



# Field Notes to Essays

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Unit: Henry as Author

Topic: Observing, writing, revising, and editing

## Thoreau Quotations

“The question is not what you look at, but what you see.”

—*Journal*, August 5, 1851

“Improve every opportunity to express yourself in writing, as if it were your last.”

—*Journal*, December 17, 1851

## Background

Field notes are short, simple recordings of observations, the setting, sensory data, facts, ideas, thoughts, ideas, and questions discovered while engaged in activities. Field notes can provide a valuable foundation for any writing project, from songs and poems to essays and scientific research reports. In fact, Thoreau used this exact approach to his writing, and is renowned for extensively reworking journal pages and passages, first into lectures and later, through more revision, into published essays or his longer literary works. And while *Walden* is his most well-known work, his journal is the most extensive with over 2 million words. Well beyond the original purpose, his journal has also been used to track changes to the life cycles of plants and animals.

## Objectives

1. To introduce and practice a method of taking notes in the field during outdoor activities.
2. Use the field notes to develop journal entries.
3. Expand, re-write, revise, and edit the journal entries into a full-scale essay.

## Method

Students will make observations that they record in a small notebook. These field notes will be used to develop journal entries and full-scale essays.

## Time Required

3-3.5 hours, broken up between several days

## Materials

- Small, pocket-sized notebook
- Pencil or pen

## Procedure

1. To start the lesson, ask the students if they keep diaries or other journals? Field notes are similar to diaries in that they are our personal observations but differ because they are less about our feelings and thoughts and more about what we observe out in the world. Thoreau took daily walks and recorded notes based on his observations. From these field notes, he then wrote journal entries, which were then used to write lectures, essays, and even whole books.
2. Explain that the students are now going to practice taking field notes, which will be used as the basis for journal entries and eventually full-fledged essays. Remind students that they will want to record the date, time, weather, and things they see, smell, feel or hear. Additionally, they will want to write down thoughts, ideas, and questions that they have about what they are observing. If desired, give them a theme or topic that they will be writing about.
3. Have the students go outside to observe and take field notes. Allow the students at least 15 minutes of observation but for older students up to 30 minutes may be allowed. Depending on the outdoor area you have access to, you may ask the students to sit and make observations or have them walk throughout the area. Additionally, we recommend having students complete this step at least three times, but the more times they can practice this skill, the more material they will have to draw from when writing a complete essay. Students may also want to sketch something that they observe. Alternatively, this step may also be done as homework.
4. Within a day or two of the observation and field notes session, have students create a more developed journal entry based on the field notes and, if chosen, a consistent theme or topic of observation. While it is good to allow some time between the field notes session and journal writing—so that students have some time to reflect a bit on their observations—you probably don't want to wait more than a day or two to have the students write their journal entries after each period of observation.
5. Some differences between the field notes and journal entries are:
  - a. Journal entries use complete sentences, where field notes might just be words or fragments that describe their observations,
  - b. Journal entries might include metaphor and simile, onomatopoeia or other literary devices that they come up with when putting their field notes into more complete thoughts,
  - c. Journal entries may include more developed hypotheses about what they saw in their observations (examples: if they saw a fallen tree, what caused it to fall? If one area they observed was wet while another was dry, what caused that difference?)
  - d. Journal entries might include details/stories of other things in their life that their observations make them think of as they are reviewing the field notes (example: a particular flower they saw and wrote about reminds them of a relative who loves that particular kind of flower)
6. Allowing at least a few days after the last journal entry (again, allowing the students some time for the ideas to simmer and evolve), have the students write a longer essay

based upon either one or all of their journal entries, and, if chosen, a consistent theme or topic.

### Reflect and Explain

- Compared to just sitting down to write an essay, was this method harder or easier (taking field notes, then writing journal entries based upon the field notes, and finally writing an essay)?
- What is one thing you learned from making observations and taking field notes that you might not have known if you weren't purposefully observing?

### Extensions

1. Pair students up to exchange essays. Have the students edit each other's essays. Then have each student revise their essay based upon peer feedback.
2. To practice public speaking, have students take turns reading their essays (or part of them) to the class.
3. Ask students to create a visual representation of their essay, which could be a photograph of one of the natural objects featured in their essay, a painting, a sculpture, etc.

### Vocabulary

**field notes** - short, simple recordings of observations, the setting, sensory data, facts, ideas, thoughts, ideas, and questions discovered while engaged in activities.

**observation** - the act of careful watching and listening; the activity of paying close attention to someone or something in order to get information.

### Common Core Standards

#### English Language Anchor Standards (all grades)

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1](#)  
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2](#)  
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3](#)  
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4](#)  
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5  
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7  
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.10  
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.