

STARTING WITH PLACE: FINDING THE ON-RAMP TO A GREAT STORY

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MATT SKILLEN

At the intersection of Interstate 24 and Kansas Highway 99 rests a small and vibrant town of Wamego. Skirted momentarily by the winding Kansas River, Wamego is the very picture of a recognizable rural town. Take a stroll down Lincoln Avenue and you'll be immediately transported to another time when only one drug store, one bank, and two pizza restaurants were open to serve the public. Sure, one could ask for more. But the question remains, do you really need more?

Like all small towns in the heart of America, Wamego has its own unique charm. It's not a presumptuous town. They all have their own variety of a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to outside observers. Wamego is the kind of town that celebrates its unique setting and identity. It leans into the stereotype of being in Kansas—so much so that it proudly promotes the Oz Museum, which is an entire museum dedicated to the film *The Wizard of Oz*. If you ever find yourself driving through Kansas on I-70 and you see Exit 228 to Alma and Wamego, consider taking the afternoon to drive up Highway 99. It's the kind of place you have to see for yourself. I lived by Wamego for two years, and I had a remarkable opportunity to get to know the town a little better when I went on a narrative journey with a group of high schoolers. Their writing later became spoken word pieces that would resonate years later.

This writing project I co-designed with my friend and colleague Lori Goodson, an English teacher at Wamego High School (a project we would later refer to as “Rural Voices”) was centered on the relationship each student had with their hometown. And I was absolutely stoked to be invited to join Lori's classes in this effort. I was a graduate student at Kansas State University at the time, and before enrolling in K-State's College of Education's Ph.D. program, I was a middle school English teacher. I absolutely thrive in a classroom environment and this opportunity was almost too good to be true. As an added bonus, I wouldn't have to grade any of the student work.