

Sample Essay of Description

The prompt to read this essay appears on p. 150 of *Acting on Words*. Study questions follow the essay.

Where Are You, My Little Village?

Galina Rison

Somewhere in the middle of northeastern Russia there stands a little village, just twenty or so houses, facing a narrow fast river and a forest on the other bank. Hens go about their business of looking for seeds in the earth, horses and cows graze on the lush grass in the field. A little wooden boat crosses the river taking somebody to the other bank. The air is motionless. It is warm and smells sweetly of hay and wild flowers. It seems that time stands still here. But that is not how it is; this little village lives only in my mind now. It is not like this anymore. Everything that lives changes. Time, the great engine, brings changes everywhere in the world, so nothing stands ever still. The little village from my memory makes, probably, a quintessential example of changes that have been wrought in Russia in the twentieth century.

The true spirit of Russia, in my opinion, has always concentrated in the villages. The peasants are the people that most preserve the connection with the past and the earth. The village that I described above was like that some thirty years ago. It was the time when the collective farms were still blossoming, when technology was still not quite developed, and when people were laid back. It was the time when only one gravel road led to the village; there was only one private car among all the households. I spent there the first few summers of my life, and, therefore, I remember every detail. There was no store there, so a truck with bread and canned foods came every Saturday. The villagers always expected it with an excited anticipation. It was fun to get together around this "store on wheels" with other people, to chat, to exchange the latest gossip, and to buy some long-awaited sweets.

There was a little wood right behind the village, where so many berries and mushrooms grew, that we ran there to collect fresh supplies almost every day, and, remarkably, they never ran out. To go to the nearby settlement was a rare and important expedition. We dressed up nicely and walked there through the woods and fields for several kilometers. The villagers worked for the collective farm, got paid regularly, had their gardens, cows, chickens; in other words, they led good productive lives. That was years ago, before the collapse of the Soviet system.

It happened that a couple of years ago I managed to make a short trip to that part of the country. I had not seen the village of my childhood for very many years and had been curious to see how it looked then. I wish now I had not done it. My fairytale dream, as I had used to think about it for years, was shattered. Every time I think about it now brings angry tears to my eyes. The village is no more, but there stands something else in its place. So, what happened? I need only several words to describe it: the Muscovites moved in. It would probably be better to describe it like this: the expansion of Muscovites (with the money) from their city to the other parts of the country. The first change that I see now is the roads and the amount of traffic. Private cars are parked now along the street. The old wooden houses have given place to huge brick cottages. A part of the wood has been destroyed, and new houses and gardens are laid out. The look of the village has changed forever.

But it is not only the look that has changed. The romantic atmosphere of the old country has disappeared. There is no more quietness, and nobody is laid back anymore. The old peasants are dead, and their children and grandchildren have moved to the big city. The village is now a collection of summer cottages. The well-to-do city dwellers have brought with them the spirit of the new business world. Somehow, the green banks and fields do not look green anymore, the river does not sing merrily when it passes over the rapids, and the smell of grass has lost its sweetness. Progress has moved in and severed the fragile connection with the past. In the race between a horse and an engine, the engine wins.

For Further Thinking

1. In the style illustrated in Chapters 6 and 9, outline the main parts of this essay, taking care to identify the controlling idea and its links to each section.
2. Russian composition style favours thesis placement at the end of the essay (inductive). Has Rison remained with the form she learned growing up, or adapted to Western university expectations? Where is her thesis statement?
3. Refer to Chapter 12 “Comparison-Contrast.” Then, as precisely as you can, describe how Rison applies some of that structure to serve the purpose of this essay.
4. Review Chapter 8 “The Personal Essay.” Which of the three main “impulses” of personal writing described there would you say this essay most represents? Explain.

Looking Back and Ahead

1. Read Joyce Miller’s personal reflection “Night Fades” at Chapter 8 of this website. What interests you most in comparing her personal essay to Rison’s?
2. Read Darlene Hafso’s essay “The Tree” (Chapter 10, website) and Joyce Miller’s “Night Fades” (Chapter 8, website). Like Rison’s essay, those two also seem to reflect upon the “progress myth,” the idea that humanity has evolved from primitive states to advanced ones, that we are better practically, intellectually, artistically and morally, than previous generations. Is life “getting better”? Also of relevance to this question are the two essays that complete the Reader (pages 504 - 513) and the discussion surrounding them.

Practice

See Chapter 12 on how to prepare an essay that compares two pieces of writing. Use the “Differences and Similarities Test” to develop an essay comparing “Where Have You Gone My Little Village” (Chapter 10, website) and “Night Fades” (Chapter 8, website). See pages 176 – 185 in Chapter 12 for further ideas of how to find your controlling idea and shape your discussion.