



project one/spring 2001
asking the right questions

Overview: This project is designed to generate the questions that will help guide your inquiry for the rest of the semester. Not only will you make decisions about the place you are going to write about for the rest of the semester, but you'll also generate some ideas and some leads to follow about the issues you'll investigate in that location, the kinds of details and information you'll use in that investigation, the resources where that information could be found, and the directions your work could take in future projects. Perhaps most importantly, however, I am asking you to think carefully about why you want to investigate this place, what larger ideas and values are at stake in place you are exploring, and what difference (for you? for others?) a more thorough, detailed knowledge of this place could make.

Writing: The result of this project should be an essay of **1000-1500 words** that responds to the factors listed below. Use as many question marks as you can in this piece; feel free to ask open-ended questions and to respond to your own questions with conjecture, reflection, even more questions. This is not a "thesis-evidence-conclusion" essay, but an effort to define a line of inquiry. As I suggest above, your goal in this assignment should be not to answer all these questions, but to ask more detailed versions of the questions below about your specific place.

Topic: What place are you going to write about? Why? What conflicts, controversies, currents, changes make this place worth investigating for a semester, make it worth the investment of time and effort? Why about this place here and now is significant?

What specific sites within this place are most important? What sites would you mention to back up some general assertions you'd make about the place? What sites, for example, sum up ideas about what this place is like? Which sites provide insight into the place's past? Which give a glimpse of what the place is becoming or could become?

Beyond Appearances: How might different kinds of people in this place view it differently? What factors shape the range of positions on the conflicts and controversies that form the dynamics of life in this place? How, for example, might this place seem different to people outside of this place as opposed to people who live there? How many different kinds of “inside” perspectives are there? How, for example, do larger conflicts of race, class, gender, or sexual preference affect local viewpoints?

Other Times and Places: What forces from outside this place shape life in this place? Are there patterns, for example, to migration in and out of this place? Where are people moving from into this place? Where are people leaving it to go? Where do people here wish they were? Why?

Is there a pattern to the changes in this place over time? What did this place used to be like? What is it turning into? What might the most important historical factors be in the changing nature of this place?

Resources: Where do you think you can find information about this place that could help you support some answers to the questions above? Are there maps, web sites, books, plays, films, TV shows about this place? How could you get access to them?

The Big Picture: What’s the use, in the end, of writing about this place? How might it benefit you as an individual? Are there personal rewards? Practical uses? What benefit might it be to other people in this place? To people from other places? What’s at stake in a project like this?

In some respects this essay is like the exercise we did on the first day of class—it’s an exercise in speculation, in making educated guesses. Try to raise the kinds of issues that could open onto a fruitful exploration of your chosen place, questions that, like the various examples John Stilgoe discusses in his text, can lead you into revealing the hidden complexities of the community, the information that, when fully explored, rewards your intellectual effort. Think of this essay as your own “Beginnings,” in which you need to look at a place more closely than an ordinary person ever would. From here, for the rest of the term, your explorations will become more purposeful as you seek answers to these questions. It’s important, then, at this point, to look for routes into the networks of complexity you’ll explore more purposefully in the future.

Materials: Though no specific research materials are necessary to support your writing in this project, you should start now trying to locate some of the basic resources that will help you think about this place: maps, photos, tourist brochures, web resources, books about local history, etc. The more stuff you can turn up now, the better; you’ll be ahead of the game later in the term.