

Approaching Walden 2004

The Natural History Writing Curriculum Unit

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Overview

This unit presents a model for introducing students to natural history writers and explores the natural history essay. It also provides a potential jumping-off point for investigating the development and philosophical underpinnings of environmentalism and the field of ecology.

Students will read excerpts of influential natural history writers ranging from Henry David Thoreau (1814-1859) to modern writers such as Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002). Students will be asked to select a place that they will repeatedly visit throughout the unit to observe and write about. This would ideally be a property in their town that is in a relatively natural state, conservation lands or town, state, or federal parks or forests, for example, but may be their own backyard or neighborhood wood lot. They will maintain a journal throughout this unit, responding to specific writing prompts or free-writing based on their wanderings and observations. The unit culminates with students writing a natural history essay about the area they have selected.

Included with this unit are several essays and excerpts that can be used for readings. However, this should in no way be construed to be a complete selection of natural history writers, nor even a collection of the most significant writers or works of natural history writing. Texts that may be of interest include *Nature's Economy* by Donald Worster, *Natural History in America* by Wayne Hanley, and *The Book of Naturalists: An Anthology of the Best Natural History* edited by William Beebe.

Objectives for Students

- Become familiar with some influential American natural history writers and the natural history essay as a form of communication.
- Become familiar with writing styles and techniques used by some influential natural history writers.
- Discover the motivations behind the natural history essay as a means of expressing opinions on the cultural and environmental landscape.
- Maintain a journal that helps the student become intimately knowledgeable about a particular place in their hometown.
- Utilize the natural history essay as a way to express their own opinion about the state of the environment, society, or other pressing topic in a way that makes the problem and the student's perceived solutions relevant to their community.

Process

Readings

Every other Friday during a full-year course, students will be responsible for having read an essay or excerpt from the following naturalists:

Henry David Thoreau (from *Walking*, 1862)

John Muir (*Save the Redwoods!*, 1920)

(www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings)

John Burroughs (*The Falling Leaves*, 1921)

(<http://www.johnburroughs.org/works/seasons/autumn.htm>)

Aldo Leopold (from *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949)

Wallace Stegner (*The Wilderness Letter*, 1960)

(www.wilderness.org/OurIssues/Wilderness/wildernessletter.cfm)

Stephen Jay Gould (*Linnaeus's Luck?*, *Natural History*, September 2000)

Barbara Smuts (*Coming Home: Living with Baboons*, *Natural History*, October 2001)

Wendell Berry (*For Love of the Land*, *Sierra*, May-June 2002)

Other writers that may be of interest include:

Mark Catesby, John and William Bartram, Lewis and Clark, Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon, Thomas Nuttall, Herman Melville, Louis Agassiz, Asa Gray, John Holbrook, Rachael Carson, Mary Roberts, J.B.S. Haldane, Isabella Bird, Barry Lopez, among many others.

Class discussion will focus on the content of the reading. Specific attention will be paid to the philosophical concepts being presented by the author and how the selection was used to convey the author's opinions about the environment, or how the environment was used to illustrate the author's ideas.

Journals

Students will maintain a journal throughout the course comprising a minimum of 10 entries. Journals will be collected for review every other Friday (alternating with the natural history readings). A journal prompt will be handed out at the beginning of the week.

- Go out and spend an afternoon getting familiar with the entire property: walk its trails (if there are any), identify obvious boundary indicators, get a sense of the area's upland and wetland composition, etc. Once you think you've got a good sense of the area, write a descriptive narrative that gives your classmates an overview of the features of the property. This should be written in a matter-of-fact way that gives an accounting of the location, features, and characteristics of the property.
- Observe one organism that you find on your selected property closely for 20 or 30 minutes. Write a descriptive narrative based upon your observations. Be sure to include classification details and other pertinent scientific information.
- In your travels around your selected property, take note of an organism (any type) that you can empathize with. Place yourself in that organism's stead and write about your observations of the young student that you've noticed on a few occasions poking around and observing things.
- What do you think the cultural history is of the area you've selected? How has the land been used by humans throughout time? What evidence is there?
- What is the value of the area you've selected? To whom is it valuable and why? Write a narrative exploring the myriad values of your selected property.
- Write an advocacy piece for your property. Was it worth protecting? Is there a better use of the land? Fully defend your position.
- Draw something you observe on one of your walks. Create several field sketches from different angles or perspectives.
- Create a fictional account of the property.
- Write a poem about your property, or about something you've observed there.
- Write a draft of the contents of a travel brochure for your selected property.

Evaluation

Readings

Students should be engaged in a discussion of readings. It should be clear that the readings have been completed and understood. Grading will be on a full-, partial-, or no-credit scale based upon participation in biweekly discussions, and account for one-third of the unit's credit.

Journal

Journal entries should be of minimum length (2 pages, e.g.). Journal prompts should be addressed completely and in a thoughtful manner. Grading of the journal entries will be done on a full-, partial-, or no-credit scale and will be worth two-thirds of the credit for this unit.

Essay

Students will coalesce their experiences reading from the works of influential natural history writers and maintaining a journal into a natural history essay. The essay should be relevant to their experiences and observations and express their opinions about any social or environmental topic that is of concern to them. The essay should have direct bearing upon the area that they have chosen to study during the course of the year and upon which they have based their journal entries. The essay will count as a test grade.

Resources

Websites

www.johnburroughs.org	John Burroughs Association (information and links for natural history writers)
www.walden.org	The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods
www.amnh.org	The American Museum of Natural History
www.findarticles.com	LookSmart article database (<i>Natural History</i> article content on-line and much more)

Books

- Worster, Donald. 1994. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hanley, Wayne. 1977. *Natural History in America, From Mark Catesby to Rachel Carson*. Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., Inc. New York.
- Beebe, William (ed). 1988. *The Book of Naturalists: An Anthology of the Best Natural History*. Princeton University Press.