Louis Owens’ “Burning the Shelter” serves as a model essay in literature or composition classes, providing a model for analysis, for connecting personal experience to a larger purpose, and for re-examining assumptions. To teach it effectively, however, we need to understand our students. Teaching at a regional state university where students had limited experience studying literature and where they questioned the importance of any assignment, my students needed

- instruction in literary studies, especially what analysis is and how to do it
- rationales that connect class activities to graded assignments and reaffirm course learning objectives

A large number of students are also likely to prefer visual learning. Visual learners do not easily integrate parts to create a whole, so we have to begin with the big picture.

I. THE BIG PICTURE: PURPOSE & STRUCTURE

- Ask students to identify the purpose of the essay, preferable as they read

I assume that students will identify the purpose in one of these three ways:
  - redefining the concept of wilderness
  - rethinking the relationship between humans and the natural world
  - criticizing Euro-American thought, especially about nature

- Have students connect their own experiences (such as realizing that an action they felt proud of turned out to be a source of shame in a different context) to further understanding of the essay and defuse resistance to literary analysis and essay’s content.

- As a class, develop a detailed outline of the essay, listing the topics covered and referencing the writing strategies Owens uses (repetition, factual vs subjective representation, dialog)

I see the essay as divided into three parts:
  - opening concisely describes the place and the job; it’s largely factual, except the reference to feeling “smug”
  - second section is rich in detail and emotion; it describes the sisters and the conversation
  - last section reflects on the experience, providing a model for analytical thinking.

- Explain that details in the outline will serve as basis for analysis of the essay, which will lead to a deeper understanding of Owens’s purpose, the strategies used to communicate the purpose and convince readers of its significance, and the way literature or our own writing conveys significance or a purpose.

II. FOCUSING ON THE STRUCTURE

Examine the outline to identify

- the turning point
- contrast, repetition, juxtaposition and other strategies that underscore the purpose

The aim is to show the value in carefully examining the structure of the essay while leaving room for new ideas to develop during the discussion.
Also, affirm that students need not agree with the essay; stress that the job of analysis is to produce understanding.

III. A CLOSER FOCUS: MODELING CLOSE READING
Students need to learn that interpretation and analysis draw on intuition, imagination, and insight, which means there is more than one right answer.

Students may feel that close readings are “fishing expeditions” where the teacher asks a question to which she already knows the answer. Design this part of the discussion so that students inexperienced in literary analysis feel free to contribute ideas (such as identifying passages that particularly moved or puzzled them) without having to explain the significance of the phrase or paragraph they choose. Draw more detail from students who show grasp of interpretation.

Also make clear that explanations, interpretations, and analysis are all about evidence drawn directly from the text. My students typically needed to learn that meanings aren’t “hidden,” appearing only to those who have a key, like professors and English majors.

Affirm for students their achievements in this class--such as their ability to identify a wide range of details in the text--and the challenges that those without a natural gift in analysis will have in doing the work of textual analysis on their own. Also affirm that the class will provide them with opportunity to continue to practice the leaps of imagination, intuition, and/or insight that makes textual analysis possible.

The passages that appeal to me for close reading include
• The first two sentences (the contrast in styles echo the different ways of knowing a mountain, by looking at and living with it or by identifying it on a map, and thus the different views of the relationship between humans and the natural world).
• The description of the two sisters. The references to loss in the essay would have us identify these women as victims, but Owens shows us their physical, psychological, and emotional strengths, defying the view of Native people as victims of history.

IV. APPLYING THE MODEL: THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT
• Literature students can undertake an analysis of a text using methods from class.
• Composition students could explore the false nature of a widely accepted idea, in terms of a personal experience or in a profile. For an example of profiles of people who transcend social categories, see H. F. Dowling, Jr., “Imaginative Exposition: Teaching ‘Creative’ Non-Fiction Writing Author(s),” College Composition and Communication, 36.4 (Dec. 1985) 454-64.

LAST THOUGHTS
You will have a better sense of what approaches work if you survey students about their experiences in class. Stephen Brookfield offers a model in “Understanding Classroom Dynamics: The Critical Incident Questionnaire” in Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher.