

Observations from a Single Spot

Activity Overview:

Students observe a single spot and record impressions of it. Later, they return to note the changes in the spot.

Objectives:

- Practice observation skills
- Create expressive writing in response to direct observation
- Perceive seasonal and/or phenological changes in a natural setting

Subjects Covered: Science, Language Arts, and Art

Grades: K through 12

Activity Time: In the prairie- 30 minutes

In class - 15 minutes

Season: Any

Materials:

Journal, pen or pencil, clipboards

State Standards:

Language Arts:

Create or produce writing (B.4.1, 8.1, 12.1)

Orally communicate (C.4.1, 8.1, 12.1)

Science:

Observe, describe, and measure physical events (D.4.4)

Social Studies:

Describe interactions with physical environment (A.8.8)



Background

Developing observational skills is both an art and a science. Artist and naturalist writer, Clare Walker Leslie, once stated that “the goal of journaling should be to capture one exceptional moment each day”. Making observations from a single spot helps you to recognize those exceptional moments as you take the time, space, and effort to enjoy a special place, observing both the large and small details of the area. You can use your senses to perhaps smell the richness of the soil, feel the roughness of a leaf, or maybe glimpse a hawk soaring overhead. By revisiting a single spot over time, you can also witness seasonal changes that occur each year at about the same time. Focusing on the natural world can also be a springboard for personal reflection.

Activity Description

Go out to a natural area and select a spot. You will need to identify this spot so you can return to it at a later date.

Settle into your place for at least ten minutes without writing. Your teacher will tell you when ten minutes are up. You can begin writing at any time after that.

Get to know your spot. Think, observe, and experience it. Write down the things you sense or your thoughts as you sit. Write in any way that you want. You can list observations, write an essay, compose some poetic lines or just jot down thoughts as they come to you.

Following are some things you may wish to consider:

- What do you see? Look close up, far away and in between. Examine the soil grain, leaf margin, and decomposing fibers. Examine the waving landscape, distant horizon and things in between the two.
- What do you hear? Listen to sounds close up and far away, loud and soft. Put your ear to the ground and listen to the minute rustlings and hold your head high and listen to the wind.
- What do you feel? Feel the small, big, soft and hard things around you; feel the cool leaf, wet detritus, sharp grass blade, the hot wind and hard ground.
- What do you smell? Tune into different smells. Try to smell the soil, the ant, and the water drop as well as the breeze, the plant community and the earth.
- What feelings do you have as you sit in your spot?
- What processes are happening on your spot?
- Who or what has been at your spot?
- How is your spot a part of the larger area surrounding it?

Observations from a Single Spot (cont.)

- What words describe your spot?

Return and share your observations and insights with others in the class. How were your observations similar and different? Pay attention not just to how things look but how they smell and sound? Try not to overlook the small things that might be staring you in the face? Those are important observations too.

Extensions

- Create a personal journal for recording your observations over time.
- Draw a picture of the spot. The drawing can capture a close up or vista view (see Earth Partnership for Schools activity, “Visual Assessment: A Prairie Through an Artist’s Eyes”).
- Create a poem about the spot. The poem could be in haiku, cinquain, diamante or other appropriate form. (See Earth Partnership for Schools activity, “Schoolyard Poetry/Rap”).
- Visit your spot monthly and create a record of the changes.
- Make a calendar that describes the changes you witness along with the observations of classmates.

Additional Resources

- Leslie, C.W. & Roth, E.E. (1998). *Nature journaling: Learning to observe and connect with the world around you*. Pownal, VT: Storey Books.

Sample Nature Writing:

- Ehrlich, G. (1985). *The solace of open spaces*. New York: Penguin.
- Gruchow, P. (1995). *Grass roots: The universe of home*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.
- Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, R. (1989). *The island within*. North Point Press.
- Olson, S.F. (1976). *Reflections from the north country*. Alfred E. Knopf, Inc.

Assessments

- Create a short story based on your single spot observations.
- Keep a nature journal or portfolio of observations over time.
- Have students make oral presentations to their peers of their observations and related writings.
- Develop 2-3 scientific explanations for possible connections among living and non-living things observed in a single spot over time.
- Have students name 2-3 living plants, animals, or insects observed in their “single spot” and then explain how those organisms may have adapted to their environment.