



Did You See That?

Unit: *Henry as Naturalist*

Topic: *Observation and description*

Thoreau Quotation

“A week or two ago I brought home a handsome pitch pine cone which had freshly fallen and was closed perfectly tight. It was put into a table drawer. To-day I am agreeably surprised to find that it has there dried and opened with perfect regularity, filling the drawer, and from a solid, narrow, and sharp cone, has become a broad, rounded, open one, - has, in fact, expanded with the regularity of a flower’s petals into a conical flower of rigid scales, and has shed a remarkable quantity of delicate-winged seeds.”

—*Journal*, February 23, 1853

Background

Henry David Thoreau spent hours every day walking through the woods and fields of his home town of Concord, MA. He would often pick up interesting objects and bring them home for closer observation; he even modified his hat to carry samples of leaves and flowers that he’d picked! Once at home, he could watch things over an extended time, study them closely under different lighting, use lenses to look more closely, or observe interactions that he couldn’t see out in nature. Observing a natural object closely over an extended time often reveals many details that were not immediately obvious.

Objectives

1. To see details in a natural object not readily apparent.
2. To write a detailed description of the object, including an explanation of details that were revealed after close, extended observation.

Method

Students will observe a natural object closely over a one-week period and write descriptive journal entries after each observation. At the conclusion of the week, they will write a descriptive paragraph (or more) discussing changes and new details that come to their attention throughout their observations.

Time Required

15-30 minutes every other day for a week, plus an additional 60 minutes on the last day (up to 150 minutes total)

Materials

- Any found natural object. Live animals should be avoided for this exercise (but see Extensions below).
- Hand lens or magnifying glass (optional)
- Field notebook or journal, pencil

Procedure

1. Students should select a natural object on a class field trip or at home. Like Henry discovered, a pine cone can work well. Leaves, a flower, a feather, or a rock are also good choices.
2. Students should use their field notebook to write a description of the object upon first observation. Students should write a physical description of the object and include the details that are obvious to them at first.
3. Over the course of a week, ask students to spend 5 to 10 minutes every other day closely observing their chosen object. They should be looking for changes in the object, new details that catch their eye, or anything new that attracts their attention upon close observation. Ask them to include descriptions of smell, texture(s), sound (if applicable), color, whether the object is relatively wet or dry, abnormalities/damage that they notice, etc.
4. After each observation, a detailed description of the object and the changes or new details they've noticed should be written. Students should note the time of day they are making their observations and any other environmental details, such as type and amount of light present (sunlight vs. lightbulb or bright vs. dim)
5. At the end of the week, students should review the notes made after their initial and subsequent observations, and use those observations to write a paragraph (or more) about their object with detailed, descriptive language. They should spend particular effort describing any new details that emerged after close observation, and try to explain why these details emerged (did the object actually change or did the student just notice something new that he/she didn't see before?).

Reflect and Explain

- Explain why, at first, you might have missed the detail(s) you discovered after close observation.
- In addition to details you might have missed on your initial observation, did the object undergo any changes (like Henry's pine cone opening up) over the week?
- Were there any factors in the environment where you kept the object that contributed to changes you noticed in your object over the course of the week? (for example, was it kept in a wet or dry spot for the week and did that impact the object?)
- Do you think you could have seen all of the details you noticed without taking the step of bringing the object home?
- Did the environment in which you observed the object impact the details you noticed (amount of light or wind, for example)?
- If you observed any changes in your object over the week, what do you think the changes in the object might tell you about your object?

Extensions

1. As an alternative, the teacher can collect a sample of pond water with leaves—and possibly living, moving organisms!—for in-class observation.
2. After the week has concluded, have the students go back once a week over a month or longer (or once a month for the rest of the school year) to observe if there are more changes or details that they notice. Ask them to consider how the two different time intervals (every day vs. every week/month) of observation might impact what they are noticing or the changes that are occurring.

Vocabulary

affect - to have an impact on (it is a verb so it's an action).

dynamic - always active or changing; having or showing a lot of energy; of or relating to energy, motion, or physical force.

effect - the result of an action, as in those “cause and effect” papers you might write in English class.

static - showing little or no change, action, or progress; of or relating to bodies at rest or forces in equilibrium.

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.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.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4
Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.6
Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.3
Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.