

Provide students with examples of journal entries by naturalists from the region.

Activity

Grades K-4

Designate one table in (or area of) the classroom as the Nature Table, and explain that this will be a place to display natural (not man-made) objects. Take students on a walk through a natural area or even the schoolyard. Allow them to collect objects to place on the Nature Table. As objects are placed on the table, students may record where and when the objects were found and details about the objects in a notebook kept on the table. Objects for the table might include a rock, a feather, or a leaf. Based on what is recorded in the notebook, allow students each week to show and describe their objects to the class. Objects on the Nature Table should change over time.

Grades 5-12

Go to an outdoor area large enough for everyone to sit, and observe nature without talking to each other. Each person should have a composition book that will be used exclusively for journal entries. Use either a pen or pencil. Pencils lend themselves to sketching, but use whatever is comfortable. A resealable plastic bag is useful in protecting and storing journals and pens or pencils.

The goal is to observe natural objects and events, and record them. The style may include sketches, technical details, and personal reflections. There should be no set length for the assignment. Curiosity and observational skills need encouragement, and suffer if a strict format is required. Sketching should be encouraged, since more detail is usually observed. Sometimes only a portion of an organism will be sketched, such as a beak, tail, or flower. Even motion may be sketched.

To begin, record the date, time of day, location, and weather; this allows for comparisons over the seasons and years. Record observations of whatever you feel is interesting, and note how you are affected by those observations. Look and listen for signs of creatures, large and small. A plant may be observed, but there are also many creatures that inhabit plants. The longer everyone remains still and quiet, the more likely creatures will be to return to their normal daily activities. Insects will search for favorite plants or prey, birds will search for insects or berries, chipmunks will forage, turtles will sun themselves, and rabbits will venture out.

Wrap-Up

Bring everyone back together as a group, and have students name the organisms they observed and what they felt were the most interesting details about them.

Assessment

- Are detailed observations recorded in the journals?
- Are the details sufficient that the organism (or an important part or action) is recognizable by others?
- Do the journal entries employ several senses?



Wetland Journeys

Summary

Observations of natural events, activities, flora and fauna have been recorded in journals for hundreds of years. In our fast-paced world, observations recorded in a handwritten journal allow time for reflection about ourselves and the natural world.

Objectives

In a handwritten journal, students will record detailed observations of the natural world through words and illustrations.

Materials

- Bound composition books
- Pens or pencils
- Resealable plastic bags

Making Connections

Observations are made by using our senses. While recording observations in a journal, we begin to organize, analyze, and synthesize them, comparing them with previous knowledge or observations, noting similarities, differences, and details that we may not have paid attention to otherwise. The ability to record observations is a skill that may be applied throughout our personal lives, such as in diaries, baby albums, health and veterinary records; and in many areas of employment, such as in boat captains' log books, in truck drivers' record books, in hairdresser note cards, and in scientists' research notebooks.

Background

Humans of the Stone Age painted their observations of bison and other game animals on cave walls. Naturalists such as Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau recorded their observations in journals. Journals help us to understand ourselves and the world around us. Occasionally we have an opportunity to view journals from the past. These allow us to note the changed and unchanging aspects of the natural world (such as wetlands that have been drained and filled), as well as those that have remained the same (the horseshoe crab).

Procedure

Warm-Up

Close your eyes and remember the last bird you saw. Open your eyes, and either sketch the bird or write a description of the bird. Now look at a large picture or poster of a bird, and sketch or write a description of it. Which sketch or description had the most detail? Why was it easier to sketch or describe the second bird? If we sketch or describe creatures when we see them, or soon afterward, we are able to record in more detail and with more accuracy. Journals are memory aids.