

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.007 World Literatures: Travel Writing
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

In this essay, I would like you to choose a single text as your focus (either *Castaways*, the *Journals*, *Interesting Narrative*, or *How I Found Livingstone*). Within that text, choose three passages related through *one* of the categories below.

Artifacts: watch, airgun, picture, thermometer, ship, paper, books, candles, etc.

Transactions: healing, trade, gift-giving, rescue, giving or accepting orders, hiring, ruses and deceptions, conversations, acquisitions, education, etc.

Ceremonies and other [intangible cultural heritage](#): diplomacy, baptism, healing, victory celebrations, cooking and eating food, formal acts of possession or naming, playing music and dancing, worship, laws, manners, skills, language, etc.

Place: city, region, geographical feature, building, etc.

Supernatural phenomena: magic, miracles, spirits, "medicine," prophecy, dreams, acts of Providence, etc.

Animals: as threats, as hunted, as eaten, as used, as observed.

In your essay, tell me what can be understood analytically about the text by considering these passages in sequence. Does this sequence of passages highlight a development in the narrative – for instance, a change in the person telling the story? Or (as an alternative) does considering these passages together suggest possible conclusions we might draw about the narrator or the narrative? I will say more in the next week or so about how to write your introduction and conclusion, but these directions should get you started.

Goals for your writing: clear, specific, and appropriate language. The fanciest word is not always the best or even the correct choice, but any reader appreciates *precision*. If you find a sentence getting long and unwieldy, that often signals a complex point that needs to be broken down into its component parts. If you find yourself getting lost, try stepping back and writing an outline of your material to get a feel for the structure of the argument and whether its parts are in the right place.

Goals for your argument: full attention to details: that includes a thorough explanation of why and how they mean what you think they mean, something that often takes more time (i.e. more sentences) than you might expect. Moving beyond description towards analysis: some description and summary helps the reader put your discussion in context, but your real work is to *explain* the text to an imagined audience already familiar with it. Good assessment of how much weight to give your evidence: sometimes a smaller and more tentative claim will strike the reader as more plausible than a bigger, bolder one. Creative thinking: don't *make things up*, but try to think outside the box in terms of how you put passages together and what perspectives you use to approach them; try to think of the questions you *aren't* asking.

Bear in mind: either this essay or your first essay will serve as the foundation for a further revision. Look for a topic that truly interests you, and which has the potential to be carried over to another text.

An example:

Category: ceremonies and intangible cultural heritage.

Incidents:

1. An animal is killed and eaten by the starving Americans and Shoshone.
2. When asked, the Nez Percé will not sell the expedition horses for food, but give them freely.
3. Back in the United States, the expedition cheers the sight of a cow and are cheered up by purchasing biscuit, chocolate, whiskey, and sugar.

We discussed the first passage in some detail during class on October 2, so I won't repeat in detail the closer analysis that we did together. To sum up, the differences between the way the Americans and the Shoshone consume meat in the second passage are clearly understood by Lewis as indicating that the Shoshone are less civilized, even less human than he and his companions. "They" eat meat raw, ravenously, and including parts considered unclean; "we" (the Americans) process, segment, cook, and share the meat, restraining their appetites until the proper acts have made it suitable as food. For Lewis, this set of "proper acts" appears to define cultural membership, and to signify cultural superiority.

The second passage suggests another difference between what two groups consider to be proper as food. Here, it is the Americans who are willing to eat something that the Indians do not consider appropriate for consumption. We can recall that the Shoshone, who were starving when the expedition encountered them in [date], were starving *despite* having horses to sell to the expedition; evidently they also did not consider horses to be proper food (unlike buffalo, on which the Nez Percé also rely) [dates to be supplied].

The third passage suggests a kind of food that, for Americans, signaled that they were effectively home. Several things are worth noticing here: first, the appearance of an animal domesticated for food; second, the degree of processing characteristic of the various foods they buy; third, the extent to which several of these (chocolate, sugar) were actually exotic goods in terms of their origin, not foods that Americans produced or could produce at home.

This is a first pass through the materials, without the text in front of me, and without a sense of where my argument will end up. I will continue expanding and revising this sample discussion on the course wiki.