

UNDER ONE ROOF · A READING COMPANION

The Lives Within the Walls

Reading Buildings, Shaping True Stories

Eight nonfiction books, one short-form companion, and nine adaptable narrative blueprints for writing the life of a building.

A building is more than a setting.

It can give a story its boundaries, its sequence, its recurring images, or its central question. The people remain more than symbols; the evidence remains more important than a satisfying pattern.

For readers and writers at 2601 Pennsylvania Avenue. Prepared for the in-person course taught by James Mulhern.

These are optional recommendations, not additional required purchases. Ask a library about print, electronic, or interlibrary-loan access; availability and loan terms vary.

Citations follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 18th edition.

Course website: <https://oneroof.silvercurrentpress.com/>

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How to Read a Building

Begin with three books rather than eight: Jane Ziegelman's *97 Orchard* for households connected by a theme; Sasha Abramsky's *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* for a floor-plan structure; and Sarah M. Broom's *The Yellow House* for memory, research, and return. This is a suggested teaching sequence, not a ranking of literary merit.

The templates are original teaching outlines. They are not the books' exact tables of contents, not summaries of every event, and not claims that all nonfiction must have a conventional plot.

What the word “structure” means here

Separate three things: chronology (the order events happened), presentation (the order readers learn them), and the source of momentum (a question, a change, a relationship, or an accumulating pattern). A nonfiction essay need not invent conflict, a climax, or a tidy resolution.

The evidence behind this handout

The book descriptions and structural observations are grounded in publisher material, contents, authorized excerpts, author interviews, and identified reviews, each cited in Chicago style on the page where it is used and gathered in the bibliography. This is not a claim to have conducted a cover-to-cover analysis of every book. Where a complete chapter sequence was unavailable, the reading map is deliberately broad.

The “Study lens,” reading tasks, and writing templates are teaching interpretations and recommendations. Use your own copy to test them; page numbers vary by edition.

How the two-page book guides work

Reading map. A verified description, a simplified structural sequence, and a focused way to study the text.

Writing blueprint. An original six-step outline that borrows the organizing principle, not the writer's wording or experiences.

Practice and response. A short activity with a model observation so the exercise can be used without extensive preparation.

Truth is the boundary

Never invent a resident, a historical scene, an encounter, or dialogue and submit it as reported fact. Mark memory as memory; verify what can be checked; obtain permission for interviews and recognizable neighbors. If experimenting with imagination, label it clearly and check the intended venue's rules.

97 Orchard

Ziegelman, Jane. *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement*. HarperCollins, 2010.

The contents cited below are those of the 2011 paperback.

The kind of book. A single tenement; social and culinary history rather than a memoir by its residents.

Documented structure

Ziegelman follows five immigrant families who lived at 97 Orchard Street. Its five main chapters are named for the Glockner, Moore, Gumpertz, Rogarshevsky, and Baldizzi families. Food provides a recurring subject: family histories open into the larger worlds of shopping, cooking, migration, and adaptation. Recipes and social context accompany the households.

Reading map: One address, several households, one recurring subject

Household / food practice / wider history / another household. The address holds the chapters together, while the recurring subject lets readers compare lives that were not necessarily lived simultaneously.

Study lens

The chapters give the reader a repeatable unit of attention. A family is not merely an illustration of a historical period; the domestic practice offers a way to move between a small physical detail and large social forces. Read for the return from historical explanation to a particular household.

A focused reading assignment

Read the introduction and two family chapters, preferably ones far apart in the contents. Mark each paragraph H (household), F (food), or C (cultural context). Ask where the scale changes and whether the transition is carried by an object, a need, or a historical fact.

Course connections: Sessions 1, 2, 6, 7, and 10

Sources for this guide

Kirkus Reviews. Review of *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement*, by Jane Ziegelman. March 15, 2010.
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jane-ziegelman/97-orchard/>.

Barnes & Noble. “*97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement*, by Jane Ziegelman.” Accessed September 27, 2026.
<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/97-orchard-jane-ziegelman/1100562016>.

Blueprint: Five doors, one question

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Jane Ziegelman's *97 Orchard*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. A short essay on what residents carried into 2601, using a recipe, kitchen object, or meal as the common question.

1. Choose one ordinary practice. Name the shared question: what do people cook, carry, repair, or save? Choose only one.

2. Enter household A. Begin with a documented object or a remembered scene approved by its teller. Establish the person and date.

3. Open the historical window. Add only the research that helps explain this practice. Label its source and return to the person.

4. Visit household B. Repeat the question but let the answer differ. Do not force agreement or an uplifting lesson.

5. Make comparison do the work. Use one recurring object or action as the transition. Add a third household only if it changes the argument.

6. Return to the address. Close with what living in proximity reveals, not a claim that all residents are alike.

A short workshop

In pairs, choose one harmless shared question and draft three interview questions for it. No interviews need to happen in class.

What a useful response notices. A useful question can produce different answers, such as "What kitchen object survived your last move?" It is narrower and more productive than "Tell me your life story."

Ethical and structural check

Do not treat different generations as if they met. Context about an immigrant community does not prove what a particular resident ate or said.

Your planning line: "I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____."

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write "not yet known" wherever research is still needed.

The House of Twenty Thousand Books

Abramsky, Sasha. *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*. New York Review Books, 2015.

U.S. edition.

The kind of book. One family home at 5 Hillway in London; memoir, biography, and intellectual history.

Documented structure

Abramsky writes about his grandparents Chimen and Miriam and their book-filled home. *Kirkus Reviews* describes a room-to-room narrative; Jeremy Dauber's review in *The Wall Street Journal*, reproduced by Halban Publishers, explicitly describes the structure as an architectural floor plan. Rooms and their holdings lead into the occupants' intellectual lives, relationships, and histories. Dauber's review identifies interviews and archival research.

Reading map: A floor plan becomes a portrait of a mind

Room / objects and books / person and ideas / another room. Spatial order makes it possible to leave straightforward chronology without losing an organizing frame.

Study lens

Treat the room as an entry point, not a storage inventory. The key question is why the object belongs in the portrait. A shelf, chair, or book can lead to an argument, friendship, or change of belief, but the narrative still needs a human center.

A focused reading assignment

Read two room-centered sections. Sketch the house as the text presents it; beneath each room write the emotional or intellectual subject it opens. Mark the point where a description becomes a story about a person.

Course connections: Sessions 1, 2, 3, 7, and 10

Sources for this guide

Kirkus Reviews. Review of *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*, by Sasha Abramsky. May 1, 2015. <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sasha-abramsky/the-house-of-twenty-thousand-books/>.

Dauber, Jeremy. "Books Do Furnish a Home." Review of *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*, by Sasha Abramsky. *Wall Street Journal*, September 2015. Reproduced by Halban Publishers. Accessed September 27, 2026. <https://www.halbanpublishers.com/house-of-20000-books-wsj-review>.

Blueprint: A floor plan of a life

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Sasha Abramsky's *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. A portrait of a consenting resident through three rooms or three places in one room.

1. Set the threshold. Tell readers whose space this is and why you are entering it. State your relationship to the person.

2. Choose the first object. Describe an observed or reliably remembered object. Let it open one specific scene.

3. Follow the association. Move from the scene to a relationship, belief, or past place. Distinguish recollection from verified history.

4. Cross into a contrasting space. Choose an object that complicates the first impression rather than repeats it.

5. Revisit the opening object. Ask what its meaning has become after the second or third stop.

6. Leave something unresolved. End with a detail that respects the person's complexity. Do not explain every possession.

A short workshop

Draw three boxes for three spaces. Put one object, one person, and one unanswered question in each.

What a useful response notices. A promising map connects objects to choices or relationships. A list of furnishings alone is description, not yet narrative.

Ethical and structural check

An object is evidence of presence or use, not automatic proof of motive. Ask what the writer can know from memory, what a witness supplies, and what a document establishes.

Your planning line: "I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____."

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write "not yet known" wherever research is still needed.

The Yellow House

Broom, Sarah M. *The Yellow House*. Grove Press, 2019.

The kind of book. One New Orleans East family home expanding into family and city history.

Documented structure

Broom combines memoir, reporting, and family testimony around the home her mother bought in 1961. In an interview with Danielle Jackson for *Longreads*, Broom confirms four movements and a reported first movement, “The World Before Me,” before the narrator’s childhood becomes central. Later material includes Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The publisher’s opening excerpt moves from an aerial view of the former house site down into a family member’s presence there, then through the geography of New Orleans East.

Reading map: Family before the narrator; home before and after loss

Inheritance before “I” / lived childhood and home / rupture and scattered voices / return and investigation. This is a simplified reading map, not a replacement for the book’s chapter sequence.

Study lens

The house can organize a narrative even after it is gone. Notice the changing basis of knowledge: research reconstructs the time before birth; memory narrates lived experience; interviews supply other people’s experience; later investigation tests earlier understanding.

A focused reading assignment

Read the opening excerpt and compare a passage about the world before Broom’s birth with a later family testimony. Mark who knows each fact. Do not confuse an interview’s interpretation with a passage you have read in the book itself.

Course connections: Sessions 1, 3, 6, 7, and 10

Sources for this guide

Grove Atlantic. “*The Yellow House*, by Sarah M. Broom.” Accessed September 27, 2026.
<https://groveatlantic.com/book/yellow-house-the/>.

Broom, Sarah M. “People Can Become Houses.” Interview by Danielle Jackson. *Longreads*, September 26, 2019. <https://longreads.com/2019/09/26/people-can-become-houses/>.

Blueprint: Before me, with me, beyond me

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Sarah M. Broom's *The Yellow House*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. An essay about a home before your arrival, your experience there, and what you understand differently now.

1. Locate the present. Begin with a current view, surviving object, or remembered place you can describe honestly.

2. Build the world before you. Use one document and one attributed account. Leave gaps visible.

3. Enter as a character. Show a scene you actually experienced. Let the younger self know only what was known then.

4. Introduce a genuine change. Use an actual move, renovation, bereavement, or change of understanding. Small changes are sufficient.

5. Let another voice disagree. Quote or paraphrase an approved interview. Keep competing memories distinct.

6. Return with a question. End by showing what your research changes and what it cannot restore.

A short workshop

Write three sentences beginning “Before I came,” “I remember,” and “I later learned.” Identify the evidence each sentence needs.

What a useful response notices. The first and third require a named source when they reach beyond personal knowledge. “I remember” identifies a memory but does not settle a disputed date.

Ethical and structural check

Do not manufacture a disaster or disclose painful family material to make an essay dramatic. Nor should a class about 2601 equate its circumstances with the structural inequities Broom examines.

Your planning line: “I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____.”

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write “not yet known” wherever research is still needed.

Inside the Dream Palace

Tippins, Sherill. *Inside the Dream Palace: The Life and Times of New York's Legendary Chelsea Hotel*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

The kind of book. One hotel, treated as a cultural and social biography.

Documented structure

Tippins traces the Chelsea Hotel and its artistic residents across generations. *Kirkus Reviews* describes the building's conception, creative ambitions, financial difficulties, and later bohemian life. In *The Nation*, Richard Kreitner reports Tippins explaining that she drew timelines of artists' lives and organized around the places where those timelines intersected. His review also criticizes the book's emphasis on famous residents and its thinner treatment of ordinary lives.

Reading map: A building's long life told through intersecting lives

Founding idea / clusters of intersecting lives / changing uses and conditions / later legacy. Chronology supplies a broad frame; encounters supply local narrative energy.

Study lens

Study the difference between a chronological list and a sequence of consequential encounters. A person belongs in an episode because their actions illuminate a relationship or change, not because the name is famous. Read the book's selection choices as critically as its pacing.

A focused reading assignment

Select one early and one later episode. Draw a small network of the people in each. Which relationship creates movement? Which person or institution provides the transition into the next period?

Course connections: Sessions 5, 6, 7, and 10

Sources for this guide

Kirkus Reviews. Review of *Inside the Dream Palace: The Life and Times of New York's Legendary Chelsea Hotel*, by Sherill Tippins. October 1, 2013.
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sherill-tippins/inside-the-dream-palace/>.

Kreitner, Richard. "Chelsea Dreams." *Nation*, June 18, 2014.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/chelsea-dreams/>.

Blueprint: The meeting points

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Sherill Tippins's *Inside the Dream Palace*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. A history of one shared space built around three documented moments when people's paths crossed.

1. State the space's original promise. Use a dated plan, advertisement, or contemporary account, clearly attributed.

2. Choose an early encounter. Identify people, place, date, and evidence. Explain what changed through that meeting.

3. Jump to a second period. Orient the reader explicitly. Use a recurring room or object as a bridge.

4. Show a changed relationship. Let the next encounter reveal a new use, tension, or form of community.

5. Test the founding promise. Compare evidence, not nostalgia: what persisted, what changed, and for whom?

6. End with a present-day scene. Return to the same space without claiming the whole building has one story.

A short workshop

Make a timeline with three dated cards, then draw a line between cards only when an actual relationship connects them.

What a useful response notices. A meaningful connection might be a room's changing use or a resident's repeated action. "They both lived here" is location, not yet a causal connection.

Ethical and structural check

At 2601, a staff member's routine or an uncelebrated resident's arrival may matter more than a notable name. Do not arrange encounters that did not happen.

Your planning line: "I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____."

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write "not yet known" wherever research is still needed.

This Ain't No Holiday Inn

Lough, James. *This Ain't No Holiday Inn: Down and Out at the Chelsea Hotel, 1980–1995*. Schaffner Press, 2013.

The kind of book. The Chelsea Hotel through multiple residents' and participants' accounts.

Documented structure

Schaffner Press identifies Lough's book as oral history and describes a chorus of narrators, including lesser-known residents. Kreitner's comparison in *The Nation* emphasizes daily life and a section on staff, in contrast with Tippins's concentration on celebrated artists. The author's Routledge biography confirms the 2013 publication year. The sources reviewed here do not provide a complete chapter sequence.

Reading map: An oral-history chorus rather than one governing voice

Shared place + selected voices + editorial arrangement. Read for how an account is echoed, challenged, or complicated by the next speaker; do not assume the voices form a literal conversation.

Study lens

The interviewer's labor includes choosing order and supplying context. A chorus is not a pile of quotations. Its shape can emerge through recurring subjects, different social positions, and accounts that resist a single version of events.

A focused reading assignment

Read one interview-rich sequence and list each speaker's relationship to the hotel. Note what changes when a staff member speaks. Compare that sequence with one episode about the same building in Tippins's *Inside the Dream Palace*.

Course connections: Sessions 5, 6, and 10

Sources for this guide

Schaffner Press. "This Ain't No Holiday Inn, by James Lough." Accessed September 27, 2026. <https://schaffnerpress.com/books/this-aint-no-holiday-inn/>.

Kreitner, Richard. "Chelsea Dreams." *Nation*, June 18, 2014. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/chelsea-dreams/>.

Routledge. "Emergent Writing: Reclaiming Creative Voice in the Age of AI, by James Lough." Accessed September 27, 2026. <https://www.routledge.com/Emergent-Writing-Reclaiming-Creative-Voice-in-the-Age-of-AI/Lough/p/book/9781041309369>.

Blueprint: One question, three voices

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of James Lough’s *This Ain’t No Holiday Inn*; not a reconstruction of the book’s exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. A 700–1,000-word oral-history sequence about an ordinary building routine.

1. Frame one narrow question. For example: “What made you first feel at home here?” Avoid an invitation to gossip.

2. Introduce speaker A. Give relevant context with permission. Use a short, accurate passage from the interview.

3. Place a contrasting voice. Choose B for a different perspective, not for agreement or shock.

4. Provide a small bridge. Clarify dates or locations in your own voice. Do not invent connective dialogue.

5. Add a complicating voice. Use C to widen the meaning. Keep any disagreement visible and fairly represented.

6. Close without a vote. End with a concrete image or open question. You need not decide whose memory wins.

A short workshop

Use three invented, explicitly labeled practice statements about waiting for an elevator. Order them three ways and describe how the implication changes.

What a useful response notices. The order creates emphasis even when the words stay identical. For real interviews, that editorial power creates an obligation to represent each speaker fairly.

Ethical and structural check

Editing interview speech must not change its meaning. Preserve attribution, keep an approved transcript or excerpt, and state whether comments were gathered separately. The book includes mature and potentially distressing subject matter; select excerpts rather than assigning indiscriminately.

Your planning line: “I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____.”

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write “not yet known” wherever research is still needed.

The Library Book

Orlean, Susan. *The Library Book*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.

The linked paperback was published in 2019.

The kind of book. Los Angeles Central Library and the wider library institution; not an apartment-building biography.

Documented structure

Orlean investigates the 1986 Central Library fire while writing about library history, present-day workers and patrons, and her own relationship to libraries. Janet Ingraham Dwyer's toolkit for the State Library of Ohio describes the book as moving "back and forth in time" among the present, the fire, and the library's history rather than following a linear chronology. The authorized excerpt on the bookseller's page displays a chapter opening made from catalog-style entries; its reading guide notes this thematic chapter-heading device.

Reading map: A central question carries several interwoven stories

Investigative question / historical background / present-day work / personal stake. The repeated question provides continuity while the narrative changes time and scale.

Study lens

A braid is not simply alternating subjects. Ask what the next strand helps readers understand about the preceding one. The investigation creates momentum, but the institution's human work makes the book matter beyond the mystery.

A focused reading assignment

Read the available opening excerpt and chart each shift of time, place, or subject. Study the catalog entries before the chapter: how do titles establish a theme before the prose begins?

Course connections: Sessions 7, 9, and 10

Sources for this guide

Dwyer, Janet Ingraham. *The Library Book: A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit*. State Library of Ohio, November 2022. https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/library.ohio.gov/ctro-files/2023-2024/Library_Book_toolkit.pdf.

Barnes & Noble. "*The Library Book*, by Susan Orlean." Accessed September 27, 2026. <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-library-book-susan-orlean/1128298213>.

Blueprint: A question with three strands

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Susan Orlean's *The Library Book*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. An essay investigating one feature of 2601, such as a mural detail, a former amenity, or a change in a shared space.

- 1. Open with the question.** Show the feature as it exists now and state what you genuinely want to learn.
- 2. Enter the archive.** Give one dated piece of evidence. Say exactly what it establishes.
- 3. Enter a lived scene.** Offer your observation or an approved resident's account that adds a different kind of knowledge.
- 4. Complicate the first account.** Introduce a second source or a missing record without manufacturing suspense.
- 5. Return to the present.** Show how the question affects the use or understanding of the space now.
- 6. Answer only as far as evidence permits.** Separate findings, interpretations, and remaining questions.

A short workshop

Label six index cards Q, A, L, A, L, R: question, archive, lived scene, archive, lived scene, return. Reorder once and explain the effect.

What a useful response notices. The strongest order makes each strand change the reader's understanding of another. If removing a strand changes nothing, it may be background rather than part of the braid.

Ethical and structural check

Do not treat suspicion as proof or promise a solution the evidence cannot support. For a small course essay, use a modest question rather than a sensational mystery.

Your planning line: "I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____."

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write "not yet known" wherever research is still needed.

High-Risers

Austen, Ben. *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing*. Harper, 2018.

The kind of book. A housing complex and community, not one building. An important comparison, not an equivalent to 2601.

Documented structure

Kirkus Reviews describes Austen's book as part sociological study and part oral history, following Cabrini-Green through community life, public crises, demolition, and diaspora. It identifies recurring residents including Dolores Wilson, Annie Ricks, and J.R. Fleming. Their accounts give the history a human center while the narrative examines cultural, political, and housing forces.

Reading map: Several lives carry a history of housing and power

Recurring people across changing conditions / decisions and pressures / consequences / dispersal. The narrative continues beyond the buildings' destruction because the community's lives continue.

Study lens

Follow the same person across separate appearances. What new condition confronts them each time? Then ask how policy enters the scene: as explanation, a decision, a constraint, or a material consequence. This is a model of scale, not permission to reduce people to examples.

A focused reading assignment

Track one recurring resident for a sustained stretch. Keep two columns: "What the person does" and "What the surrounding system makes possible or difficult." Read a second resident to test your first interpretation.

Course connections: Sessions 5, 6, 7, and 10

Sources for this guide

Kirkus Reviews. Review of *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing*, by Ben Austen. December 1, 2017. <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ben-austen/high-risers/print/>.

Blueprint: People through a genuine change

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Ben Austen's *High-Risers*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. A carefully bounded account of an actual change in a shared space, told through two consenting participants and a documented decision.

1. Introduce two different relationships to the space. A resident and a worker might see the same routine differently. Obtain consent without pressure.

2. Show the routine before the change. Use a dated observation or clearly attributed recollection.

3. Identify the decision. Quote or summarize an accessible record; do not speculate about private motives.

4. Follow the consequences. Return to each person. Show concrete effects rather than simply reporting opinions.

5. Preserve uneven outcomes. One improvement can benefit people differently. Let the evidence remain complicated.

6. Follow life beyond the event. End with what people do next, not only with the completion of construction or a policy decision.

A short workshop

Choose a non-contentious hypothetical change for practice, such as moving a notice board. Name three people who might experience it differently.

What a useful response notices. This exercise succeeds when students recognize different needs without inventing a villain. A real essay would then require actual evidence and consent.

Ethical and structural check

Do not flatten racial and economic differences between communities or borrow another community's suffering for atmosphere. Serious harm and violence appear in this history; excerpt selection should be deliberate.

Your planning line: "I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____."

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write "not yet known" wherever research is still needed.

At Home

Bryson, Bill. *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*. Doubleday, 2010.

Vintage paperback, 2011.

The kind of book. A tour of the author's house used to explore domestic history; not chiefly a biography of that house's occupants.

Documented structure

Penguin Random House describes the organizing method as a room-by-room tour through Bryson's own house, with each room opening into the history of domestic artifacts and modern comforts. The publisher lists 2010 electronic publication and a 2011 Vintage paperback. The available page establishes the spatial method but does not supply a complete chapter list.

Reading map: Rooms as doors into a much larger history

Present room / ordinary object or comfort / surprising historical reach / return to domestic life / next room.

Study lens

Compare this with Abramsky's *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*. Both use spatial organization, but Abramsky's rooms lead toward particular people, whereas Bryson's lead toward broader domestic history. That distinction helps students decide whether their essay is a portrait or a researched exploration.

A focused reading assignment

Choose two room-centered chapters from your copy. Draw a line whenever the narrative leaves the room for a historical subject. Underline the sentence that makes the departure feel warranted.

Course connections: Sessions 1, 7, 8, and 10

Sources for this guide

Penguin Random House. "At Home, by Bill Bryson." Accessed September 27, 2026.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/20575/at-home-by-bill-bryson/>.

Blueprint: One room, one object, one historical thread

An original adaptation inspired by the organizing method of Bill Bryson's *At Home*; not a reconstruction of the book's exact plot.

A possible 2601 essay. A short researched essay beginning with a familiar object in a shared space.

- 1. Observe the object now.** Describe what you can actually see, hear, or touch, respecting access rules.
- 2. Ask an answerable question.** Choose one feature: material, use, origin, maintenance, or a documented alteration.
- 3. Follow one historical thread.** Use two reliable sources rather than a sweep through all of domestic history.
- 4. Find the human implication.** Explain whose labor, convenience, access, or habit the object makes visible.
- 5. Return to the same object.** Describe it again through the new understanding, without adding imaginary facts.
- 6. Stop before the second essay begins.** Save unrelated discoveries in a separate file.

A short workshop

Choose a door handle, radiator, mailbox, or piece of tile. Write one observation and one research question; do not answer the question from a guess.

What a useful response notices. “Why is this brass?” is a question. “It was chosen to impress wealthy tenants” is an unsupported assertion until a source substantiates it.

Ethical and structural check

A surprising fact is not enough. Verify it, explain its relevance, and resist filling a 1,000-word essay with loosely related trivia. Students do not need to imitate the book's research scale.

Your planning line: “I will organize this essay by _____ because that order will help readers understand _____.”

Before drafting: identify the opening evidence, the most important change of direction, and the final image. Write “not yet known” wherever research is still needed.

A Short-Form Companion: Joseph Mitchell's “Up in the Old Hotel”

Mitchell, Joseph. “Up in the Old Hotel.” In *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories*. Pantheon Books, 1992.

First collected in *The Bottom of the Harbor* (Little, Brown, 1959).

This is one essay to study, not a claim that the full collection is a biography of a single building.

Janet Malcolm’s account in *The New York Review of Books* describes a movement from Mitchell’s conversations with the restaurateur Louis Morino to the history of the South Street building and then to exploration of its abandoned upper floors. Mitchell narrates but repeatedly gives space to Louie’s extended accounts. The physical ascent turns architectural space into narrative sequence.

Reading map

Everyday encounter / a guide’s story / an unanswered question about the building / movement into another space / an altered sense of the place.

Why this belongs beside the books

A short essay gives students a manageable structural model. Read for the delay before the ascent: how does conversation make the building’s upper floors matter before the movement begins? Then track which details change the narrator’s understanding without supplying a complete explanation.

A necessary caution

Malcolm also documents composites and inventions elsewhere in Mitchell’s work: the composite title figure of *Old Mr. Flood*, the invented “king of the gypsies” Cockeye Johnny Nikanov, and the opening encounter in “Mr. Hunter’s Grave.” Those issues should be taught, not concealed. They do not by themselves establish that a particular incident in “Up in the Old Hotel” was invented. Borrow a structural technique, never a license to fabricate.

For 2601, use only accessible, authorized spaces. No exercise requires entry to roofs, locked rooms, staff-only areas, or unsafe parts of a building.

Source for this guide

Malcolm, Janet. “The Master Writer of the City.” *New York Review of Books*, April 23, 2015.
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/04/23/joseph-mitchell-master-writer-city/>.

Blueprint: The Guided Passage

A 700–1,200-word essay in which a permitted walk or visit changes the writer’s understanding. These are suggested practice lengths, not publication rules.

- 1. Start with a modest occasion.** Meet a consenting guide or begin an ordinary errand in a shared space.
- 2. Let a detail create curiosity.** Describe an actual object or feature and the question it prompts.
- 3. Make room for the guide.** Use approved quotations or attributed recollection. Do not improve dialogue by inventing it.
- 4. Move through one threshold.** The next place may be an adjacent room, an archive page, or a photograph, not a forbidden physical space.
- 5. Let discovery remain partial.** Show what the visit reveals and what is still unknown.
- 6. Return with a changed view.** Use one concrete detail to register a shift rather than attaching a moral.

Ten-minute exercise

On paper, plan a route through three permitted locations. Beside each, write one observation, one question, and one source that could answer it. Then remove a stop: does the narrative lose anything essential?

Model observation. A strong plan makes each stop alter understanding. Three descriptions in a row form an itinerary; three connected discoveries can form a narrative.

Do not borrow the danger

Suspense can come from uncertainty, attention, or a change of understanding. It does not require physical risk, a hidden scandal, or trespass.

Choose the Shape Your Material Needs

Select a structure after looking at the evidence you actually possess. Do not force a neighbor's life into the outline because the outline is attractive.

Households and a common question. Use when you have two or three accounts connected by one domestic practice. Model: Jane Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*.

Rooms and objects. Use when spaces help reveal a particular person. Model: Sasha Abramsky, *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*.

Before, rupture, return. Use when a real change divides experience and later research alters memory. Model: Sarah M. Broom, *The Yellow House*.

Intersecting lives. Use when documented encounters carry a longer history. Model: Sherill Tippins, *Inside the Dream Palace*.

A chorus. Use when different people's voices are the most important evidence. Model: James Lough, *This Ain't No Holiday Inn*.

An investigative braid. Use when records, lived experience, and a current question illuminate one another. Model: Susan Orlean, *The Library Book*.

People and conditions. Use when a change affects people differently and the relevant decisions can be documented. Model: Ben Austen, *High-Risers*.

An object's wider history. Use when an ordinary feature supports a focused research question. Model: Bill Bryson, *At Home*.

A guided passage. Use when a real visit or walk changes understanding. Model: Joseph Mitchell, "Up in the Old Hotel."

A reusable structural worksheet

My subject is _____. My actual evidence is _____.

The central question is _____. The reader needs it because _____.

My opening will show _____. Its source is _____.

My middle will change direction when _____.

I move between times or voices by _____.

My ending returns to _____, now understood as _____.

What I still need to verify or obtain permission for: _____.

One Story, Three Structures

An optional 30-minute workshop for Sessions 7 or 10. It replaces part of the discussion rather than adding another session, and nothing needs to be collected or graded.

The exercise

Minutes 0–5. Choose a modest subject: a communal notice board, a mailroom routine, or one visible mural detail. List only what the group actually knows; put possible research in a separate column.

Minutes 5–13. In pairs, outline the subject three ways: a room-centered tour; two or three attributed voices; and a question alternating between present observation and a record. Write headings, not essays.

Minutes 13–22. Compare openings and endings. Identify which outline needs the least new reporting and which could best express the intended meaning.

Minutes 22–30. Each writer chooses one structure and writes a first paragraph using only available evidence. Anyone may pass on sharing.

Discussion with model responses

Which structure is best? There is no universal winner. The best fit makes the available evidence meaningful without adding unsupported scenes or demanding more reporting than the writer can undertake.

Can two structures coexist? Yes. A room-by-room essay may contain a braid of history and memory. Choose a dominant organizing principle so readers can orient themselves.

What counts as a turning point? A change in the writer's understanding can suffice. A newly found date, a conflicting memory, or an unexpected use of a space can redirect the essay without manufactured drama.

What can an ending leave unresolved? Anything the evidence does not settle. A precise final image or a well-defined question may be more truthful than a sweeping conclusion.

Keep the course sustainable

One well-shaped essay is enough. These books are models for attention and structure, not a commitment to produce a building history or a class anthology.

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