

Fundamentals of Essay Writing

Summer 1997

Weaver

Here's a sample of description / narration, on "What We Did Last Summer,"
(or Fall, as it turns out) written to some friends of mine (810 words):

In Yorkshire, Reinhild and I toured small towns nestled in little inland valleys known as the Dales, historic and picturesque, and with both simple open-air markets and sophisticated shops selling the produce of the sheep grazing everywhere on the hillsides. At one of the shops Reinhild found a stylish red woolen cape so reasonably priced she couldn't resist, and at one of the market stalls I got a pair of wool-lined moccasins (my new slippers) that really *were* cheap. Reinhild maneuvered our Toyota up an S-curving road to the highland Moors, bracingly fresh with the fall smells of heather and pine, and we then continued on to the coast, with an impressive view from the high Moors down to the sea. Jittery about left-side driving and a huge truck behind her, she didn't manage to stop for some of the pictures I desperately wanted to take.

One afternoon, approaching the ruins of Rievaulx Abbey along the River Rye, as we drove over a narrow stone bridge, the road itself rising and falling with the steep arch of the bridge, I had another of my aesthetic epiphanies, and this time Reinhild was able to stop, only feebly protesting that we'd surely be rammed by irresponsible hot rodders cruising the narrow country road, if not cited for trespassing on the farm property immediately adjoining it. I got my camera and started walking, and then just gazed at the bridge and the rolling hillsides, the orchards and pastures, the large, bright blue sky. But mostly at the chiaroscuro of the small river (a creek, really), churning and glistening on the surface yet darkened by the deep shadow of old trees and brambles on the shore, idyllic and wild.

A bearded peasant with a walking stick trudging the road with his wife appeared, at closer view, to be just another fiftyish tourist like myself, and they turned up again later in the day at other spots on our agenda (including the town with red woolen capes and leather moccasins). I took numerous shots from various angles within fifty yards of each other (and about fifty yards from Reinhild, impatiently waiting to get on down the road to the abbey), but the one most obviously qualifying for the cover of my own 'Old England' calendar was of the brick-and-stone country squire's house tucked back from the road, its elaborate flower garden gracing the gentle slope to the river (in the foreground, of course: the quaint arched stone bridge).

Despite my reluctance to leave this charming corner, I was as happy as Reinhild to get to the abbey, and after roaming through its ruins, surprised at how relaxed Reinhild had become. We had both taken our time viewing museum displays of the abbey's rise and fall as the center of a chain of Cistercian monasteries built in the 12th century, responsible for both religious reform and economic growth (including the rise of the wool industry, and the continuing presence of all those Yorkshire sheep), but by the Reformation it was part of the decadent Church establishment suppressed by Henry VIII, when the abbey was 'privatized' and then dismantled by its influential new owner.

So it was that on this sunny afternoon centuries later, we could roam through endless cloister chambers, cellars, workshops and chapels without once opening a door or having a roof over our heads. Everywhere stone walls blend in with the landscape of hillside and sky. The tiered stone arches of the immense church sanctuary are now part of an open temple to nature, a tribute to the capricious rise and fall of civilizations. For a few centuries the abbey had grown into a large community with its stone structures covering several acres of the countryside, home to lay workers and learned monks alike. Then, for twenty years, it was carted away stone by stone, until the new enterprise lost its direction, and the project was abandoned, with about as much of the abbey still standing as had been demolished.

Again, I took pictures from numerous angles. This time Reinhild was enticed by the view, invigorated by the walking and climbing, enchanted by the prospect of what had once been here, awed by its grandeur and its destruction. At some point, maybe two hours after arriving, I had seen enough, but she was off in the distance again, walking through arches, ascending ancient stairs to non-existent upper rooms and descending to ceilingless cellars. Catching up, I took a picture of her framed in yet another archway, a neatly-trimmed English lawn in the foreground (the work of the meticulous grounds crew), and wildflowers growing out of cracks in a wall, an exotic combination. Then we walked along talking about the abbey's nooks and crannies, about how amazing life has always been. Without quite realizing it, we were both high on the beauty and cruelty of existence.