the subtle shifts in your own perceptions.”

A successful essay cannot, however, simply record the subtle shifts in perception. An essay is not a platter of mental food to be handed over to the reader. You need to take an active role in reflecting upon your experience. Taken literally, the term “personal narrative” can be misleading. The essay should not sound like an overgrown journal entry. The material that you draw upon can grow and change shape as you craft your essay. You can and should develop the most revealing details and omit those that are distracting or unproductive. Make sure that you have read Carolyn Ross’s discussion of personal narratives in Writing Nature and thought about its implications for your particular subject.

The first version of this essay should be at least 1000 words long. The revised essay (due Tuesday, March 1st) should be at least 1200 words long. Make the first version as complete and polished as possible. It should not be a rough draft. Proofread and edit your essay; then, make five copies to bring to class on Thursday, February 17th. You should also bring five copies of a letter addressed to your readers commenting on the state of your essay. Let your readers know something about your plans for revision. Point your readers to the issues that concern you.