Nature Writing

Subject Area: Humanities

Session Description: This creative writing session allows students to express their thoughts and feelings about nature through language. Students will have the opportunity to try several different creative writing styles, including field journaling, reflective journaling, poetry, story-writing, campaign writing, and writing from a specific perspective. Draft writing will be done outdoors; at the conclusion of the class, students will have the opportunity to create a final copy of their favorite piece of writing from the session and present it to the class.

Objectives:
- To develop observation skills.
- To reflect on the natural world and develop thoughts and feelings about the natural world through writing.
- To learn about and experiment with different writing styles.
- To create a final draft of a piece of writing from the field.

Materials:
- Students will either bring their own notebooks or be provided with a field journal (TBD).
- Clip-boards and pencils
- For the final draft, students will be provided with paper, pencils, and art supplies such as colored pencils, crayons, and markers.
- “The Earth on Turtle’s Back” short story
- Several examples of field journal pages
- An example of a reflective journal entry
- Examples of poems and haiku with nature themes
- Examples of perspective writing
- Examples of green advertising for campaigns
Procedures:

At the very beginning of the class, the students will be taken outside on a hike. There will be several stops along the hike to sit and write. The instructor can take the class anywhere on campus, but some spots may include Piney Point, the Pavilion (when it is open), Vesper Glen, the beach on Lake Wapalanne, a clearing along the Big Flat Brook, the Corral, and other spaces where it is easy to find a place to sit and write.

The following activities can be done in any order, depending on teacher preference. Each activity should take between 15 and 25 minutes, but the teacher can judge this based on student interest and participation. The class can work on as many or as few of these activities as necessary.

Each activity will begin with a brief lesson. Teachers will share an example piece of writing and instruct about form and style before giving the writing assignment. The teacher can also provide ideas for the students.

○ Story-telling

For this activity, begin by reading “The Earth on Turtle’s Back” from Keepers of the Earth by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. Talk to students about creation myths, or symbolic stories that show how the earth was created and how people came to live on it. In many Native American creation myths (such as this one by the Onondaga people of the Northeast Woodlands), animals, plants, seasons, elements, and the four directions played crucial roles.

Discuss the story. Ask students: What animals are in this story? What plants are in this story? What elements are in this story? How do the humans get along with the animals? How do the humans treat the earth and other living things?

Give students the assignment: write a short creation story. They can use their imaginations to write about how the earth was created, or they can get more specific and write about why a pinecone was created or why a salamander was created. Other ideas include how clouds got in the sky, how the turtle came to live in the pond, why the squirrel eats nuts, or why owls or bats come out only at night.

○ Field Journaling

Field journaling is a tool that has been used by ecologists for centuries. In order to better understand the natural world and the plants and animals in it, scientists draw and take notes about the things they see. Field journaling allows people to keep notes on what they saw, when they saw it, where they saw it, and what behavior it was exhibiting. It also allows people to later look up and research something that they saw in the field.
Show some examples of field journaling pages that include both sketches and writing. Then, give students the assignment: to write a field journaling page. Have them each write down the date, time, and what the weather is like. Then have them choose one object in nature: a tree, a rock, a flower, a newt, a leaf, etc. Have them draw that object, paying close attention to detail. Then have them take down notes about that object. What color is it? How big is it? If it is an animal, what is it doing? Where was it found? Does it appear to be common or rare? Is it dead or alive?

○ **Reflective Journaling**

For this activity, read the students an example reflective journal entry. Discuss some of the elements that can be used in reflective journaling, particularly thoughts and emotions. Such journaling is a useful tool to reflect on an experience. Have the students write a reflective journal entry on their experience so far at the New Jersey School of Conservation.

Ask students: What do you like about NJSOC? What don’t you like about? What has been your favorite part? What would you have liked to do differently? What are you looking forward to? How are you getting along with your classmates? How do you like your teachers? What are you learning? Are you having fun? How are you feeling? (Happy, excited, calm, interested, nervous, sad, content, etc.) What does it feel like to be in nature?

○ **Poetry**

Students will be introduced to different forms of poems, such as haiku, cinquain, and diamante poems. They will be given examples of these poems. This activity will have a seasonal component, with different sets of examples of poems for each season. The students can then choose one form to write a poem about something found in nature. To assist students, discuss terms such as *syllable, noun, adjective, verb, and synonym*.

- **Haiku**: This type of poem is a traditional Japanese style of writing. It follows this form:
  
  Five syllables  
  Seven syllables  
  Five syllables

- **Cinquain**: This type of poem, with five lines, can be used to describe an object. It follows this form:

  Name of object  
  Two adjectives to describe the object  
  Three verbs to describe what the object does  
  Four words to describe how the poet feels about the object  
  Repeat the first line, or use a synonym.
• Diamante: This type of poem forms the shape of a diamond and indicates a change. It follows this form:

Noun
Two adjectives describing it
Three verbs ending in “ing” or “ed”
Four related nouns
Three verbs indicating change
Two adjectives continuing the change
Noun (opposite)

○ Sensory Awareness and Perspective

Students will be read examples of poems or short pieces of prose where the author is using a specific sense or perspective. Ask students to name the five senses and talk about how senses can be used to describe an object, place, animal, or plant. Then, each student will be given a laminated card with their assignment. The cards will include the following prompts:

• Become an ant. Lie on your stomach with your eyes close to the ground and imagine an ant walking along the soil. What does it look like? What does it feel like?
• Observe your surroundings using only your ears. What do you hear? What does that tell you about your surrounding environment?
• Choose a color and look for that color in nature. Is the color hard to find or can it be found easily? What objects, plants, or animals are that color? What other words can you use to describe that object, plant, or animal?
• Imagine you are a bird, looking down on the forest. What do you see? What does nature look like from up in the air? How is it different from a human perspective, on the ground?
• Observe your surroundings using only your eyes. What do you see? What does that tell you about your surrounding environment?
• Find an object, such as a rock, leaf, branch, tree, moss, or mud. Feel the object with your fingers. Describe it using only your sense of touch. What does it feel like? What is the texture? Is it hot or cold, hard or soft, rough or smooth?
• If you were a salamander burrowing under a wet log, how would you see the world? What does it look like, feel like, and smell like? What are you afraid of? How do you like to spend your time?
• Rocks have been here longer than anything else—longer than the trees, moss, animals, plants, buildings, and people. Imagine you are a rock. What have you witnessed over time? What changes have you watched take place? What is the most amazing thing you saw in your thousands of years?
• Observe your surroundings using only your sense of smell. What does the forest smell like? How does it smell different from where you live? Does something smell stronger than everything else? What is it?
• If you were a black bear roaming through the forest, how would you spend your time? What do you smell? What do you look for? What is your favorite part of the forest?
• Imagine you are the stream. What do you feel like? Where do you go? What plants and animals depend on you? How does that feel?
• You are a white-tail deer browsing through the forest. What do you look for? How do you spend the day? What do you do when you see a human?
• If you were a fish in Lake Wapalanne, how would you see the world? How do you feel? What do you do during the day? What other plants or animals do you encounter?
• You are a pine tree in the forest. What is your life like? Do you feel, think, or see? You are very old; what have you learned during your life?
• You are a snake slithering through the forest. How do you see the world? How do you spend your day? What do others think of you? How does that make you feel?

Have students write a short story or poem based on their prompts.

○ Campaign Writing

For this activity, students will be shown examples of “green” advertisements or campaign materials, with brief statements that include information about the environment or an environmental issue. The teacher will talk to students about persuasion, or using words to influence the reader’s decision. Ask students: What important information was used in each campaign piece? What was the call to action? What tactics were used? Is the advertisement effective?

Have the students then make a campaign flier, using words and drawings. Give them a scenario: A development company is planning to cut down part of Stokes State Forest to build a mall and several condos near the New Jersey School of Conservation. How do you feel about this issue? Write a campaign flier to persuade others to protect the forest. If students are having trouble, they can write a campaign flier to protect their favorite place in nature, or a place near their home.

Wrap-up:

Following the hike and writing activities, return to the classroom and provide students with paper, pencils, and art supplies. Have the students choose one of their pieces of writing from the hike to make a final draft. Then have them present their projects to the class if they would like to.

To wrap up, give a brief lecture on Rachel Carson and Henry David Thoreau, two very influential nature writers. Carson’s book Silent Spring was extremely influential in
alerting people to the dangers of the insecticide DDT. Thoreau’s famous *Walden* is a book that has lasted for generations, showing people the value and beauty of nature.

Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*:

- DDT is an insecticide that was used in the US to kill mosquitoes.
- The book argued that pesticides such as DDT were having harmful impacts on animals, especially birds. The chemical was impacting the thickness of bird eggshells, so that no baby birds were hatching. The title comes from the idea that the spring would be silent because no birds would be heard.
- Carson argued that chemicals such as DDT were having harmful affects on humans, as well.

Henry David Thoreau and *Walden*:

- *Walden* was published in 1854. It was written over the course of 2 years at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, where Thoreau lived in a cabin he had built.
- Thoreau went to Walden Pond to live a simple, self-reliant life. His reflections and observations from these experiences are described in *Walden*.
- This book is one of America’s earliest examples of nature writing. For generations, the book has inspired people to spend time in nature.

After describing these two authors and their works, have a short discussion with the class about the importance of writing in sharing messages about the natural world. Such writing can both inform readers about the natural world and promote appreciation for it.

**Indoor Activities:**
(To be held in the Nature Center)

Have students go through the same activities as above. Instead of finding scenes or wildlife outdoors to write about, have them choose a display animal, nest, pinecone, or something similar from the Nature Center to describe. They can also practice story writing and poetry by using their imaginations instead of direct observations. They can also use the time to journal about their experience at the New Jersey School of Conservation thus far.
Before the Earth existed, there was only water. It stretched as far as one could see, and in that water there were birds and animals swimming around. Far above, in the clouds, there was a Skyland. In that Skyland there was a great and beautiful tree. It had four white roots which stretched to each of the sacred directions, and from its branches all kinds of fruits and flowers grew.

There was an ancient chief in the Skyland. His young wife was expecting a child, and one night she dreamed that she saw the Great Tree uprooted. The next morning she told her husband the story.

He nodded as she finished telling her dream. “My wife,” he said, “I am sad that you had this dream. It is clearly a dream of great power and, as is our way, when one has such a powerful dream we must do all that we can to make it true. The Great Tree must be uprooted.”

Then the Ancient Chief called the young men together and told them that they must pull up the tree. But the roots of the tree were so deep, so strong, that they could not budge it. At last the Ancient Chief himself came to the tree. He wrapped his arms around it, bent his knees and strained. At last, with one great effort, he uprooted the tree and placed it on its side. Where the tree’s roots had one deep into the Skyland there was now a big hole. The wife of the chief came close and leaned over to look down, grasping the tip of one of the Great Tree’s branches to steady her. It seemed as if she saw something down there, far below, glittering like water. She leaned out further to look and, as she leaned, she lost her balance and fell into the hole. Her grasp slipped off the tip of the branch, leaving her with only a handful of seeds as she fell, down, down, down, down.

Far below, in the waters, some of the birds and animals looked up.

“Someone is falling toward us from the sky,” said one of the birds.

“We must do something to help her,” said another. Then two Swans flew up. They caught the Woman From The Sky between their wide wings. Slowly, they began to bring her down toward the water, where the birds and animals were watching.

“She is not like us,” said one of the animals. “Look, she doesn’t have webbed feet. I don’t think she can live in the water.”

“What shall we do, then?” said another of the water animals.

“I know,” said one of the water birds. “I have heard that there is Earth far below the waters. If we dive down and bring up Earth, then she will have a place to stand.”

So the birds and animals decided that someone would have to bring up Earth. One by one they tried.

The Duck dove down first, some say. He swam down and down, far beneath the surface, but could not reach the bottom and floated back up. Then the Beaver tried. He went even deeper, so deep that it was all dark, but he could not reach the bottom, either. The Loon tried, swimming with his strong wings. He was gone a long long time, but he, too, failed to bring up Earth. Soon it seemed that all had tried and all had failed. Then a small voice spoke.

“I will bring up Earth or die trying.”
They looked to see who it was. It was the tiny Muskrat. She dove down and swam and swam. She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined. She went so deep that it was all dark, and still she swam deeper. She went so deep that her lungs felt ready to burst, but she swam deeper still. At last, just as she was becoming unconscious, she reached out one small paw and grasped at the bottom, barely touching it before she floated up, almost dead.

When the other animals saw her break the surface they thought she had failed. Then they saw her right paw was held tightly shut.

“She has the Earth,” they said. “Now where can we put it?”

“Place it on my back,” said a deep voice. It was the Great Turtle, who had come up from the depths.

They brought the Muskrat over to the Great Turtle and placed her paw against his back. To this day there are marks at the back of the Turtle’s shell which were made by Muskrat’s paw. The tiny bit of Earth fell on the back of the Turtle. Almost immediately, it began to grow larger and larger and larger until it became the whole world.

Then the two Swans brought the Sky Woman down. She stepped onto the new Earth and opened her hand, letting the seeds fall onto the bare soil. From those seeds the trees and the grass sprang up. Life on Earth had begun.
Field Journaling Samples

It is the circumstance, that several of the islands possess their own species of the tortoise... that strikes me with wonder.

Figure 29

The Galápagos Tortoise

I wandered the Park one all the time, really, but not too much. This part had flowers.

Watched all the flowers and birds. Lots of violets, big ones. Some of the flower clumps had yellow, green, and white flowers. Some had purple ones.

I saw a leaf with a red spot and some of the petals turned to be brown. At the base of the leaf, there were some small, yellow, tiny, circular-like ones on the leaf. I found a red one on the leaf, but it was not too big.

Saw a young quail - Golden. I checked a lot of grass instead of white, looking for it. I found it. Not too big. It was white, and some of the quail were white, too.

Saw some bird gizzard that actually had grapes - almost ripe - along the middle point. It was below the wing. Fed the daily food: fruit, etc.

Lots of people - the Park - walking, running. Having The Park - a very busy Park.

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09/04/11 5:57 PM, sunny, a slight breeze, making it chill up. The shade, but I want to thank Spring is here.

An hour for another week of consultation meetings. We were locked in the station's large van and taken to the research labs at El Capitan. They have some black-footed penguins and are trying to get the small population to breed. So that way, they can, in more of an environment, the outlet is grim. Our puzzle seems to have some sort of adenosine response and is experiencing a superinfection, and loss of pigment. The director hinted that the remaining birds might have to be destroyed before they can be saved.

There is a conclusion to the book, is to stop death. Which leads to...
**Reflective Journal Entry Sample**

When we arrived at the New Jersey School of Conservation, it was raining lightly. The rain began to pour down harder when we went to ASEs. It was cold and wet. At first, I wanted to go back into the cabin, but as we began working on the group challenges, I forgot about the rain. I think my team worked well together even though we didn’t solve all of the challenges. For some of the activities, we were disorganized, but then Emily stepped up to be a leader, and I think she did a really good job.

Stokes State Forest is really different from where I live in New Jersey. It feels like we are in a different state because I’m not used to seeing so many trees. There are also more hills here than at home. I like hiking here but I am afraid to sit on the ground because there are so many earth worms. I hope that we see more wildlife while we are here. I want to see deer, and if we’re lucky, a bear!

**Sensory Awareness and Perspective Sample**

From the perspective of a salamander:

Damp, slimy, slick, dark. Under here it smells cold, barely a smell at all. The dirt is fresh, it’s healthy and moist and for now there is no reason to move anywhere else. Not until the ground starts to shake and the log starts to move; the heavy vibrations indicating something has come looking for me. Once that happens I will have to move quickly, scurry under the wet leaves to find safety from the massive creature that somehow finds something as small as myself to be a substantial meal. But until that happens, I’ll stay here, where I am safe.
Poetry Samples

*Haiku:*

Snowflakes are our friends
They descend when winter comes
Making white blankets

Frost this morning and
a cold wind, scatters leaves like
broken promises

Moonlight casts a pale
blue light on the snow, winter
perfect, cold and brisk

*Cinquain:*

pine
soft, green
standing, growing, producing
tall, regal, silent, majestic
tree

*Diamante:*

autumn
crisp, colorful
cooling, drying, dropping
leaves, acorns, branches, wind
falling, freezing, sleeping
white, cold
winter
PROTECT OUR HOME.
IT'S THE ONLY ONE WE HAVE.

Nearly half of the world's species of plants, animals and microorganisms will be destroyed or severely threatened over the next quarter century due to rainforest deforestation.

HELP SPREAD THE WORD
BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

http://www.rain-tree.com/facts.htm
This election, WA needs sanctuaries, not oil spills

Less than 1% of WA’s oceans are protected.

There is a greater level of unique marine life in our south west than on the Great Barrier Reef.

Marine sanctuaries are urgently needed.

Tell your local candidate there’s no time to lose:

www.saveourmarinelife.org.au

SAVE OUR MARINE LIFE
saveourmarinelife.org.au

Authorized by P. Versteegen on behalf of The Conservation Council of WA, D Delphi Street, West Perth, WA, 6005

Thanks for the
Exercise!

TYDB

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