

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

The Nature Journal: Observing, Naming, Knowing

Kara Mae Brown

This activity guide is a selection from the *Writing Spaces* Assignment and Activity Archive, an open access companion resource to the Writing Spaces open textbook series.

To access additional selections, visit: <http://writingspaces.org/aaa>.

Assignment and activity selections © 2026 by the respective authors. Unless otherwise stated, these works are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) and are subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use.

To view a copy of this license, visit

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>, email

info@creativecommons.org, or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA. To view the Writing Spaces

Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

All rights reserved. For permission to reprint, please contact the author(s) of the individual articles, who are the respective copyright owners.

The Nature Journal: Observing, Naming, Knowing

Kara Mae Brown

Overview

Writing is a powerful tool for understanding and communicating about the natural world. In turn, the places that writing happens inform, influence, and shape the writing. As Madison Percy Jones writes, “writing emerges out of the reciprocal interaction of writers and the complex rhetorical ecologies. Place is more than content for writing; it constitutes the conditions for writing itself.” Indeed, as students write about and in place, they deepen their understanding of both the ecologies of rhetoric and the ecologies of places. For this activity, students engage with their natural surroundings to learn techniques for observation and naming. Ultimately, students will gain more knowledge about the natural world and communicate what they discover in their writing.

Much of this activity is inspired by John Muir Laws’ book, *The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling*. As a naturalist, he places particular emphasis on the act of observing, saying, “Learn to observe deeply and open yourself to the wonder of inquiry and investigation” (5). Indeed, observing is a profound way of knowing, based on one’s own lived experience. The observing students will do in this activity is not only useful for writing about place or nature, but will also sharpen their observation skills more broadly.

Indeed, by developing questions and reflections out of their observations, students have the opportunity to learn more about their relationship with the natural world and to understand that relationship as a profound way of knowing a place. They can begin

to understand how their own lived experiences shape their connection with nature. The notes students will create as a product of this activity can be a powerful springboard into a number of different writing assignments, like profiles of a place, nature essays, poetry, and many other genres. Students may also share notes with one another in class in order to learn from one another's observations (e.g. to learn about different species than the ones they observed) or even compare observations of the same species (e.g. in order to learn how different individuals may notice different things). As such, students go into the more expanded assignment with a collection of observations, details, and ideas that goes even beyond their own experience.

In class, we discuss how effective writing about place and nature almost always relies on vivid descriptions and often on using the exact names of things (e.g. "California poppy" vs. "flower"). Students' notes from their nature journals equip them to compose a draft with those details at their disposal.

Time Commitment

Variable depending on time availability and needs: 20 minutes to 1 hour.

Materials

A physical notebook, pencil, colored pencils (optional), and a smartphone or other mobile device loaded with the apps iNaturalist, Seek by iNaturalist, Merlin Bird ID, and Rock Identifier: Stone ID; if the use of digital technology presents a barrier to students, they can be encouraged to consult regional field manuals that the instructor has placed on reserve in the library after their observations. For instance, students in my classes are encouraged to refer to *A Naturalists Guide to the Santa Barbara Region*, by Joan Easton Lentz, which is a handbook for the plants and animals of our local ecosystem.

Assignment or Activity Process

- First, instructors should define the bounds of a place for students to explore - it could be the campus, a city block, a nearby walking path or park, or, as our class did, a natural reserve to be visited during a field trip. Students should do any relevant research before going into the field, including gathering information about the place, its natural and cultural history, and its ecology. Also in preparation, students should download apps to their mobile device that can help them identify any animals, plants, or minerals they might encounter (see more in “Materials” above).
- Once in the field, students should move freely and explore. If they are able, they should be encouraged to sit, stand, walk, and otherwise look at the space from a number of different perspectives. Once students find a spot that speaks to them, they should spend time simply observing by engaging all their senses, taking notes about what they see, smell, taste (only when absolutely sure of the safety of doing so), hear, and feel.
- Ask students to focus on one (or a few, depending on time) animal, plant, or stone they find in their chosen spot. They should make use of the apps they’ve downloaded to identify the species or type that they are observing and note the basic identification information in their notebook. Students should be encouraged to pay particular attention to the scientific and common names of the animals, plants, and stones they observe.
- In their notebook, students should sketch, in pencil or even colored pencils, what they see as a way to record their observations. Students can add notes to their sketch to draw attention to any particularly interesting aspects of the anatomy or structure of the thing they are observing.

Students should make note of any follow-up questions about their observations that they might wish to pursue later.

- Finally, students should spend their final moments in their spot reflecting on the experience. In their notebooks, they should write a paragraph or two exploring any feelings that came up for them during the process, or any memories or associations they have with the place or what was observed there.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Hone their skills as observers of the natural world using all five senses
- Practice using digital tools to identify the flora, fauna, and geology of a place
- Learn the scientific and common names of flora, fauna, and geology in order to increase their literacy of a place
- Become better, more thorough notetakers
- Explore their own feelings, memories, and associations with a place to better understand their own relationship to the natural world

Learning Accommodations

- For students with physical disabilities, instructors can encourage observing from a paved path, bench, or other more accessible locations. Instructors should encourage students to see the natural world in even what may seem like unlikely places, like gardens, single trees in urban areas, or their very own backyards.

- If the use of mobile digital technology presents barriers to participation for some students, instructors can put field manuals for regional animals, plants, birds, and stones on reserve in their university library. In that case, students can make their observations while in the field and make their identifications later, based on their notes. Indeed, this approach might be preferable in some cases, since learning to use field manuals is a useful skill in its own right.

Works Cited

- Jones, Madison Percy. "Writing Conditions: The Premises of Ecocomposition." *Enculturation*. 23 Aug. 2018.
<https://enculturation.net/writing-conditions>.
- Laws, John Muir. *The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling*. Heyday, 2016.