Seeing the Life That Surrounds Us:
Teaching Reading and Writing Skills Through Observation of the Natural World

A Curriculum Unit Written by Shirley Daniels
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Subject: English Language Arts
Grade Level: Grade 6*
*With some adaptations, the lessons in this unit could work with lower or higher grades.

Thread: Being Awake, Aware, and Alive

Essential Questions:

- How did the observations of Henry David Thoreau and Jane Goodall directly impact their lives and their work?
- What can we learn about our world by being observant?
- How can improving observational skills help students become better readers and writers?

Objectives:

Students will…

- Compare and contrast the lives, work, and messages of Henry David Thoreau and Jane Goodall
- Locate and discuss examples of close observation in poetry and prose
- Sketch and note their own observations in the classroom and outdoors
- Transcribe notes into journal entries

Materials:

- Assorted children’s books about Henry David Thoreau and Jane Goodall (see References)
- Multiple copies of The Chimpanzees I Love, by Jane Goodall
- Multiple copies of Henry David Thoreau for Kids, by Corinne Hosfeld Smith
- Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen
- Note taking materials to take outdoors, such as clipboards and scrap paper
- The Tree That Time Built (see References) or another selection of poems appropriate for your grade level/curriculum
- Writing materials (such as notebooks, binders, laptops, tablets, etc.)
- Series of four pigeon photos (attached) or other animal/nature photos
- Pencils (optional: colored pencils, pens, markers, crayons, watercolors)
- Selected passages from Thoreau’s journals (see References)
Lesson One: Annotating a Text, Day One

Guiding Question: How do authors and poets use observation in their writing?

Learning Target: We will listen, look, and read closely, and write down our observations.

Lesson One, Day One Procedures:

I have included a Warm Up (also called a Do Now or a Bell Ringer) for each day because this is a procedure I use in my classroom. Students read a message as they enter and then complete the warm up activity. I am not writing a detailed procedure for this in these lesson plans because every teacher has his or her own way of starting class, but I have included the prompt that I plan to give students.

Warm Up: Make a list of everything you can think of that is alive in and around our school.

Read aloud the poem “This World,” by Mary Oliver (page 11 in The Tree That Time Built). In this poem, Mary Oliver is describing her efforts “to write a poem about the world that has in it / nothing fancy.” She goes on to describe all of the “fancy” things she notices in the world, from the opening of a tulip to the “stones on the beach.” Tell students that Mary Oliver is a poet who is well known for her poems about nature.

A note about annotating text: Most of my students come to sixth grade with at least some familiarity with using sticky notes to note their predictions, connections, etc. However, the use of language to define and describe reading strategies can vary from teacher to teacher. I introduce the term “annotating” at the beginning of sixth grade. Since this will likely be the first poem that we read and annotate this school year, students will not be expected to look for specific poetic devices such as figurative language, rhyme scheme, etc. At this point in the year, I want to see them reading closely, observing, making inferences, asking questions, and jotting notes about their observations, inferences, and questions.

Class Discussion: Modeling close reading and annotating, lead students in a discussion of the poem: How can you tell that Mary Oliver admires the natural world? How can you tell that Mary Oliver spends a lot of time observing nature? Discuss the speaker’s revelation that the whole world is “fancy.” (This poem could be substituted for any poem that is appropriate for your grade level.)

Closure: Make a class anchor chart entitled “Annotating a Text.” Ask students for suggestions of things we can note as we read a poem or other text (connections, observations, questions, inferences, predictions, etc.) Leave space to add more at a later date. Revisit guiding question.
Lesson One: Annotating a Text, Day Two

Guiding Question: How do authors and poets use observation in their writing?

Learning Target: We will listen, look, and read closely, and write down our observations.

Lesson One, Day Two Procedures:

- **Before students arrive**, place an assortment of natural objects on a table. Objects might include leaves, acorns, stones, pine cones, etc.
- **Warm Up**: Choose an object from the table. Take it to your seat and observe it closely. Write down everything you notice. You may write a paragraph, a free write, or simply a list. You may also sketch the object in your notebook if you have time. If you finish before time is up, push yourself to keep observing. What else do you notice? (15 minutes)
- While students are working on the warm up, post the following chart on the board:

  **Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen**
  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- **Read aloud** the book *Owl Moon*, by Jane Yolen. Point out the chart, and instruct students to observe closely with their ears and their eyes. Make sure everyone can see the pictures. If possible, place copies of the book around the room so students can look back at the pictures and text. You might also read the book more than once.
- **Class Discussion**: Give students time to write down their observations and share with partners. Then ask for examples of observations that the narrator made throughout the book. Record answers on the chart.
- **Closure**: Ask students for more suggestions to add to the class anchor chart entitled “Annotating a Text.” Have a brief discussion. Revisit guiding question.

  Some possible discussion questions:
  - Were you able to make more observations by reading the text a second time?
  - What do you think Mary Oliver and Jane Yolen have in common?
  - Did the pictures make any difference in your observations?
  - How do you think observing our surroundings can help us with our writing?
Lesson Two: Comparing and Contrasting Jane Goodall and Henry David Thoreau
Day One: Jane Goodall

Guiding Questions:
- What can we learn about our world by being observant?
- How are reading and observing connected?
- How did Jane Goodall’s observations directly impact her life and her work? (day one)
- How did Henry David Thoreau’s observations directly impact his life and his work? (day two)

Learning Target: We will compare and contrast two well known observers.

Lesson Two, Day One Procedures:
- Before students arrive, display an assortment of children’s books written by and about Jane Goodall (see References for a few examples). There are numerous picture books, biographies, and even a graphic novel available.
- Warm Up: As you read your independent book today, slow down and read closely the way we practiced yesterday. Jot down notes about your observations of the events, characters, or setting, as well as any questions that come to mind as you are reading.
- Tell students that over the next couple of days, we will be reading about two people who are well known for being excellent observers. The first is Jane Goodall.
- Give a brief overview of who Jane Goodall is or show the National Geographic video clip. (I will probably also have a display with some photos of Jane Goodall and her chimps, as well as some quotes. I am a huge Jane Goodall fan!)
- Read chapter one of The Chimpanzees I Love. Depending on the number of copies you have, this could be a read aloud, partner reading, or independent reading. I plan to request multiple copies from the public library, so each student can have his/her own copy of the book to read. Students will take notes as they read. Have students focus on the question: How did Jane Goodall’s observations...? as they read and take notes (on sticky notes or in their notebooks).
- Closure: Discuss the question, How did Jane Goodall’s observations directly impact her life and her work? Have partners share with each other before opening it up to a whole class discussion.
Lesson Two: Comparing and Contrasting Jane Goodall and Henry David Thoreau

Day Two: Henry David Thoreau

Guiding Questions:
- What can we learn about our world by being observant?
- How are reading and observing connected?
- How did Jane Goodall’s observations directly impact her life and her work? (day one)
- How did Henry David Thoreau’s observations directly impact his life and his work? (day two)

Learning Target: We will compare and contrast two well known observers.

Lesson Two, Day Two Procedures:

Before students arrive, prepare a Henry David Thoreau display. This can include photos, quotes, copies of his books, and biographies.

Warm up: As you read your independent book today, continue to read slowly and jot down notes about your observations of the events, characters, or setting, as well as any questions that come to mind as you are reading.

Yesterday we read about a famous observer, Jane Goodall. Today we will read about another famous observer, Henry David Thoreau.

Have a discussion about who Henry David Thoreau was. Since my school is in Lincoln (right next to Concord), many of the students will probably be familiar with Walden Pond, and some may even know a little about Thoreau. I plan to find out what they already know and then fill in some gaps.

Following the same procedures from day one, read some or all of the following selections Henry David Thoreau for Kids:
- Introduction
- “A Boyhood on the Pond” (3)
- “The New England Town” (3-5)
- “Brothers and Friends” (10-12)
- “A View of the River” (12-13)
- All of chapter 2 (excluding pages 23 and 25-27)

Closure: Discuss similarities and differences between the two observers. See examples on the next page.
Similarities and Differences Between Henry David Thoreau and Jane Goodall

Similarities

- Observers of animals
- Note takers
- Writers for a wider audience
- Concerned about human rights and animal welfare
- Interested in the natural world and made scientific observations, but not scientists
- Love of spending time alone in nature
- Patience!
- Educators (though Goodall has never been a classroom teacher, she educates people through her talks and books)
- Lifelong learners
- Inspirational to others

Differences

- Goodall travels the world; Thoreau traveled in the U.S. but spent majority of time in Concord
- Goodall started an organization and raises funds as well as awareness; Thoreau focused on lectures and writing
- Goodall’s lifelong dream was to study animals; Thoreau studied nature and society
- Goodall is still alive and in her eighties, so her accomplishments have been over a fifty year span; Thoreau’s life was cut short at forty-four.
- Their work was done 100+ years apart.
Lesson Three: Thoreau’s Writing Process
Day One: Journal Passages and Animal Photos

Guiding Question: Why is observation an important skill in ELA?

Learning Target: We will observe photographs of animals and take notes.

Lesson Three, Day One Procedures:

Before students arrive, project the first of the four pigeon photographs on a whiteboard or screen.

Warm Up: Closely observe the photograph on the whiteboard/screen. Take notes about your observations.

- Explain that Thoreau kept a journal for many years. Show the photographs of some of his journals on the Morgan Library and Museum Website.

- Briefly describe Thoreau’s writing process (long walks, close observations of nature, jotting brief notes on scraps of paper, transcribing those notes into his journals, lecturing, and finally writing essays and books).

- As a class, read selections from Thoreau’s journals. Below is a list of dates that have animal observations that will likely be of interest to elementary and middle school students. I found these journal entries compiled by season in the book Thoreau’s Animals, edited by Geoff Wisner. The same journal entries, including copies of manuscripts along with transcripts, are also online at http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals.html.

**Journal Selections:**

- March 6, 1853 (red squirrels)
- September 1, 1850 (good one for fall, Thoreau’s observations of birds)
- September 9, 1854 (baby tortoise hatching and Thoreau’s musings about Earth protecting the eggs)
- September 12, 1857 (wood frog)
- September 24, 1857 (red squirrel)

Discuss the kinds of things that Thoreau noticed. Then go back to the pigeon photograph and challenge students to notice more.

Show the photos in a series, stopping to allow time for note taking and discussion of each photograph. Ask students to try to tell the story (verbally) of what is happening in these photographs.

Optional: After the students have finished making their own observations, tell students that these photos were all taken one morning at the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts.

Read the page in Henry David Thoreau for Kids called “Keep a Daily Journal” (9). It includes a quote from Thoreau about keeping a journal, followed by some suggestions for journaling.

Closure: Tomorrow you will have an opportunity to write a short journal entry about the pigeons. What kinds of things might you include in your journal entry? How will it be different from your notes? (Also, tell students that part of the class will take place outdoors tomorrow. They should dress accordingly.)
Lesson Three: Thoreau’s Writing Process  
Day Two: Outdoor Observations

Guiding Question: Why is observation an important skill in ELA?

Learning Targets: We will observe our natural surroundings and take notes.

Lesson Three, Day Two Procedures:

- **Warm Up:** Look over your notes from yesterday and write a journal entry about the pigeon photographs that we observed.

- Before heading outdoors, read the selection entitled “Record Wild Animal Behavior” from *Henry David Thoreau for Kids* (14-15). We won’t be following all of the steps in the activity as described, but it is helpful to read it because it includes a quote from Thoreau as well as tips for observing wild animals.

- Go over expectations for outdoor behavior. We will need to be very quiet. We can talk about what we saw when we are back inside.

- Give each student a clipboard and some scrap paper. Instead of taking our notebooks outside, we are going to just jot down brief notes while we observe (Jane Goodall refers to hers as “field notes”).

- Go to a location outdoors where you might see animals, such as squirrels, birds, or insects. Give students as much time as possible to quietly observe what they see and hear (and maybe smell). Remind students about Thoreau’s tip in yesterday’s reading, “Keep a Daily Journal.” Thoreau thought it was important to write about the weather, so students might want to jot down some notes about the weather.

- **Closure:** Head back indoors in time to allow for a few minutes to share observations.
Lesson Three: Thoreau’s Writing Process
Day Three: Writing Journal Entries from Our Field Notes

Guiding Question: Why is observation an important skill in ELA?

Learning Targets: We will reread our notes and write a journal entry about what we have observed.

Lesson Three, Day Three Procedures:

Warm Up: Reread your notes from yesterday’s walk. If there are more details that you can add, take some time to do that now. Think about how you might use these notes to write a journal entry today, but don’t write your journal entry yet.

After students have finished reviewing and updating their notes, lead students in a discussion about all of the things we have learned about observing. If there was not enough time for a good discussion yesterday, take a few minutes to ask students about the observations they made and what they might want to include in their journal entries.

Make sure that students understand that their notes were just for them, but their journal entries will be read by others. This might be unexpected since many people associate a journal with something you keep just for yourself. Ask what kinds of things they will need to do in order for readers to understand what they wrote (punctuation, legible handwriting, etc.) They might also want to make some sketches, as Thoreau and Goodall sometimes did.

Allow time for students to write their journal entries, either in their notebooks or using technology. (I plan to let students choose. Those who type will print their journal entries and glue into their notebooks. Normally, they submit their writing in Google Classroom, but I want them to have a physical copy for this particular activity.)

Closure: Discuss the guiding question: Why is observation an important skill in ELA?

Follow up: See Suggestions for Assessment.
Suggestions for Assessment

Formative Assessments:
- Teacher reads journal entries, looks for examples of close observation, and responds with comments.
- Students share their journal entries with small groups to get feedback.
- Photocopy some students’ journal entries and invite classmates to read closely and provide feedback (assessing close reading of the journal entries).
- To assess progress with close reading, have students read, annotate (either using sticky notes or jotting notes directly into their notebooks), and discuss poems about nature from *The Tree That Time Built: A Celebration of Nature, Science, and Imagination*
  - “Reply to the Question: ‘How Can You Become a Poet?’” – Eve Meriam
  - “Earthworms” – Valerie Worth
  - “A Narrow Fellow in The Grass” – Emily Dickinson
  - “Cricket” – Mary Ann Hoberman
  - “Bees Stopped” – A.R. Ammons

Summative Assessments:
- After students have accumulated a number of journal entries, have them choose subjects from their journals and write more formal, graded pieces of writing, such as essays, paragraphs, and poems. The journal can be a source of writing topics throughout the year.
- Students can present one of their journal entries in the form of a lecture or a Ted Talk.
- Present a new photograph or series of photographs (or a video clip if you can find one with limited narration) and have students go through the steps of the writing process up through journal entry independently.
References


“Jane." Human. Human, a Film by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, uploaded by Human the Movie, 11 Sept. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=99gJKzINNow](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99gJKzINNow).


Additional Sources for Teachers

The following texts are recommended for a range of grade levels. Teachers should preview them to determine whether they are appropriate for their students.


Meltzer, Brad. *I am Jane Goodall.* Dial Books for Young Readers, 2016.