

STATION B: Field Notes - Nature Writing in the Field

Developed by Joe Belknap, 2017

Staffed by PWHS teachers and chaperones. Students explore the natural beauty of the trails and complete some guided observational writing about what they see, hear, and experience. Maps available in the Visitor's Center.

Writing Goals: As we hike the center's nature trails, we will take time to simply sit in a place, observe it, describe it in detail, and work with the memories that surface, integrating them into prose rather than resisting them. The results might be hard to categorize: Is this a nature essay, a memoir, a personal meditation, or all of the above? Worry not. The goal is simply to free the writer to be herself on the page, watching and remembering.

Step 1 - Notebook Heading: At the top of a page in your notebook, write the following heading:

Station B: Field Notes

Friday, April 21, 2017

Step 2 - Stop. Observe. Take it in.: We'll break to observe and write during our hike. Find a place to **sit by yourself**. Take a moment to take in your surroundings before you start writing. As you settle in, you might, at first, be more aware of the thoughts and worries that followed you onto the trail than what is actually before you. Close your eyes for a moment and listen to the sounds around you while you also pay attention to your breath. Listen to your heart beating; listen to the birdsong, wind, water. Inhale the smells of vegetation and water. Open your eyes and note the palette of colors and textures of the sand, trees, birds, rocks, tracks - animal and human. There is so much life to take in before you even lift your pen!

Step 3 - Imagery Notes: Begin by simply taking notes on what you **see, hear, and smell** close at hand. If you know the names of things, write them down. Be specific. Capture what you heard with your eyes closed and what you hear now. Sketch what's before you, if it helps. Record details that will help you remember the scene later, but don't feel obliged to just yet to write in complete sentences. **Key words and descriptive phrases will do. Aim for two pages of vivid phrases and key words to work with as a kind of imagery bank.**

Step 4 - Write: Begin writing with a simple "you are here" map that shows exactly where you are. For example, *I am sitting beneath a willow tree on the banks of the Grass River, in northern New York, watching a great blue heron land across the river.*

Look at your imagery notes, your sketches, and continue writing, working in some of this material. If memories come, unusual associations, abstract thoughts or personal feelings, feel free to include the ones that seem most compelling. No matter how hard you try to stay in the present moment your mind will wander, so just let it happen and follow that trail. Nudge yourself back to the present now and then, recording what you are seeing now, in the present scene, when you do.

If a number of memories have surfaced, find a trigger from within the scene itself that allows you to explore one of the memories that came up in greater detail. Example: *As I watch the heron swoop down, I remember the time Lisa tried to teach me to dance the tango. We'd just come back from lunch, and...* When you're ready, find a link back to the present scene, back to the now, back to the natural world.

Writing unlocks writing, so keep writing. If you don't know what to write about, write to discover what to write about.

"Landscape and Memory" is a writing exercise developed by author and professor Natalia Rachel Singer. It was originally published in Now Write! Nonfiction: Memoir, Journalism, and Creative Nonfiction Exercises from Today's Best Writers and Teachers.

STATION D: Guided Transcendental Reading in the Classroom *Developed by Lisa Flooding, 2017*

Meet in lower level (basement) elementary classroom.

Staffed by PWHS teachers and chaperones. Students will read and discuss some selected works by Thoreau.

SANC staff member Cassie Rincon will also facilitate a reptile/amphibian mini-presentation! (Last 15 minutes)

Introduction

Quite simply, Transcendentalism is based on the belief that human beings have self-wisdom and may gain this knowledge or wisdom by tuning in to the ebb and flow of nature. Different writers conceived of the search for self knowledge in different ways. Author Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) took a unique approach to self-knowledge by focusing on solitude. In his book, *Walden*, he wrote “I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time...I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” For him, self-discovery comes as the result of intense reflection, which he was able to accomplish by living by himself in the woods for a year.

Self knowledge has political implications as well. Once a person has established a moral code to live by, it becomes his or her duty to engage in civil disobedience against the government should policies violate that code. Thoreau’s opposition to slavery led to his refusal to pay a poll tax supporting the Mexican War, an act that landed him in jail for a night. Therefore, for Thoreau, self-discovery was not simply an idea, but it was a way of living one’s life.

Activity: Transcendentalism “Quiz”

Answer the questions honestly - the idea here is to spend some time thinking about the most significant questions of life. No one knows you better than you know yourself.

Step 1: Handout. Distribute “Quiz” and take 5-7 minutes to complete. Go with your gut here, don’t overthink it. Obviously there are not “right” and “wrong” answers.

Step 2: Sharing. In small groups, discuss your responses to the questions. Select a few that you are comfortable sharing for 3-5 minutes.

Step 3: Guided Reading and Annotation. Distribute excerpts from *Walden* packet. Direct students to listen as you read the texts to the rhythm of the speech and take note of the lengthy, complex sentences. A focus question follows each section. Students can Think-Pair-Share these.

Step 4: Thoreau’s Responses. Time allowing, return to the “Quiz” questions. Based on what you have listened to/read so far, how might Henry David Thoreau answer these questions?

SANC staff member Cassie Rincon will facilitate a reptile/amphibian mini-presentation for last 15 minutes.

STATION E: Writing Instruction in the Classroom

Developed by Amy E. Casey, 2017

Meet in main level classrooms 2 & 4 (group may split into two mini-groups). Staffed by PWS teachers and chaperones. Students examine mentor texts and get instruction about how to polish and publish their nature writing created during their time at the center.

Nature writing has many different purposes. It's a playground where science, art, communications, political action, spirituality, and adventure are all equally welcome. Let's learn about some of the ways nature writing appears in the professional world!

1. Nature writing as creative expression

Since people first put words to the written page, nature has served as inspiration for creative works. Stories, poetry, and even song lyrics are sometimes born out of the experiences we have in nature. Beautiful settings can set the stage for beautiful words, and being in nature creates the perfect state of mind for creativity. Many of the most famous poems (and works of art) in history are about aspects of the natural world!

2. Nature writing as scientific observation

As we've explored in class, a naturalist's field notes can help focus the powers of observation that are so important to scientific work. As biologists observe the natural world, they need to measure and describe every detail that they notice in order to collect information about ecosystems and make new discoveries. When scientists publish their research, they write formal reports and articles to share their findings.

3. Nature writing as memoir and reflection

Being outside can open up a space inside us where we have room to think about our lives and enjoy the setting around us. Many people remark about feeling at peace and thoughtful when they have an experience in nature. This creates a great opportunity to either write about the adventures we've had, or just to write about whatever opened up in our brain while we were hiking. Nature-based memoirs are very popular, just look at *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed or *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson.

4. Nature writing as activism and advocacy

Many people feel passionately about the importance of natural conservation and environmental science. This can be anything from educating people about endangered species, to writing up flyers about a volunteer day for litter pick-up, to writing a letter to a politician about environmental concerns, to writing to raise awareness about the beauty and importance of national parks. Many people who work for nature centers and park systems need to keep writing--on blogs, in publications, and on social media--to help the public stay invested in their work.

Discuss in small groups--**Which of these four forms of nature writing is the best fit for you? Which kind do you think your own writing style lends itself to?**

Is there anything you have written today or plan to write today that would fit any of these categories?

Let's check out some short mentor texts of these types of nature writing! (See next page)

[STATION E, continued]

Read and discuss together! Can you identify which type of nature writing each mentor text exemplifies? Are some a mixture of more than one? Do any of them give you an idea of what your field trip notes could turn into?

Sea Fever

BY JOHN MASEFIELD

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

“Lake Sturgeon Reintroduction Project: Restoration Efforts” from the [Riveredge Nature Center's website](#)

Recognizing their cultural and historical significance, the Wisconsin DNR began stocking the Milwaukee River with hatchery-raised sturgeon in 2003. Like salmon, sturgeons return to the river where they were born to spawn. However, the hatchery sturgeons were likely too old to imprint on the river, and are unlikely to return.

To maximize the opportunity for sturgeons to imprint on the Milwaukee River, the Wisconsin DNR and Northern Environmental designed the streamside rearing facility. This 10' by 20' trailer pumps water from the Milwaukee River into rearing tanks, enabling sturgeon to be raised in Milwaukee River water from day one.

The goal of the program is to produce a breeding population of lake sturgeon in the Milwaukee River. To achieve this goal, 1,000 to 1,500 sturgeons will be raised and released every year for the next 25 years. In addition to the restoration efforts on the Milwaukee River, the Wisconsin DNR is working on three other Lake Michigan tributaries.

From *The Soul of an Octopus* by Sy Montgomery

“She’s looking right at you,” Scott says. As I hold her glittering gaze, I instinctively reach to touch her head. “As supple as leather, as tough as steel, as cold as night,” Hugo wrote of the octopus’s flesh; but to my surprise, her head is silky and softer than custard. Her skin is flecked with ruby and silver, a night sky reflected on the wine-dark sea. As I stroke her with my fingertips, her skin goes white beneath my touch. White is the color of a relaxed octopus; in cuttlefish, close relatives of octopus, females turn white when they encounter a fellow female, someone whom they need not fight or flee.”