

Paper #1—Description

**Context and general instructions:** The writing assignments that follow are a bit unconventional, so I think I owe you an explanation of the thinking behind them.

In a recent article in *Slate* titled “Do You Think Like Sherlock Holmes? What the detective can teach us about observation, attention, and happiness,” Maria Konnikova makes a distinction between *seeing* (what all of us do) and *observing* (which means, basically, being attentive to what we see and, more important, being able to distinguish between the trivial and the significant). Holmes is the extraordinary detective that he is not so much because he is smarter but because he has cultivated something called *mindfulness*:

Mindfulness allows Holmes to observe those details that most of us don’t even realize we don’t see. It’s not just the [number of] steps [leading up from the street to Holmes’ apartment door]. It’s the facial expressions, the sartorial details, the seemingly irrelevant minutiae of the people he encounters. It’s the sizing up of the occupants of a house by looking at a single room. It’s the ability to distinguish the crucial from the merely incidental in any person, any scene, any situation. [. . .]

Over the past several decades, researchers have discovered that mindfulness can lead to improvements in physiological well-being and emotional regulation. It can also strengthen connectivity in the brain, specifically in a network of the posterior cingulate cortex, the adjacent precuneus, and the medial prefrontal cortex that maintains activity when the brain is resting.

Mindfulness can even enhance our levels of wisdom, both in terms of dialectism (being cognizant of change and contradictions in the world) and intellectual humility (knowing your own limitations). What’s more, mindfulness can lead to improved problem solving, enhanced imagination, and better decision making. It can even be a weapon against one of the most disturbing limitations that our attention is up against: inattentional blindness. (*Slate*. 3 Jan. 2013. Web. 5 Jan. 2013)

In other words, that last paragraph in particular suggests that mindfulness is something that a college education can help all of us become a bit better at exercising. The prompts that follow are intended to help you develop this habit of being more attentive to your world.

As you’ll see, all the prompts have their specifics, but here are the general requirements:

- 1) For those that ask you to visit a place, **do not take *any* sort of electronic device with you**—leave it/them in your car or, even better, at home. You and your friends will survive for a couple of hours without your being able to talk to or text each other—I promise. Moreover, in her article Konnikova notes that our various gadgets impede rather than enhance mindfulness. However, **do** take paper and pen or pencil with you for note-taking/sketching purposes. You may be tempted to take pictures of some of these places or things, but recent research shows that people who do so actually have *less* recall of the place or object in the photographs than do those who simply observe closely and make notes or sketch what they observe.
- 2) For all of these prompts, the ***minimum word length is 1000 words, firm***. Obviously, “minimum” does not mean “maximum.” You are welcome—encouraged, even—to write more. **Those papers that do not meet the minimum word length will not earn a passing grade.**

Here are the prompts:

- 1) Visit a park—preferably, the more “natural” the better. (And by “visit,” I mean “go there in person—**do not** visit it virtually either via a website or in your memory; I will be able to tell if you have done the assignment in this way.) Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve (on state highway 177 in the Flint Hills) would be perfect, but for our purposes parks such as Chisolm Creek Park, Pawnee Prairie Park and Garvey Park (down by the riverbank) will work, too. (*Wherever you go, plan on staying for **at least a couple of hours!***) If possible, try to find a place where there is water and a variety of vegetation close to it. Describe whatever might be there that catches your attention. **“Describe” here does not mean “list”—it means, “Tell what these things look/sound/smell/feel/taste like.”** If there are animals and insects around (if you’re near water, some should be around if people aren’t being too noisy), describe what they’re doing and how they’re doing it. Also, look for order and pattern(s) in what you see and try to account for them: might there be reasons why you see the plants and animals in the places where you see them? Above all, what do you find yourself thinking about regarding all this observing? Do you feel detached from what you see, or connected to it in some way, or what? And why?
- 2) All of us have had this experience: in a dark space, even a familiar one, sounds seem much louder and more varied than they do when it is light. This prompt asks you to describe what you hear while listening in a dark space (inside or outside) for a few hours. Using Annie Dillard’s essay “Seeing” and/or Josephine Dickinson’s essay “A cochlear implant for a deaf musician” as models and inspiration, find a darkened room or a space outside, such as a patio or balcony, with enough light so that you can see to make notes with paper and pen/pencil and where you know you won’t be disturbed for a few hours (to further ensure this, turn off or put away your smartphone), and listen. (It would not be a bad idea to sit in that space for a bit while it is fully illuminated, so that when you darken the space you will have a basis for comparing what you hear.) In that darkened space, begin just by listening for, say, five to ten minutes; let your eyes (and ears) become accustomed to the dark and the space you occupy. What do you hear? What do these things *sound* like? As with the first prompt, don’t merely list the sounds—**describe** them. Note, for example, how Dickinson doesn’t merely say she hears human voices or music, or even merely mention the kinds of instruments she hears—she also describes tonalities, what these voices and instruments actually sound like. (In my own case, as I am writing this I can hear the mid-range constant *whoosh* of the air from the blades of a box fan that is running in my bedroom, which is next to my study. I can also hear, and almost feel, the low-range pulsing hum/vibration of the motor of the ceiling fan in my dining room, which is directly below my study. This sound seems to be coming from the window and exterior wall my computer faces, but it actually grows louder the nearer I get to my floor.) You get the idea. In addition to describing what you hear, what, if anything, do you find yourself thinking/realizing/learning from this experience?
- 3) Visit either the Wichita Art Museum (\$7/free admission on Saturdays/closed on Mondays; those of you with children will want to take them to The Living Room, a place where kids can look at and make their own art) or the Ulrich Gallery, which is on the WSU campus (always free/closed on Mondays). **Note: Don’t take ink pens with you; you’ll only be allowed to use pencils in the galleries.** As with #1 above, you are **required** to physically go to the museum. (To verify that you went there, name at least one other work (artist and title) next to the work you’ve chosen to write about.) Pick one piece of art that, for whatever reason, holds your attention. **Sit in front of it for *at least two hours!*** Describe whatever you see and think about as you look at it, no matter how trivial it may appear. Take into account not just the figure(s) rendered but *how* they are rendered: realistically or abstractly; colors; textures; lighting; placement of people and objects in the space of the painting or photograph; etc.: Whatever you happen to notice. Though you’re not required to, you might try sketching what you see to help you begin thinking about these questions. As you sit and look and make notes, become a little kid and keep asking the question, “Why?” In your paper, then, first describe the painting, and then discuss why you think the artist makes the choice(s) s/he does. Does the work suggest a narrative to you? What is it, and what in the painting causes you to think that? Keep in mind also that the work’s title can sometimes give you insight into how to think about the work.

- 4) Here's a challenging prompt for movie-lovers. The inspiration for this prompt comes from this quote:

[L]et's assume there are secrets in the common images of film, or more precisely, in the individual frames (if frames is even what we can call them in this digital era) and that the method of discovery must be based on constrained disorder. Constrained, because the 70-minute mark is our entry point, no matter what. Disordered, because what will appear at 70 minutes is not something that we are intentionally searching for, so that we are left open to surprise[.] (Nicholas Rombes, "The 70s," *Berfrois*, 17 Jan 2014. Web)

In other words: If we were to choose a single, precise, but arbitrary instant from a film—its 70-minute mark—what might it reveal about the film as a whole? Would it feel as though it fits into what the film seems to be about, or might looking at it closely reveal something about the movie that we hadn't noticed or suspected before? (In case you're wondering, by the 70-minute mark in a film, the plot is firmly established, and the time remaining will (or should) be spent resolving that plot.)

Here's what to do for this assignment: Choose any film you wish (ideally, it should be one that you have seen often and thought about) and, at its 70-minute mark, pause it and take a screen grab of the image, whatever it is. (Keep in mind that if the screen is completely blank, that, too is an image the director and editor want included in the film—though, admittedly, one that will be rather challenging to discuss.) (Be sure to include the image in your paper.) Then, write about that image—who/what we see in it and, *only* if relevant, who/what is out of frame—and its relation to the film as a whole. It will be helpful to briefly describe the scene in which it occurs, but be sure you say as much as you possibly can about **the image itself** and what, if anything, it might have to say about some aspect (thematic or symbolic) of the film. Some questions to keep in mind as you approach this assignment: Is the image's setting important in the film? What might certain objects—or the abundance/absence of objects—in the image convey about the film's themes? How do the image's lighting and camera angles fit with your sense of the film's overall atmosphere? That is, how do they compare, or not, to the overall "look" of the rest of the film? If characters are speaking to each other, indicate exactly what is being said precisely at the 70-minute mark (use italics or boldface for those words). How does that dialogue fit with the film's thematic arc? What might a character's facial expression or gestures or body language reveal about himself/herself that might not always be apparent elsewhere in the film? In short: Everything you see in any movie is there because someone has decided s/he wants you to see it. Your job for this assignment is to account for that moment's presence in the film, as completely as you can.

Rombes (the man I quoted in the excerpt above) solicited screengrabs of the 70-minute mark in films from his readers and, if they were so inclined, add commentary to them; he posted the responses he received in "The 70-Minute Mark" (*Berfrois*, 16 May 2014. Web). You'll see images from a wide variety of films—everything from documentaries to foreign films to horror to classics to *Weekend at Bernie's*. Not all of the images have commentary (most of which are very brief), and there are some editing problems with the texts; but you're welcome to have a look at them to get a sense of what can be said about an image.

- 5) Chain restaurants and coffee shops (whether they are independents or Starbucks) look the way they do for a reason: they seek to create an environment—an ambience—that appeals to the customer. (Ambience includes everything from the design of the menu, lighting and décor to the floorplan of the dining area, ambient noise/music and the behavior of the wait staff.) The choices these restaurants make are far from accidental. Moreover, though obviously restaurants want as many customers as they can physically handle, it seems equally clear that restaurants appear to have an Ideal Customer in mind when creating their ambience. The ambience of Golden Corral, for example, is very different from that of On the Border; and if you have visited both, you know that each tends to attract a different kind of customer. For this prompt, visit a chain restaurant that you go to on a fairly regular basis; I encourage you to take a friend or significant other with you who can help out with noting details and to discussing them with you. Order something so you won't get kicked out, and while

you're there, make note of the place's features and clientele that to your mind seem revelatory of the kind of image the restaurant seeks to project to its customers. You're welcome to discuss the kind(s) of food on the menu, but don't focus on the actual quality of the meal unless that in some way leads you to further insight regarding the place's ambience.

Your paper's focus should be primarily on what you observe on the day of your visit, but keep in mind that that day not be an ordinary one for that place. Thus, you're welcome to compare that day's visit to what seems to be customary for that place.

For inspiration, go to YouTube and find a video titled "Taste3 Conference: Bryant Simon." (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fxpfx8W8C20>) Simon talks about how Starbucks creates in its customers the desire to buy into an image of the customer that Starbucks has also created. Keep in mind as you watch that all chain restaurants employ the kinds of strategies Simon observes at Starbucks, but through different means.

- 6) Students of social media have talked about the contents of Facebook pages as examples of "curated personas"—somewhat like a collage, the images, links and posts on a Facebook page collectively add up to a more or less conscious expression of self that is intended to project a certain image of that self to a selected audience (one's "Friends")—an image, by the way, that may or may not correspond to what that person is actually like. For this prompt, choose three of your Facebook friends whose pages, to your mind, are expressions of different kinds of curated personas. (Don't use their names, but do note their basic biographical information, such as their genders, ages, and occupations. I think also this assignment will work better if you choose to write about people who aren't members of your immediate family.) Describe and discuss typical sorts of postings on their pages, but most of your attention should be given over, in essence, to asking—and attempting to answer—the larger question of *why* these people have posted these sorts of things with such frequency. You're not looking for "weird" stuff that sticks out from most of what's there—you're *trying to identify larger patterns among the postings and get at what those patterns might say about what that person wants his/her friends to think about him or her*.
- 7) **(Place Prompt)** In his book *Place: An Introduction*, Second Edition, geography professor Tim Cresswell has this to say about the concept of place:

So what links these examples: a child's room, an urban garden, a market town, New York City, Kosovo and the Earth? What makes them all places and not simply a room, a garden, a town, a world city, a new nation, and an inhabited planet? One answer is that they are all spaces which people have made meaningful. They are all spaces people are attached to in one way or another. This is the most straightforward and common definition of place—a meaningful location. (11-12)

Put another way, "place" is that combination of boundaries, objects, emotions and memories which, for example, makes a house feel like a home, or which makes any space, no matter its size, feel as though it in some way "belongs" to you, and yourself to it. It would be a locale which you would describe or take someone else to as a way of conveying something essential about yourself.

Think of a place—again, the definition is "a space that is meaningful to you"—and describe it in your paper. It does not have to be a place near where you currently live; it can be public or shared as well as a place that is yours and yours alone. The main thing is that you have clear memories of it and, moreover, that you feel a sense of belonging when you are there. What/Where is it? What are its boundaries? How often do you go there? (If you no longer are able to visit it, when was your last visit there?) When did you know or feel that this place was "yours"? What does it contain (or, as the case may be, not contain) that causes you to feel as

though you and it belong to each other? (Again, remember that you can feel this way about a public place as well as one that only you possess.) When you go there, what do you do? Most important of all, what do you think it is about this place that causes you to feel so connected to it? What makes it “yours”? (This last question is especially important if the place you describe is one that you have not visited in a long time.) You may want to include pictures of this place as a way of focusing your writing (and your reader’s attention), though you certainly don’t have to.

- 8) Think of a piece of technology that you use frequently or, for whatever reason, enjoy using. Though most students who have chosen this prompt in the past write about some sort of personal electronic device, “technology” in fact denotes any sort of tool or device, no matter how simple: a quill pen is a kind of technology. In your paper, briefly describe the object or device, then focus on describing the nature of your relationship with the object: not so much what you use it for, but how you would characterize your feelings or thoughts as you use it. (By way of illustrating, consider including brief narratives which for you capture the positive/negative essence(s) of your feelings or thoughts about the object.) Another way to get at what I’m asking you to think about here: You may have seen recent surveys that report large percentages of people saying they “could not live” without their cellphones. I think it’s safe to say that they aren’t speaking literally; still, though, what is implied by that person when s/he makes such a statement about his/her device? Who is serving whom in such a relationship? By way of conclusion, examine this question, which I mean quite seriously: How, if at all, does this device make your life better—not more convenient, not “cooler,” but *better*. (Assume for the sake of argument that the distinction between one’s quality of life and the attributes of products and services, such as their convenience, speed, popularity and novelty, can get very blurry.) How much of your relationship with the object is determined by your genuine *need* for it, and how much is determined by your *desire* for it?