

PRW.285 Nature Writing
Guidelines for Final Project (College Course)
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Complete a three-part project on the theme of change, focusing on one particular place (The Frost Place in Franconia NH) and a writer associated with that place (Robert Frost).

Throughout the semester: Keep a handwritten nature journal of observations, reflections, and sketches/ photographs. Visit the Frost Place at least six times during the semester, with your journal in hand. Stagger your visits across September, October, and November to see how the same location/environment changes as summer turns to fall. Alternate between early morning and late afternoon. Observe both the natural setting and the people there. Interview several people. Why are they here? How do they react to the setting and its history? How do they react to you, or to the presence of other people?

Mid-semester: complete a short work (a poem, essay, artwork or interdisciplinary) to be presented in class; in this short work, write your response or reaction to one of the poems or letters Frost wrote in Franconia.

Final week: Your final paper will be a 2000-word creative nonfiction essay using Frost as a character and the Frost Place as a setting. The goal is to produce a publishable essay in the genre of nature writing, building off of your journal, experiences, and research.

More questions to contemplate as you begin (adapt one or more to fit your theme):

How does the landscape change over time, both short-term (morning vs evening, season to season) and long term. How did it change over the course of Frost's lifetime? Over geologic time? What might this setting be like 30 years from now? (Today the landscape is densely wooded. "When Frost was here there were no trees," says poet Jim Schley. "This was sheep country." Compare old photographs with the landscape today.) Is change good or bad, or neither, or both?

How did this location influence Frost? What changes in Frost's life brought him here? Did his presence change this site and the surrounding community in any lasting way? What would the town of Franconia be like today if Frost had never lived here? How did the surrounding community's perception and treatment of Frost change over time, as his career and reputation changed?

How did visiting this place, while working on this project, change you?

Assignment #1: Keep a nature journal, which may be used for raw observations, sketches, notes, rough drafts, and as a scrapbook. You will "mine" from this journal to complete the other two assignments.

Assignment #2: Choose a short excerpt, letter, or poem by Frost, composed in Franconia between 1915 and 1920. Write (or draw or both) a response or "sequel" to the piece, from your perspective today. Present your work in class. For example, see "On the Porch at the Frost Place, Franconia, N.H." by William Matthews:

So here the great man stood,
fermenting malice and poems
we have to be nearly as fierce
against ourselves as he

not to misread their disguises...

Assignment #3: Write a 2000-word creative nonfiction essay, in first person, using Frost as a character and the Frost Place as setting. Draw on your experiences, observations, and contemplations there. Think of Edward Abbey's "Down the River with Henry Thoreau" as an example. You will be writing your own "Walking in Franconia with Robert Frost" or "On the Front Porch with Robert Frost."

Creative nonfiction begins with a story to tell or a point to make. Also include three or more of these components from our earlier lesson "Ingredients of Nature Writing." You may choose to emphasize only one or two of these ingredients, while using just a dash of the others as a bit of literary spice.

- A. Vivid description** – painting a picture with words. Use all five senses, figurative language (the "flowery Annie Dillard stuff"), onomatopoeia ("tea-cher tea-cher" is the cry of the species of bird described in Frost's "The Oven Bird").
- B. Firsthand experiences** – what did you see or do at the Frost Place? Examples: a funny conversation you overheard, a mishap on the hiking trail, a moose wandering across the yard while tourists gawk. Who did you meet? What did they say?
- C. Anecdotes, secondhand stories** – interesting stories you didn't witness yourself, drawn from interviews, newspaper articles. Stories about Frost or other quirky or eccentric people who visited there (resident poets, sightseers, neighbors, animals). For example, New York City writer Katha Pollitt was the first invited poet-in-residence at the Frost Place in the 1970s. She promptly gave an interview admitting that she didn't like Robert Frost's writing very much.

"Frost is not a poet who appeals enormously to me," she told the Littleton Courier. (What did her hosts think?) She liked the tourists visiting the Frost Place even less, as she listened to them complain about the hiking trail and mosquitoes. She said, "I wonder why they come, but I don't want to talk to them. Would you want to talk to them?"

The quiet countryside and eerie creaks at night disturbed her, too. "The creaks, she confesses, scare her into an inconvenient wakefulness at night. 'It isn't the noise,' she explains, 'It's the scary nature of them, in that you don't know what it is. Trucks and cars in New York are very soothing, sort of a low rush.'" (This anecdote fits the theme of change of location, of lifestyle.)

This step will require some library research and/or interviews of people at the Frost Place.

- D. Natural history** – facts about plants and animals. Frost was a botanist, and his poems also show an amateur interest in astronomy. What science/nature facts did Frost work in to his poems. What additional knowledge can you add? For example, read the opening lines of Frost's "The Star-Splitter."

You know Orion always comes up sideways
Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains

Quoting this, in a scene in which you walk across the lawn at the Frost Place in evening as Orion rises over Mt. Lafayette, provides an opportunity to work some basic astronomy into your narrative. (Connecting to theme: Even the stars change, their patterns drifting in the sky. The North Star will no longer be due north in the sky in 500 years, as our own sun migrates around the edge of the Milky Way. The constellation we see as Orion the hunter will slowly contort and change over time.)

Frost refers to the trilobite in his poem "Trespass," another opportunity to talk

about change (a once-dominant life form, now extinct, existing only in the rocks the tourists walk over) and weave in some natural history facts.

E. Philosophy – What lesson do you want to share with your readers? What questions do you want to raise? Frost does this at the end “The Oven Bird”: “The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing.”

Think of a natural process you might observe at the Frost Place (e.g. migration of birds, transition from tadpoles to frogs) and extend the metaphor to your own experiences (e.g. moving from home to college, graduation as transition)

Resources:

Old newspapers, articles, letters to the editor.

Town Hall archives

Poems and letters of Robert Frost and family. See especially *Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost*, edited by Arnold Grade, State University of New York Press, 1972

Biographies of Robert Frost