

## Lesson Plan – *Twain’s Use of Descriptive Settings*

### Concept: Studying and Writing About Place

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**Rationale:** My idea is to develop in students an awareness of Twain’s sense of place. In both his fiction and nonfiction works, he relies on detailed scene descriptions to develop his plot and characters. I want students to find vivid descriptions in Twain’s writings and create equally vivid ones depicting their own “important” places.

**Suggested Grade Level:** High School

**Time Frame:** One extended lesson—three class periods

**Objectives:** Students will identify and compose strong descriptive, place-centered writing centered.

**State Standards:** R2C, R3B, W1A, W2A, W2B, W2D

**Assessment/Evaluation:**

Looped Freewrite: Students will be scored based on their increased fluency. This score is derived from increased length using three benchmarked scores in September, November, and January. Students earn completion points based on increased word counts from checkpoint to checkpoint.

**Language/Vocabulary:**

Review descriptive writing as a mode of discourse.  
Review the literary term “setting.”  
Review the terms “freewrite” and “read aloud.”

**Integrated Curriculum:**

This topic could easily be tied to the historic period in which Mark Twain lived and wrote.

**Background Information:**

Provide information about Hannibal (fictionalized into St. Petersburg) and life on the river? For this, use photos and online virtual tours, also incorporating available technology.

**Materials:**

This will require the related works listed below.

**Technology Support:**

Mention use of digital camera for students to create virtual tours. Also online access and publishing software.

**Related Twain Quotes/Other Readings:**

*Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain  
*Writing Toward Home* by Georgia Heard  
*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*  
*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain  
*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain

## Lesson Plan Format –

**A. Introduction:** What are three prominent places in your life, whether they be rooms in a childhood home, relatives' homes you visited in childhood, memories of the natural surroundings you visited in childhood, or strong vacation memories from childhood?

### **B. Lesson:**

#### **DAY 1**

Opening Read-Aloud: Read chapter one from Heard's *Writing Toward Home*, a chapter that details the importance of "home" and place as a source of writing ideas.

Opening Looped Freewrite: Ask students to respond to the introductory questions above in a looped freewrite addressing the introductory questions. (10 minutes—10 minutes---15 minutes) (Looped freewrite---students are asked to write without stopping. In this case, several questions might prompt the topic. Key to the activity is that students write without stopping, even if they must ramble or list ideas choppy. Fluency, not accuracy or form, is the goal of this activity.)

Ask students to underline a sentence, paragraph, or page to share. End the opening class period with them sharing something from their writing—students need to read from the page and not summarize or paraphrase.

#### **DAY 2**

Center the second class period around Twain's use of and sense of place (in both nonfiction and fiction, since part of the goal here is to show students how writing from memory can inform both narrative and fictional writing). Read the following excerpts (or ones you choose) categorized by theme:

#### **Water**

From *Life on the Mississippi*, read Chapter 7

From *Tom Sawyer*, first 3 paragraphs of Chapter 15

Many passages would work here from lots of books; I chose these because, in addition to strong description, they also pique interest in students...I am hoping to draw them in as readers and writers. I hope that after hearing Twain excerpts they will want to seek out his works in our library.

#### **Traveling Memories**

From *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Chapter 2, opening 5 paragraphs, and Chapter 3, opening 2 paragraphs (describing the Quarles farm)

From *Huck Finn*, Chapter 32, paragraphs 2-5

Here I chose the Quarles farm (fictionalized into Uncle Silas's) to show that vivid memories can transform into fictionalized settings.

#### **Bedroom**

From *Autobiography*, Chapter 8, paragraph 11 "There was a stairway outside the house..." Read from beginning of chapter.

From *Tom Sawyer*, Chapter 9, paragraph 1

While reading these, be sure to use photos/postcards for doc camera or use virtual tour of river.

Ask that students write for 15-30 minutes about other memories of place...for day 3, ask that they bring a photograph of a place in one of the above categories.

Other useful quotes (concerning Twain's thoughts on memory of place):

"What becomes of the multitudinous photographs which one's mind takes of people? Out of the million which my mental camera must have taken of this first and closest friend, only one clear and strongly defined one of early date remains..."

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts."

### **FURTHER OPTIONS**

As an option for a final project, students can use the information generated through their writing about place/memory to create a virtual tour of their "place." Combine visual and verbal (narrative excerpts) components to create a tour that will draw in the audience.

### **C. Closure:**

Post these descriptive/narrative pieces w/ photographs, including posted links to any virtual tours. Center this quote in the middle of a bulletin board:

"My uncle, John A. Quarles, was also a farmer, and his place was in the country four miles from Florida. I have never consciously used him or his wife in a book but his farm has come very handy to me in literature once or twice. In *Huck Finn* and in *Tom Sawyer*, Detective I moved it down to Arkansas. It was all of six hundred miles but was no trouble; it was not a very large farm--five hundred acres, perhaps—but I could have done it if it had been twice as large."

(This quote should remind students that narrative writing serves many purposes, only one of which is narrative!)

### **Strategies/accommodations to support students with exceptionalities:**

Students can use the multisensory components of the project (photographs, potential technology) to engage in the personal and relevant topics.

**Possible Guest Speakers/Other Resources:** A trip to Hannibal would provide deeper awareness of Twain's settings. Virtual Tours of Hannibal sites described by Twain available at: <http://www.marktwainmuseum.org/content/community-projects/>