

# Double Vision in Travel Essays: Something Old and Something New

**Presenter: John Bennion**

*This is a transcript of a presentation given on September 24–26, 2020, at the annual conference of the Latter-day Saint Publishing and Media Association (LDSPMA). You may not reproduce or publish this material without prior written consent from LDSPMA.*

Hello, and welcome to this session. My name is John Bennion, and I teach in the English department at Brigham Young University.

I teach essays and fiction writing, and I practice both those genres myself.

Our session today is entitled “Double Vision in Travel Essays: Something Old and Something New.” And in this workshop you’ll learn about and briefly practice skills necessary to write personal travel essays. This is writing that is not merely informative, such as travel guides, nor is it anecdotes that’s strung together without thematic connection. And we’ll stop the presentation several times to practice various skills that we’ve just talked about. So please have paper and pen or a blank word processing document open where you can do these practice exercises.

And if you have questions, please ask them in chat using the button at the bottom of your screen. If you want a copy of this PowerPoint presentation, write down my email address, which is on the first and last slide.

See there are some different subjects of travel writing. This is the material you use in your writing. It could be tourist activities, such as personal family trips; outdoor experiences, such as backpacking, climbing, hiking, rafting, skiing, canoeing, and so forth; or there could be study abroad or other educational travel.

Then in addition to subject material, there is also different genres of travel writing. There’s the how to travel writing that, say, such as done by, in video form by Rick Steves and others.

Then there's the journalistic essay.

The one we're going to focus on today is the personal or meditative essay. This is the kind found in best American travel essays.

Or you can write a blend of these.

There are several ways of thinking about double vision, which is a good principle to know when you're writing. You can reinterpret a single experience so you see it as you saw it at that time, and then you see it as you see it now. So you move from one way of looking at an experience to another way of looking at an experience.

Or you can combine an experience from the present with an experience from the past. And so you have a weave of an essay that moves back and forth in time. Or you can combine personal experiences and the experience of others through research, which is another kind of double vision.

So an essay is made stronger by this movement back and forth.

You should carry a notebook wherever you could travel. It can be small enough to fit in your pocket or big enough to sketch, and I love to sketch, so.

The first principle to learn is to record details in such a notebook. This is from David Foster Wallace's essay on a cruise he took. And if you glance through this, you can see all of the very descriptive language.

Sucrose beaches and water of a bright blue. All-red leisure suit.

2,100 pounds of hot flesh covered with suntan lotion that he smelled. So he's using all of his senses, and he's using visual contrast.

And if you go down through this, 145 cats inside the Ernest Hemingway residence. Smell. He's heard music Rhythmically in the two-four beat of the same disco music he hated pointing at the ceiling to in 1977.

And it goes on and all the way through this whole essay, which is about 40 pages long, is this kind of detail. And he could not remember it all but without the notebook. Maybe he was a genius and could remember, but I doubt it.

This is a detail from “Climbing Shingle Peak” by Joey Franklin. And you can see that they’re climbing up through underbrush onto a saddle. He describes the canyon opening up. And the subject of the essay comes out through his description. “I wondered to myself if the boys had noticed that the ... trees had given way to a scattering of juniper bushes and alpine grass growing in the washes beneath us. I wondered if they had noticed the deer droppings or the snake’s burrow. ...

We were stepping into the dizzying skyline at more than 9,000 feet ... wondered if they could, in this quiet, sense our distance from the valley floor” and so on. So he’s tying his description to wondering whether the others on the trip see it as well. And that’s the kind of double vision.

So he decides to ask them what they’re feeling. “What are you thinking about boys?” And Landon laughs and answers as a boy would.

So he decided to quit asking questions, but through this exchange between what he’s perceiving and what they’re perceiving, that comes from the description and the meaning of the essay, which is our next category, which we’ll come to in a minute. So now we’ll stop the presentation for a few minutes and do some exercises and then we’ll start the presentation again.

Welcome back. Our next subject is discovering or creating the meaning of an experience. We want to “allow meaning to grow out of the experience as you write about it.

Meaning is often better revealed as a question or tension to explore than as a didactic statement of meaning—a conclusion.” As in the essay we just looked at from Joey Franklin, he’s wondering whether the boys see and perceive and feel what he’s feeling. That’s not a didactic meaning; it’s a question that he wants to figure out as he writes the essay.

“Predetermined meaning generally feels both false and didactic; few people will want to read essays written to demonstrate a predetermined meaning.” So, the following is another paragraph from Joey Franklin’s essay.

“A red biplane came upon my troop that morning in a slow quiet grumble like some eight ... grumble like some late August thunderhead rolling out of the west. An airplane was the last thing we had expected to encounter on our hike, me and the motley [group] of Boy Scouts who had reluctantly followed me up this mountain.” And so he describes the airplane, and then that airplane ... This is the beginning of his essay.

That airplane makes him start to wonder whether it will wake the boys up to noticing what's going on.

And so his meaning that he is exploring in the essay is closely connected to the experience itself but is separate from it. He could have hiked up the mountain not wondering, or he could have forgotten. Decided to write about that trip but written about something other than wondering whether the boys were feeling what he was feeling. So this is the meaning that grew out of the experience for him.

This is an essay from an essay I've written called "Like the Lilies." In the first paragraph I described being lost in the Yorkshire Dales up to my thighs in a brook. I was looking.

"I was lost again—my shoes and the legs of my hiking shorts soaked. 'There's no path over here either,' I said, an astute observation, because I had just climbed a barbed-wire fence and forced myself through waist-high stinging nettle to get to the brook.

The students looked at me as if I were crazy. I didn't have a clue where we turned off the Pennine Way, and I was frantic inside, though it manifested itself in a forced and manic grin.

The worst part of getting lost when you're supposed to be the guide is that it's undignified. When I lost my way, which was every time I got behind the wheel of our luggage van and often when we set out on foot cross-country, the students laughed. It was always a sweet, you're-one-of-us kind of laughter, as if my failings endeared me to them." When we started on this trip, I had no idea that that experience would be an essay. And I also didn't have any idea that it would be about getting lost, or my feelings of loss of control when I get lost.

Nor did I know that I would tie that to my own depression. So the meaning grew out of the experience rather than being imposed on it.

This is from Michael Chabon and published in the magazine Bon Appetit. And he says where they were going.

And when their driver turns off the road and goes down a stretch of road that's not in the direction they were going.

And so they go to this town and they have an experience there, which is eating some delightful food. And here's where he described it, the meaning of this experience for him. "I have eaten

good food in unprepossessing locales, but I doubt the disparity between the crude, shabby atmosphere of that nameless cement-block dispensary of protein and redemption and the quality of the lunch laid on by the butcher of Zegota will ever be matched.” He describes the food in wonderful detail and then ...

And he says, we were “as happy, collectively, as we had been in Morocco or might ever be again in our lives.” And so when they turned off the road, he didn’t know what was going to happen. And he could have made many meanings out of this wonderful meal, but he chose one that is, to contrast the situation to the delight of the meal. And so that’s the meaning of it for him, and it arose out of the experience, not imposed on it. So now we’ll stop and have some more discussion about the ... And practice, do some practice exercise on discovering meaning.

Welcome back again. Now we’re going to talk about split perspective, again from my essay “Lilies of the Field.” Split perspective is looking at, as we’ve talked about at the beginning, it’s looking at a subject or material or an experience in two different ways.

“I am a child of an alcoholic. When I was a teenager in a tight and repressive Mormon village, it felt like being abandoned in a private desert.

I could control nothing, do nothing to keep me and my family from disappearing from before God’s throne. My kind, taciturn father self-medicated his depression with cooking sherry.

Because drinking any alcohol was against the Mormon commandments, I thought his sin was as evil as adultery. I was ashamed of him.

Now that I’m more enlightened, I’m ashamed of being ashamed of him. This is what my therapist calls progress.” So when I had the experience, I had no idea it would be connected to my depression.

And I didn’t know what I would learn from writing about my father’s alcoholism and wandering in study abroad, and this is what happened is I discovered that I had changed my mind about my father. He no longer seemed evil to me. And that was a drastic change in my perspective.

This is another paragraph about that. “Through therapy and on the walk across England, I solidified this second way of thinking as it applies to my relationships with people.” Here I’m referring not just to my father’s alcoholism but to a kind of flexible thinking where I’m not always trying to be in control.

“Others don’t love me for how well I manage projects for them. The students on this trip loved me for my complete self, including my lapses of competence. From this understanding I postulate that my Heavenly Parents and Christ, the son, could be the same.

They might not be deities who love me only because my life is a well-tilled field.” And this was a great discovery for me. And so I saw the same experience in two different ways, drastically different ways.

Here’s one about a woman whose change changes her idea about rugby.

She said, “Rugby had, for a time, given me everything. But around the same time I’d begun to outgrow my need for it, I’d also begun to understand its potential cost.

I racked up pulled muscles and strained ligaments and chipped a bone in my ankle that still aches under pressure, more than 15 years later.” Throughout the essay, she explores this same idea that her attitude toward rugby has changed. What was once absolutely necessary, and later it was not necessary.

So here’s a related subject combining past and present experiences in a weaved essay.

This is the most recent experience, which was only a year or so before I started the essay.

Well maybe only a few months before I started the essay. And it talks about doing an exercise that my therapist told me to do, which was to float in the university diving pool and abandon myself to the floating.

And I connect that to the experience of wandering in England and getting lost there, and I connect that to an experience from when I was in the child. I used headings, “Lost in the Desert” and the other headings, to help the reader see that I’m shifting to another time, another place possibly, of experience. So you can weave past and present experiences together.

This is again from Joey Franklin’s essay. When he was a child, his mother took him to get a Cub Scout book, and he saw all the scouting equipment. He says, “I was hooked. I wanted to be the Scout on the cover of ‘Boy’s Life.’ ...

I wanted to sleep in a tent ... and salute the flag with a dozen other boys ... march single file into a wilderness. ... I wanted the Norman Rockwell Scouting experience.

I doubted my—” And then this last sentence implies the change that he has about scouting now as a leader. He doubts his Boy Scouts even know who Norman Rockwell was. In other words, they don’t have the same perception of Scouting as he does.

Okay, here we will stop the presentation again and talk about some ... and do some exercises. Welcome back again.

Okay. In addition to weaving your own experiences, past and present together, you can weave your experiences with someone else, with someone else’s. And in the essay by Joey Franklin, he alternates paragraphs with the Boy Scouts and him with paragraphs about Henry David Thoreau.

And so it moves back and forth between those. And here’s a paragraph about Henry David Thoreau. I’m not going to read through the whole thing. But you can see he has researched a lot of details about Thoreau, and he’s put a narrative of Thoreau and braided it into the essay about his experience with the Boy Scouts. And this paragraph includes both parts because at the bottom, he talks about being a scoutmaster.

Here’s another weaved essay, braided essay. This is by Liz Knight, and she opens it talking about her own love for rivers. “Now is the time of year, when the days are shorter and the nights longer, that I lie in bed and think about rivers.” She goes on and talks about them. And then she has a famous river boatman Haldane “Buzz” Holmstrom, a quote from him.

And what she does in this essay is alternate her own experience with the experience of Buzz Holmstrom and her analysis of his experience. And so she says, “Rivers must have haunted ... ‘Buzz’ Holmstrom, as well.” She goes on and describes him. So this essay, similar to Joey’s essay, alternates her experiences with experiences about someone else who is pertinent to our subject, which is running rivers.

‘Kay. Another subject is out of research. In order to write about Thoreau, Joey had to research Thoreau.

In order to write about Buzz Holmstrom, Liz Knight had to research him.

So how do you take—In terms of library research, that’s pretty standard. You just look up on the internet or get access to the library and you research something using Wikipedia or whatever.

In terms of actual interviews, a great essayist, Brian Doyle said once that he never took notes when he's talking to people and he never recorded because the recording would distract people.

But what he did was he would go privately right after the conversation and write down everything he could remember, especially the language. So that's a technique you could use. You have to be careful about privacy. We don't have time to really talk about this in this session, but you want to respect your interviewee and keep their identity secret and be very general, or get their permission, or, you know, risk offending them.

So this is from the rugby essay earlier, and she shows research that she's done about studies examining people's motivation for playing sports. So that—She blends her experiences with research experience. This is an essay about chocolate. And Rowan Jacobsen researched cacao.

Squat toilet. He uses his own experience, but he also talks about the experiences of people who have written about using a squat toilet, and so.

There's Doug Lansky quotes, and then there's Ralph Potts, and then Dr. Jane Wilson-Howarth is probably the most foremost expert on excretion.

So any subject will have an expert on it that you can look up and do research on. Here's some interview, some notes Michael Chabon made about his trip.

And I won't read them all, but you can see that he did a lot of ... he did some ... He wrote down his chats with the driver, what he was chatting about with the driver.

Okay, we'll stop briefly again and do an exercise and talk a little bit and then we'll start again.

The last subject we'll talk about is finding places to publish. The basic rule is to read the journal where you want to publish so you know the journal's interests and style. For example, say, this was published in 'Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought,' and which is really a spiritual autobiography essay, an essay about a spiritual crisis and movement toward healing.

That wouldn't fit at all in 'Sport Literate,' which Joey Franklin's essay "Climbing Shingle Peak" fit very well, and it wouldn't have fit as well in 'Dialogue.' So choosing a journal where you publish something is an essential skill. And you can see where others published. 'Harpers Magazine,' which is probably out of all our reach, but 'Outside,' that magazine, 'Bon Appetit,' 'SBNation,'



'World Hum: The Best Travel Stories on the Internet.' Some of those might be possible for us to publish in.

'The Best American Essays.' I'm sorry that's misprinted there, it should be 'The Best American Travel Essays.' All the volumes contain a list in the back where the pieces were originally published. And you can read essays that you like and then find out where they were published and read in that journal.

Again, following the rule that you read in the journal where you want to publish. You can publish in newspapers; they won't pay very much, but they occasionally publish travel essays.

And then you can use the internet to find other travel journals where personal essays are accepted. You have to read them because they might be looking for how-to essays, not personal, meditative essays. That's the end of my presentation. And so we'll have more time for discussion and for answering your questions about the process of writing travel essays.

Thank you.