Developing Creative Language Skills through Nature Observation
Lessons and Activities for Nature Loving Teachers

Compiled and Illustrated by Kyle Nagelmann, AmeriCorps Volunteer
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Introduction

Outside Language

The impact of the outdoors on a young person’s development cannot be underestimated. Yet, too often, our children receive little to no exposure to the lessons that nature provides. This is unfortunate, because not only does nature offer many tangible and intangible lessons, it is also offers a source of great joy…it is fun to be outside!

Meanwhile, teachers struggle to find ways to motivate students. Literacy rates are low and drop out rates high. Although this is cause for alarm, the solutions are close at hand. Teachers know that project based and experiential learning approaches work and are motivating students across the country. But with smaller and smaller budgets teachers often struggle to find the resources and environments to create such meaningful learning opportunities. Perhaps the first place a teacher with a small budget can look to meet his students’ needs is simply outside his window. The opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning are at the student’s fingertips when a teacher opens the door and lets his students look, listen, smell, touch and feel the outdoors.
This booklet is not the first attempt to integrate education with nature. In fact, there is a surplus of curriculums geared toward getting students outside. But the majority of these curriculums focus on science exploration and as we know, nature has so much more to offer than simply a medium for research. Nature, with its force, its beauty, and its grace provides opportunities for exploration beyond the microscope; indeed one of nature’s greatest gifts to the human experience is that of an artistic medium. Nature provides an amazing opportunity for students to hone their skills in observation and description. What is more, nature provides a wonderful canvas for development of language and writing. And so this booklet aspires to provide teachers with activities to engage student development in observation, description and writing through first hand interaction with the natural world.

The opportunities that nature provides to hone observation and description skills cannot be underestimated. Nature is often defined by the details. Taking students outside and asking them to observe the subtleties of an object or element works students’ observation muscles. Whether quiet and consistent or loud and sudden, nature always provides a stimulus, whether to our sense of sight, hearing, smell, touch or taste, or to the body. Providing students an opportunity to practice and acknowledge these senses develops a more adaptable and well rounded individual. And of course, whether on account of the tiniest detail or the biggest expanse, whether displaying beauty or the grotesque, whether predictable or unpredictable, nature is capable of defying understanding; providing students opportunities to experience such moments gives them a glimpse into the complexities of the natural world.

Still, we can do more than just expose students to the outdoors, we can also hand them a pencil. As alluded to above, nature provides amazing opportunities for students to develop language skills whether through simple description, drawing comparisons, or problem solving. Providing students opportunities to explore nature writing allows them to practice and master specific writing techniques. In fact, nature writing is often associated with a technique known as the grand style, a style of writing that focuses on detail and description and in addition adds the writer’s awe and wonder, or spirit to the text. Imagine trying to accurately put into words the scale and expanse of the Grand Canyon or Mt. Everest; a writer is almost forced to speak of the power and awe of such natural wonders. Giving students opportunities to practice such writing gives them a chance to be creative, to take risks with their writing, and teaches them that they do not always have to be serious or “expository” in their approach. Indeed, when writing about nature, the writer is not trying to persuade or prove a point; rather he is simply trying to bring the reader in to acknowledge the wonder and awe of the natural
world. As is the case, getting students outside can provide platforms for student growth in writing.

Let us not forget that getting students outside has benefits that go well beyond individual student development: Student exposure to the outdoors also benefits the earth. Taking students outside provides them opportunities to learn about and appreciate the outdoors first hand, thus increasing the chances of developing future generations that care and advocate for the health of the planet. Nature consistently amazes and inspires, and by simply getting students outside, a teacher can develop student interest in the environment. It really is that simple.

Of course, not all classrooms are equipped with a scenic view outside their window. Still, there is *something* outside a classroom that can elicit a degree of wonder in our students’ eyes, and we are missing a wonderful opportunity if we do not go out and find it. And if all else fails, teachers can easily adapt lessons using video, print or by bringing items into the classroom.

The activities in this booklet are simple and require few materials. Some do require advanced preparation, but ideally that process will be a fun one. The first section focuses on development of the senses. The activities in this first section require little prerequisite and can be pulled out and used individually at any time during the school year. The second section is geared more toward the writing craft. This section builds on itself so it may behoove teachers to take a look at all activities before pulling out individual activities for their classroom.

Hopefully this booklet inspires you to take your classroom outside. Enjoy your time outdoors, and don’t forget your rain jacket and sunscreen!
Introductory Activities

Activity #1: Create a Nature Journal
Students create a nature writing journal that they use for all their outdoor writing activities.

Materials
Cardboard, paper, big rubber band, twig, scissors, pens/colored pencils.

Procedure

1. Students cut a piece of cardboard out that is slightly larger than 8½ x 11 (this is the cover).

2. Create a crease in the paper by running the sharp point of the scissors down the middle of the cardboard so you can fold the cardboard in half (landscape oriented “taco fold”).

3. Fold in half a number of 8½ x 11 pieces of paper (landscape oriented “taco fold”) for the inside pages.

4. Punch two holes (using scissors or a hole punch) on the back of your cover and in your paper close to the creased edge.

5. Place the pages inside your nature writing book cover and line up holes.

6. Find a twig that will “bind” the book and place against the back cover of the book.

7. Loop a rubber band around one end of the twig and thread it through the top holes of your journal and then down through the holes at the bottom. Loop the rubber band around the other end of the twig holding it and your pages in place.

8. Have students put their names on their nature journal and decorate with pens/colored pencils.

*If you prefer, you can perform the same function of the rubber band and twig with brads.*
**Activity #2: Sensory Thesaurus**
Students create a list of adjectives used to describe the different senses. This can become a reference material for future work in sensory and writing exercises. The thesaurus can include adjectives describing sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. This booklet contains lists of adjectives for sound, smell and touch in Section One.

**Activity #3: Journaling the Seasons**
Teachers can engage students in a simple and fun educational activity by taking students outside occasionally and having them journal the changes in a local ecology as the seasons progress. It is encouraged to take students to the same place so they can see the cycles of the seasons – trees, plant life, weather, insects, etc. are all elements to which students can focus their writing. Encouraging students to observe these elements using all their senses is recommended.
Section 1
Exercising Our Senses
Activity #4: Observe, Draw, Describe

To him that watches, everything is revealed.  
— Italian Proverb

Summary
This activity is a basic building block for exercises in description. Encourages students to slow down and observe. Students are asked to observe an object in nature, noting its physical features, drawing the object, and then putting the features into words.

Materials
Writing journal, writing utensil, and the great outdoors

Time Required
30 minutes

Procedure

1. Tell students you are going to begin to exercise their sense of observation; specifically their sense of sight. Take them outside and ask them to quietly observe their surroundings.

2. Have students sit as a group and introduce students to the importance of sight observation. See Consider This!

3. Ask students to look around their environment and to focus on one object whether big or small. Students can choose to observe a small physical object such as a leaf, a rock, or a larger object such as a tree or hillside. (Tip: As an initial exercise it is encouraged to have students start small, focusing on “the little details.”)

Consider This!
Ask students how often they make note of their surroundings and the details of people, places, and objects around them. Tell them that observation can provide major insight into questions unanswered and mysteries unsolved. (Think Sherlock Holmes) And all it requires is taking the time to make note of their surroundings. Observation is a habit, and the old adage that one can make a habit in a month applies to observation. Challenge your students to actively engage in sight observation for the remainder of the day, week, or month.
4. Once their objects are located and depending on the age and independence of your students, allow them to spread out and establish their own space for greater observation.

5. Students should take a few minutes to simply observe their object and engage in an internal discussion about the quality of the object. Teachers can encourage this process by asking students as they observe basic questions about their object (What color is it? What is its texture? Is it big or small? What is its shape?).

6. Students should then draw the object in their journal. Allow them 10 minutes and encourage them to take their time and draw the intricacies of their object. *Drawing is only half dexterity, the remainder is observation.*

7. On the opposite page, have students now describe in words what they see. Eloquent language is not important, nor is accuracy of language, more important is acknowledgement of all the small details of their object.

8. Teacher can have students share with partners, groups, or as a class, or can choose to move on to their next activity at this point.

9. *Optional:* Ask students to reflect on process of observation (observations they have about the process of observation!).

**Conclusion**

10. Remind students of the observation challenge for the remainder of the day, week, or month.
Activity #5: What’s the Difference?

*The artist is the confidant of nature, flowers carry on dialogues with him through the graceful bending of their stems and the harmoniously tinted nuances of their blossoms. Every flower has a cordial word which nature directs towards him.*

- Auguste Rodin

**Summary**

This activity challenges students to use not only their sight skills but also those of touch and smell. Students are each given a similar object and asked to study it. The object is then mixed with a number of other similar looking objects; students examine all of the objects in order to distinguish their original.

**Materials**

A number of similar objects (examples: pine cones, leaves, rocks, flowers)

**Time Required**

15 minutes

**Procedure**

1. Seat students in a circle outside and hand them their object and ask them to quietly observe it (if you are in a location where there are lots of rocks or Douglas fir cones, etc., students can get their object on their own).

2. Give students 2-3 minutes to mentally note all the features of their object. Encourage them to use all senses available to them (although tasting objects may be inappropriate). It is important for later discussion that you do not tell students that you are going to take the objects from them.

3. Collect all the objects and place them in a non-see through bag or a pillow case. Mix up the objects. Then pass out the objects so each student again has one.

4. To maintain order, tell students on your signal that they will pass their object to the right of the circle and this process will continue until all students have their original objects. When a student is reunited with his or her original object they can remain in the
circle passing around the objects or the teacher can have them move out or into the middle of the circle.

5. Once all students have retrieved their object, engage students in a discussion about the challenges of the activity. Questions can include:

   a. Was that easy or difficult? Why?
   
   b. If you could do it over again, what details about your object would you have paid more attention to?
   
   c. Did you use more senses than just your sight?

Conclusion

6. Optional: Have students return their object to its original location or collect them. Now ask them to draw or describe their object in their nature writing journal.
Activity #6: Create Your Own Plant

*Nature uses human imagination to lift her work of creation to even higher levels.*

- Luigi Pirandello

**Summary**

Students create their own plant. This activity encourages students to use their imagination to create original details and features. Teachers can encourage students to use established vocabulary to create and describe their plant or students can create their own features and vocabulary.

**Materials**

Nature journal, writing utensil, colored pencils, markers or crayons

**Time Required**

40 minutes

**Procedure**

1. *Optional:* Teachers can introduce the lesson by showing students unique plants and sharing interesting stories about the plants. This introduction gets students to start thinking about unique qualities of plants. Example: Venus flytrap, Rafflesia arnoldii, Corpse flower. (Teachers may choose to use this step at the end of the activity as it may stifle creativity.)

   For examples of unusual plants:
   http://www.divinecaroline.com/22167/37205-eight-world-s-mostunusual-plants

2. Tell students their assignment is to create their own plant in their journal. They should draw the plant as well as provide a description about their plants features, adaptations, unusual characteristics and history.

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**Consider This!**

Teachers can provide as many parameters for this activity as they believe appropriate. For example, teachers can ask students to create plants that are consistent with reality, or instead, they can allow students to make up features and descriptive vocabulary. Think Avatar.

This activity can also be adapted for other forms of life: mammals, insects, amphibians, ecologies, etc.
3. *Optional:* Have students share their plant with a partner. Without showing the partner the descriptive characteristics, have the partner describe the plant using his or her own vocabulary. Then have the creator of the plant describe the characteristics as they were intended. This step offers opportunity for conversation about how people have different ways of describing objects; different perspectives and perceptions. This can be done in partners or as a group activity.
Activity #7: Listen, Label & Write

*Lie down and listen to the crabgrass grow.*

- *Marya Mannes*

**Summary**
This activity encourages students to hone in on one or two sounds and then develop their awareness of the sound by putting it into a writing context.

**Materials**
Teachers can use sounds from outside or can have pre-recorded sounds; nature journal, writing utensil

**Time Required**
30 minutes

**Procedure**

1. Introduce the activity engaging students in a brief conversation about the tendency to over rely on vision and the importance of using all our senses to observe settings (whether in nature or in a man made setting).

2. *Optional:* A great secondary introduction to this activity is to ask students to close their eyes and then play/make a variety of different sounds. Consider the use of a nature relaxation CD. Teachers can stop the CD occasionally to ask student reflection on the sounds they hear, or they can have students write down what they hear once the sounds have ceased and their eyes are open.

3. *Optional:* Briefly provide definitions on descriptive words for sound: pitch, tone, timber, melody, harmony, etc. (See Fact Sheet for more information on these terms).

4. Take students outside and have them quietly listen to their surroundings for a couple minutes; ask them while listening to single out a sound that is of interest to them; tell them they are going to use this sound in an upcoming writing activity.

5. Students should listen to the sound and quietly write down any observations they can make about the sound. Its pitch, timber,
melody, harmony, etc. Is it a pleasant or disturbing sound? Where is this sound coming from? How does it make the student feel? Does it recall any memories?

6. Now students create a poem or story incorporating the sound as a key component. Poems can be about the sound itself, what created the sound, or how the sound made the students feel.

Conclusion

7. Students share poems in pairs, small groups or to the whole class. Teachers can encourage discussion based on the observations, description, and student stories.

Word Sheet

The Vocabulary of Sound
Harmony – a combination of notes sounding simultaneously that form a pleasing union.
Melody – a succession of sounds that form a pleasing union.
Pitch – the value of a sound (A flat, B sharp, etc.).
Tone – the quality of sound (full, thick, shrill, etc.).

Common Sound Descriptors
Bark, beat, bellow, blare, blast, blubber, boom, bubble, bump, burp, cackle, cacophonous, carol, caw, chant, chatter, chirp, chorus, clamber, clang, clank, clap, clash, clatter, clucking, collide, commotion, coo, cough, crackle, crash, creak, croak, croon, crow, crunch, cry, discordant, dissonant, fizz, flat, gabble, gasp, gibber, grate, grind, gritty, growl, grunt, gurgle, hiss, hoarse, holler, honk, hoot, howl, jabber, jangle, jingle, loud, melodious, moaning, moo, mum, mumble, murmur, noisy, pandemonium, pant, patter, peal, peep, piercing, pitch, pop, pounding, prattle, quack, quiet, racket, rasping, rattle, raucous, rhythmic, ring, rip, roar, rumble, rustle, scratchy, scream, screech, shout, shriek, shrill, shuffle, sigh, silent, singing, smash, snap, snivel, snore, snort, sob, soft, soothing, speechless, splash, squall, squawk, squeaky, squeal, strike, swish, tapping, tear, thump, thunderous, tinkle, tone, tranquil, trumpeting, tumult, tune, tweet, twittering, uproar, vocalize, voiceless, volume, wail, weep, wheeze, whimper, whine, whisper, whistle, whoop, yap, yell, yelp.
Activity #8: Integrating Sound Into Stories

Each environment has its own signature. Sound tells a story: You make choices about what you’re hearing, where to look, how you want to feel about what’s going on.

- Stephen Hopkins

Summary
Students create their own sound and then incorporate it into a story.

Materials
Pots, pans, fans, noisemakers, etc, tape recorder, nature journal, writing utensil

Time Required
45 minutes

Procedure

1. Tell students they are going to be creating a story using sounds they create. As an introduction, teacher’s can play their own story incorporating sounds to model the activity (see procedure to create your own story). *(Teachers can introduce this activity a day or two before proceeding so that students have an opportunity to bring in noisemakers from home.)*

   *This activity lends itself to students working with a partner or in small groups.*

2. Lay noisemaking objects on a table and ask students to select one or two objects to create their sound.

3. Students now create their sound. Tell students to be creative with their sounds… the sound they create can be more than simply a “crash” or “bang”; it can be “multisyllabic.” *(The process of*
developing a sound may be best suited for outdoors where groups can find their own space to develop their sound.

4. Once they have determined their sound students then write and record a story that incorporates their sound. The story can be about the sound or a can simply incorporate the sound, regardless the sound should be a focal point of the story.

5. Finally, students share their story with the class! Students can simply read their stories or teachers can have groups act out their stories.

**Alternative Activities:**

**I Hear a Story!**

Another great sound activity is to play a series of sounds for students and then have them create their own story based on the sounds. The fun of this activity is that each student will have a different interpretation of the sounds and so each story will be unique (but based on the same input...how cool!).

- or -

Have students brainstorm a list of sounds from nature. With the noisemakers provided, have students create sounds that mimic those from your natural world sounds list. Examples: a rockslide, an earthquake, the wind in the trees, a bird call, ocean waves, etc.

- or -

Students create a story they then tell using only sounds. Students should write down the story on a separate piece of paper and then practice “playing” their story. Now have a student or group of students share their “soundtrack” with a small group. The small group works to “decode” the meaning of the soundtrack and guesses as to the story behind the sounds. Once the guessers have shared their ideas, the author reveals his or her version of the story created by the sounds.
Activity #9: Where Is That Sound Coming From?

Hearing is a form of touch. You feel it through your body, and sometimes it almost hits your face.

- Evelyn Glennie

Summary
Teacher plays a sound at a distance and students use their listening senses to locate the sound.

Materials
Blindfolds, a pre-recorded sound or a drum

Time Required
30 minutes

Procedure

1. Take students outside and tell them they are going to engage in an activity that requires them to focus on their hearing.

You can also introduce this activity with some interesting facts about hearing:

- Animals use their sense of hearing for a wide variety of functions, most importantly for locating prey or evading danger.

- Dolphins’ sense of hearing is 14 times better than that of humans.

- As we get older, our hearing becomes less capable of picking up sound.

- Parrots have a strong sense of hearing. In fact, during WWI they were put on top of the Eiffel Tower to alarm soldiers of pending enemy air strikes.

Now ask students to summon their animal instincts and use their sense of hearing to locate a sound.
2. Have students partner up. Each pair will consist of one student who is blindfolded attempting to locate the sound, and one who is not blindfolded, whose role is to walk with the blindfolded student keeping him or her safe.

3. Explain to students that you are going to begin playing a sound and when they hear it the blindfolded students should walk toward the sound using their sense of hearing to guide their journey. Explain to the partners who are not blindfolded that it is NOT their job to guide their partners to the sound (they are simply there to make sure the partner stays safe). Because students will be walking blindfolded, teachers should choose an appropriate and safe location for this activity. That said, do not be afraid to challenge students by performing the activity with obstructions; obstructions force students to heighten all their senses and to use their bodies to sense danger.

4. Place yourself or an assistant in a location away from the students with the drum or pre-recorded sound and begin playing the sound.

5. Students walk toward the sound. Once students arrive at the location of the sound, tell them they can take off their blindfold. Ask students to wait to share thoughts on the activity until they have had the opportunity to play both roles.

6. Have partners switch roles and again complete the activity with the sound coming from a new location.

**Conclusion**

7. Ask students to share insights about the activity. Teachers can facilitate the discussion by asking questions such as:

   a. Did your sense of hearing guide you well, or did you get lost at times?

   b. Do you think if you were to focus more attention on your sense of hearing you could develop the skill and be able to complete activities such as this one better?

   c. In what areas of life could better hearing/listening skills serve you?

   d. What other senses did you use during this activity?

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**Consider This!**

As a wrap up writing activity, ask students to write about the sense of hearing from the perspective of an animal hunting for prey or avoiding predators.
Nothing is more memorable than a smell. One scent can be unexpected, momentary and fleeting, yet conjure up a childhood summer beside a lake in the mountains.

- Diane Ackerman

Summary
This exercise is geared toward moving students away from describing smells with simply, “that stinks” or “mmm, that smells good” to using more descriptive language to capture a scent. In addition, the exercise focuses students on describing smell rather than judging it good or bad.

Materials
Scented objects (ideally one for each student…can be anything), writing journal

Time Required
35 minutes for modeling and student exercise
20-30 minutes for presentations (depends on whether teacher breaks students into pairs, groups, or has students work on activity alone)

Background
Describing smells can be difficult because there are no obvious umbrella terms for smell. To clarify the process, a class can create their own categories for types of smells. For example, a class could determine that sweet, floral, savory, and earthy provide solid general categories for describing smell. They could then put similar adjectives into each of the categories; for example dirty, minerally, sulfurous would be placed in the earthy category. Regardless of what categories a class makes, what is more important is to understand that they can use other sensory descriptors to describe smell. In fact, more often than not, people use adjectives for taste and texture to describe smell. For example, sweet and sour (taste) or buttery and dirty (texture). Once students grasp this concept, they can get creative with their descriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Odor Descriptors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acrid, aromatic, balmy, briny, burnt, damp, dank, earthy, fetid, fishy, floral, fragrant, fresh, fulsome, gamy, gaseous, leathery, malodorous, moldy, musty, noxious, perfumed, piney, pungent, putrid, rank, reek, rotten, savory, scented, sharp, sickly, smoky, sour, spicy, spoiled, stagnant, stench, stinky, sweet, tempting, woody.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure

Activity can be done individually, in pairs or in small groups.

1. Create your classroom smell adjective chart as suggested above.

2. Now model the activity with the class: Pick an object with a scent and give students a chance to smell it, then as a class, begin to develop a paragraph describing its qualities of smell. Do not use terms such as good or bad; instead describe the smell in terms that reserve judgment. The purpose of this assignment is to spark students’ creativity with their language in order to provide their reading audience imagery that it can relate to. (Example below).

3. Now it’s the students’ turn. Provide each student a scented object. Provide some students with objects that smell “good” and others with a “bad” smelling object.

4. Students then write a paragraph describing the smell. Again, challenge them to describe the object in ways that do not clearly elicit a positive or negative response. Tell them they can refer to the adjective chart for ideas.

Conclusion

5. Students now share their descriptions. It can be fun to have them describe the object and allow others to guess what it is before revealing its identity.

Example

Rubber
It burns my nose. It is harsh, defined, and yet changes complexion as the final whiff passes by. It is as if the smell bends after the initial shock and then it fades and what is left lingers, but eventually turns to leave, distinguished and everlasting. It reminds me of the drive home in the hot sun after a long hard day of manual labor. It reminds me of an honest job; it reminds me of the people behind the scenes of a great city, working hard to keep it going.
Activity #11: What Is That Smell?

The act of smelling something, anything, is remarkably like the act of thinking. Immediately at the moment of perception, you can feel the mind going to work, sending the odor around from place to place, setting off complex repertories through the brain, polling one center after another for signs of recognition, for old memories and old connection.

- Lewis Thomas

Summary
The timeless and tested “what’s in the bag” activity. Students smell a number of different fragrances and describe them.

Materials
Bags or jars or bottles for odoriferous emanations, strips of paper for student guesses, receptacle for guesses, nature journal, writing utensil

Time Required
40 minutes

Preparation
This activity requires preparing your “smell kit.” Perfume bottles or jars can be used to capture a smell or teachers can simply use bags. Ideally, teachers will place the object or fragrance in a container that does not allow students to see what it is. Duck tape can come in handy here.

Some ideas for smells to use:
(These are only a few, you can get creative here!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Herbs</th>
<th>mint, rosemary, lavender, anise</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fruits &amp; vegetables</td>
<td>lemon, grapefruit, berries, carrot, pepper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>pine or fir needles, fragrant flowers, grass clippings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Leather, smoke, wood, butter, vanilla, chocolate, sulfur, oil, rubber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other x2</td>
<td>old musty clothing, morning dew, kitty litter, scat, bleach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure

1. Introduce the activity by providing students some interesting facts about the olfactory sense. Here’s a few to begin with:

   - Animals use their sense of smell to meet basic needs whether in pursuit of food, passion or as an alert against predators.

   - Scents become more fragrant in the presence of moisture. Dog’s noses are wet, an adaptation to increase their sense of smell.

   - For humans, sense of smell and memory are largely connected. 80% of memory can be triggered by smell.

   - Sense of smell gets better as the day moves forward. Our sense of smell is least effective in the morning.

2. Place smell samplers on a table in front of class (or teachers can place smell samples in tables around the classroom to avoid student congestion). Each sample should be accompanied by small tabs of paper and a receptacle for students to place their guess.

3. Students spend 10-15 minutes circulating the room smelling each of the samples and scribing a guess about the mystery smell’s identification. They then place their guess in the receptacle. (This activity can be done with a partner to increase interaction.)

   a. Students should take their writing journal with them, jotting down notes describing the smell.

4. When students have completed their olfactory sampling, have them return to their seats and reveal the scents. Teachers can play with this part of the activity, incorporating the sharing of student guesses, or creating some sort of poll, tally or competition.

Conclusion

5. Finally, have students categorize smells. Begin discussion of smell categories and vocabulary using the smell samples as a guide. (SEE next activity for list of descriptive smell words).
Activity #12: Olfactory Reminiscing

Nothing awakens a reminiscence like an odor.

- Victor Hugo

Summary
A writing exercise asking students to write free-form associations and memories in response to different fragrances.

Materials
Smell kit (SEE Activity #7 for examples), writing journal

Time Required
5 minute introduction + 10 minutes per scent

Procedure

1. Explain to students that smell has a strong impact on recalling memories. (People can recall smells with 65% accuracy after a year, whereas they can only recall 50% from sight after just three months). This activity is going to test out this theory.

2. Ask students to take out their writing journals. Explain that you are going to “release” a number of smells and students’ assignment is to respond to the smells by writing their initial response to them, whether associations or memories. Give students 5-10 minutes for each scent.

Conclusion

3. After students complete writings, provide them opportunity to share.
Activity #13: How Does It Feel?

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

- William Shakespeare

Summary
This activity has students isolate their sense of touch, asking them to feel and describe a number of hidden objects.

Materials
Touch kit (place a variety of objects with different textures in bags), strips of paper for student guesses, receptacle for student guesses, writing journal.

Time Required
40 minutes

Preparation
This activity requires you to once again prepare a sensory kit; in this case it is a “touch kit.” Place objects in bags or other containers that can allow students to touch the objects but conceals the objects’ identities.

Some ideas of common objects you can use:
(These are only a few, you can get creative here!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organic</th>
<th>Pelts, furs, leaves, different styles of bark, dirt, sand, rock, feathers, thorny branches, snake skin, tumbleweed, oats.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inorganic</td>
<td>Playdough, sandpaper, “slime,” pillows, ice packs, pocket warmers, oatmeal, polyester, nylon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

1. Introduce this activity with some fun facts about touch. Some points of interest include:
   a. Skin is the largest organ of the body and is part of the system that senses pain, pressure, movement, hot and cold.
   b. Skin is very sensitive on the lips and in the hands and fingers.
2. Place touch samplers on tables around the room. Each sample should be accompanied by the small strips of paper and the receptacle for student guesses.

3. Students spend 10-15 minutes circulating the room feeling each of the samples and writing down their guesses as the samples’ identities. They then place their guesses in the receptacles. (This activity can be done with a partner to increase interaction.)
   a. Students should take their writing journal with them, jotting down notes describing how the objects feel.
   b. It is important for the teacher to make sure the students pay attention to how the objects feel, not to simply determine their identity.

4. When students have completed the activity, have them return to their seats and reveal the sensory objects. Teachers can again play with this part of the activity, incorporating polls, tallies, reading student guesses, or having students share how they described the object.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Sheet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Touch Descriptors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bumpy, coarse, cold, dry, feathery, fuzzy, grainy, hairy, hard, hot, leathery, lumpy, moist, prickly, rough, scaly, scratchy, sharp, silky, slimy, slippery, smooth, soft, sticky, velvety, warm, wet, wooly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activity #14: Hot Nature Potato

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

- William Shakespeare

Summary
A game of sensory musical chairs that gets students thinking about all the ways they can describe an object. An object is passed from student to student; “when the music stops” the student with the object describes a feature of the object.

Materials
An object worth describing; music

Time Required
10 minutes

Procedure

1. Move students into a circle; if an aid is in the classroom, you can divide your class into two circles.

2. Explain to students that they are going to use ALL their sensory skills to describe an object.

3. Students pass around an object while music plays, when the music stops, the student holding the object tells the class one way to describe the object.

4. The game continues the class has exhausted all ways to describe the object.

Consider This!
To discourage students from relying on their vision, teachers can blindfold students, forcing them to focus on touch, smell, and hearing. Teachers can encourage the rest of the class to quietly consider the object’s identity as more features are recognized.
Activity #15: Feeling Your Environment

A great wind is blowing, and that gives you either imagination or a headache.

- Catherine the Great

Summary
A meditative activity asking students to observe nature’s touch. Students sit quietly observing the environment interacting with them and then write their observations.

Materials
Nature journal and writing utensil

Time Required
Variable

Procedure
1. Explain to students that their sense of touch also allows them to feel outside forces such as the wind, the sun, rain, other people, etc. Students are using their sense of touch when they simply sit quietly feeling the environment initiate interactions with them (this is a subtle distinction from touch as a proactive action; in this case, the student allows the environment to initiate contact and the student feels the response).

2. Take students outside making sure they have their writing journal.

3. Instruct students to find their own quiet space for observation.

4. Students sit quietly (length determined by teacher) and observe nature’s “touch” on their body (wind, rain, sun, etc.). If required, the teacher can facilitate this process by asking students what they feel.

5. Students write their observations in their journal attempting to describe the sensations felt. Encourage them to go beyond, “I felt the wind. I felt the sun…” and to describe what these outside sources feel like, how their bodies responded to these inputs.
Activity #16: Food Tasting Haikus

Everyone eats and drinks, but few appreciate taste.

- Confucius

Summary
Students sample different foods and write taste haikus.

Materials
Food samples, nature journal and writing utensil

Time Required
45 minutes

Procedure

1. If students are not already familiar with writing haikus, review the formula (three lines: first line five syllables, second line seven syllables, third line five syllables).

2. Explain to students that they are going to write their haikus based on the sense of taste. Encourage them to observe the taste and to use the haikus as an opportunity to describe it.

3. Prior to class, set up a few samples of foods (try to have foods that represent each of the four main taste types – sweet, salty, sour, and bitter – and/or try to incorporate extreme opposites). Cover the foods to add to the anticipation of the activity…

4. Instruct students on the

Consider This!

Of course you can do a traditional lesson on taste simply having students sample different foods and categorize their tastes into one of the four taste categories: sweet, salty, sour, and bitter.

Or you can adapt the “What’s The Difference” activity (#2) for a subject such as taste. Have students try the same food and describe the subtle differences between each sample.

“Food For Thought”
If you have a class with students who love to participate, another variation to this activity can incorporate a “potluck” where students bring a side or main course and the class samples and writes about each dish.
procedure for tasting foods (may be easiest if food is set up on tables or shelves around the classroom).

5. …drum roll…remove cover from foods and allow students to dig in. (This activity runs best if you pass out plates and have students pick up a sample of each and then take back to their desk to begin the writing process; instruct students that they should be writing – or considering what they are going to write – immediately after sampling the food.

6. Have students share their haikus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edibles Naturally Growing in the NW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have the funding and time for a field trip, here are some native edibles common to the Northwest:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berries: blackberries, huckleberry, Oregon grape, salal, salmonberry, thimbleberry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants: Indian plum, wood sorrel, wild ginger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mushrooms: chanterelle, morel, oyster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Before you eat anything, be sure you know for certain what it is!!!**
Activity #17: Body Awareness

*That which fills the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I see as my own nature.*

- Chang Tzu

**Summary**
A simple activity asking students to sit quietly, observing the feelings and motions of their bodies.

**Materials**
Nature journal, writing utensil

**Time Required**
Varies; to start out, limit to no more than ten minutes

**Procedure**

1. Tell students they are to find their own space outside and to sit quietly observing their own body. Focus students’ efforts by asking them to notice any sensations they feel while sitting – pain, relaxation, warmth, cold, etc.

2. Encourage students to sit up and to really focus their attention on their body and how it feels.

3. Teachers can facilitate this meditative exercise by focusing student attention with verbal direction and questioning. Questions and directions can include:

   - Take some time to observe all parts of your body. Start by focusing concentration in your toes, now your feet, your ankles, your lower leg, etc. Spend a few moments on each part of your body observing how it feels.

   Consider This!
   This is a great exercise to use before beginning a class or as a transition between activities. Allowing students an opportunity to sit provides a quiet time for refocus, and re-energy.

   Teachers can also structure this activity to focus on any of the five senses.
• Do not judge your feelings. If you are feeling pain, try to think of it as a unique feeling, rather than a bad feeling, you can say to yourself, “Hm, I am having this interesting feeling” and leave it at that. Students should approach feelings of relaxation in the same way; allow the mind to simply observe, not judge.

4. Ask students to write observations in their journal.
Section 2
Developing Descriptive Language
Introduction

This section focuses student efforts on descriptive phrases, figurative language and development of the writing process. Activities include focus on similes, metaphors, personification, describing setting and further developing students’ skills in the writing process. It is important to note that activities move from simple to more involved.

In order to provide students an opportunity to succeed in these endeavors, especially when developing a storyline, teachers should encourage students to use brainstorming and outlining techniques.

The next two pages show a couple basic examples of worksheets teachers can provide students (or have students make) in order to foster the brainstorming and organization process.
Webbing

Students place a main idea/topic in the center circle and then develop supporting ideas or brainstorm relationships and descriptive features in the outer circles.

Below is an example of a web describing a Douglas fir tree:
Below is an example of a story outline – this will look different depending on the type of story, the number of characters, etc., but this can provide a starting point for development of an outline suitable to student needs.
Activity #18: Narrative through a Window

The source and center of all man’s creative power...is his power of making images, or the power of imagination.

- Robert Collier

Summary
This activity asks students to begin to synthesize the activities from the previous section into a cohesive writing sample. Students are asked to observe a natural setting and to “set the scene” for a narrative. The focus of this activity is strictly observation and description of a setting; later activities will incorporate use of simile, metaphor, etc. to describe a setting. (Note: This activity can be as involved or as simple as you would like it to be. The activity can be a part of a larger writing assignment, or it can simply be an exercise to focus students on describing a setting.)

Materials
Nature journal, writing utensil, storyline cards
The location or object observed will vary on the location of your activity and teacher preference. Teachers can take students outside and ask them to locate a natural setting, teachers can provide pictures, or students can bring pictures to class to guide the activity.

Time Required
40 minutes

Procedure

1. Place students in front of their setting (whether outside, through a window, or looking at a picture).

2. Provide students time to write out their description. Encourage students to consider all the different sensory aspects of the setting.

3. Have students share their setting description with a partner or in a small group.

4. After sharing and receiving peer feedback students can add to their setting description, or they can use the feedback to describe a new setting.
Alternative Approach

Summary
Part II is an extension of the original activity, but in this activity students are asked to describe their setting while aware of the story/plot that will unfold in the setting.

Materials
Same as above

Time Required
Same as above

Preparation
In order to simplify this exercise have storyline cards ready and available for those students who do not have a story already in mind. These should be general descriptions of a story’s plot and will provide students a running start for creating their scene. The cards also give students a sense of the “mood” for their writing.

Ex.1) a young man is being sent off to war.
Ex 2) teenage vampire story
Ex 3) unrequited love story

Procedure

1. Lead students through the same exercise but now ask them to consider the setting as a part of a larger storyline.

2. Hand out storyline cards to help students begin description of setting.

3. Provide students worksheets or guidelines for mapping out their ideas (SEE pages 45-46 for examples).

Activity #19: Asking Questions

*Sometimes questions are more important than answers.*

- Nancy Willard

Summary
This activity encourages students to consider questions that a setting/object/story may elicit. By asking questions students consider the topic in greater detail and develop stronger understanding which can lead to greater description.

Materials
Setting and or object, nature journal, writing utensil

Time Required
30 minutes

Procedure

1. Provide students an object or natural setting (whether outdoors, through a window, a picture, or an object).

2. Have students open their nature journals and draw two lines from top to bottom on their paper dividing the sheet into three columns.

3. On the left side of the paper have them write out all noted observations about the object or setting.

4. Once all observations are completed have students begin to write down questions that the observations elicit. Questions should be written in the center column.

5. The right column is reserved for answers to all questions.

Consider This
A great variation of this activity is to have students work in partners; one student does the initial observation and then the other student asks the questions based on the first student’s observations. The observer then answers his partner’s questions.

If done this way, partners can ask questions to encourage greater description by the observer.
## Observation / Question / Response Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object / Setting ____________________________</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Activity #20: Simile & Metaphor Practice**

*Words have weight, sound and appearance; it is only by considering these that you can write a sentence that is good to look at and good to listen to.*

- William Somerset Maugham

**Summary**
This is a simple exercise providing students an opportunity to practice similes and/or metaphors with a natural setting or natural objects.

**Materials**
Nature journal, writing utensil; natural setting, objects, pictures or worksheet

**Time Required**
30 minutes

**Background**
Similes and metaphors are tools of language used to better describe objects, ideas, actions, etc. by point of comparison. A simile uses “like” or “as;” a metaphor does not.

**Examples:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simile</th>
<th>The tree remained in its place, silent and content, like a meditating monk.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The flower was as fragrant as the sweetest perfume.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He is as sharp as a tack.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Thee tree was a meditating monk, sitting silent and content.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The mountain was a jungle gym with hikers scaled up and down its side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Her brain is a tack, sharp and direct.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

1. Explain to students what a simile and/or metaphor is. Provide examples and model how to create a simile or metaphor. Then as a class develop a few similes and or metaphors to ensure student understanding. (Another great way to teach similes/metaphors is to break students up into pairs or groups and provide each group
with an example of the language devices using quotes, poems or excerpts from books. Students read and analyze the text looking for the metaphors/similes and then share their findings with the class.)

2. Take students outside and have them observe their natural surroundings. They can focus on vegetation, wildlife, weather, or the interaction between any of these elements. Students can choose to consider the sensory characteristics of what they are observing, or they can focus on its actions and or function.

3. While observing have students jot down / brainstorm other items, actions, things that the object or element reminds them of.

4. Now have them apply the comparison of the object/element and what it reminds them of to the simile or metaphor sentence formula. Encourage them to add as much description as possible to their sentence. Also encourage them to review their simile: does it make sense? Is there a common characteristic and point of comparison between the two objects/elements/actions?

If teachers are using pictures or creating a worksheet, here is a small list of objects/elements that students can use to make a simile / metaphor:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vegetation</th>
<th>Trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife</td>
<td>Birds, mammals, insects, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>Sun, wind, rain, clouds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Happy, sad, angry, disappointed, hopeless, excited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School objects</td>
<td>Desk, table, pencil, books, shelves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Couch, chair, table, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Running, walking, standing, jumping, creeping, climbing, driving, blinking, smiling, talking, listening, smelling, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And so many more!
Activity #21: Simile (or Metaphor) Round Table

*Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.*

- *E.L. Doctorow*

**Summary**
A simple activity asking students to practice creating similes (or metaphors). Students are presented with an object and share similes (or metaphors) with group. Purpose of activity is to allow students to hear the ideas of their peers and get new ideas for describing objects.

**Materials**
Objects of interest, nature journal, writing utensil

**Time Required**
15 minutes or more

**Procedure**

*Activity can be done outside using natural objects and elements or can be done inside using teacher and/or student provided objects.*

1. Determine whether the focus of the activity is on similes, metaphors or both.

2. Break students up into small groups (or can do as a large group depending on size of your classroom, management requirements, etc.)

3. Present group(s) with an object and give each student a few minutes to come up with a simile/metaphor for the object.

   *If necessary, partner students up in order to encourage more participation and to discourage doubt and fear from quieter students.*

4. Have students share their similes/metaphors with the class.

5. Repeat activity with new object.
Activity #22: Simile Battles

One simile that solitary shines
In a dry desert of a thousand lines.  
- Alexander Pope

Summary
This is a fun game that encourages students to have fun with similes. The game works similar to a “rap battle” whereby students or groups throw similes back and forth at each other until one group is stumped.

Materials
Bring your “A” game and your creativity

Time Required
As long as the teacher feels appropriate

Procedure

1. Break students up into four to six groups (depending on size of your class) and have each group sit together. Explain the rules of the game:

2. Rules
   a. A topic will be presented to the groups.
   b. Groups will take turns making a simile out of the topic.
   c. Each group will be given one minute to come up with a simile.
   d. Groups will take turns sharing their simile.
   e. When a group is unable to come up with a simile it will be disqualified. The winner is the last group remaining.
   f. Once a topic is exhausted the teacher will choose another and the game will begin again.
   g. The teacher is the judge as to whether a simile qualifies as correct and appropriate.
Example: Topic is the wind

- The wind was as wild as a raging stallion.
- The wind swayed the trees like a dad rocking his baby to sleep.
- The wind howled like an angry ghost.

3. Teachers can take the class outside and choose topics based on the surroundings.

Conclusion

4. Ask students to take out their nature journals and write their three favorite similes shared during the activity.

Consider This!

A variation to this game can be played with compliments. The teacher throws out the beginning of the simile and groups finish the sentence. For example, “You are as happy as ________.”

(Of course, teachers need to make sure that students keep the game clean and appropriate.)
Activity #23: Nature Personified

Words, when well chosen, have so great a force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of the things themselves.

- Joseph Addison

Summary
This activity asks students to personify naturally occurring objects and elements in a natural setting. Teachers have students write stories or poems using the technique.

Materials
Nature journals, writing utensil

Time Required
40 minutes

Background
Personification is a type of metaphor which gives human traits to non-human objects.

For example:

- The wind picked up and kissed my face.

- The rock broke loose of its perch and ran down the hillside, knocking over anything in its way.

- The hammer smacked the nail without any concern for its well-being; its only concern was ensuring that the building stayed in place.

Personification can also be as simple as a phrase such as:

- “the raging river” or “a cackling fire”

Consider This!
As an introduction read a story such as The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein, or quotes/poems (ex. “The Railway Train” by Emily Dickinson) that express personification. After reading, discuss them with your class.

Or break students up into groups and hand each group a quote or poem that exemplifies personification. Have the group share their quote/poem and explain its use of personification and how it adds to the imagery/description.
Procedure

1. Introduce personification through modeling and lead students through the process of personifying an object in your classroom (can personify a pen, pencil, stapler, desk, etc.)

2. Take students outside and ask them to observe their surroundings. Ask them to make note of all the plants and inanimate objects. Now tell them you want them to create a story or poem about one of the objects using personification.

3. After completing their story have them share in small groups.

4. Repeat the exercise (as many times as needed) asking students to focus on a new object.

**Napping Under a Tree**

As I napped under the tree it whispered the wind to me. Its boughs swayed back and forth and I felt as though I were in its arms, being rocked gently back and forth; the leaves cooing in the wind. On occasion the wind would pick up and as if providing an offering, the tree would place on my nose, my hip, my foot, a leaf. Upon arriving at my body, the leaf remained still, relaxed and unaware of the possibility of anything more. Perfectly content. And all I could think was how simple everything was. How unnecessary worry was. The tree was not worried.

As I awoke from my nap and rose to my feet anticipating a return to my daily obligations, I turned and looked at the tree, silently thanking it. The tree said nothing, but it nodded in a way that suggested understanding: I had to go...the tree would be there.
Activity #24: Nature Writing

*Come forth into the light of things,*
*Let Nature be your teacher.*

- William Wordsworth

Summary
This activity asks students to bring together their sensory observation skills and their figurative language tools (simile, metaphor, personification) to describe a setting. This activity is the culmination of previous activities, asking students to practice the art of nature writing.

Materials
Nature journal, writing utensil (webbing diagrams may be helpful)

Time Required
1 hour

Procedure

1. Read a few excerpts from great nature writing or break students into groups and provide each group with a different excerpt. Have groups read and analyze their excerpt and then share the excerpt and their insights about it with the class.

Some suggested reading includes:

   a. *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey
   b. *The Maine Woods* by Henry David Thoreau
   c. *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold

2. Now explain to students you want them to use their knowledge or figurative language (simile, metaphor, personification), sensory description and the writing process to begin creating a nature writing narrative.
3. Provide students a setting to begin their writing (whether taking them outside or using a picture). Teachers can choose to have the whole class write about the same setting or different settings.

4. Ask students to simply focus on writing about the setting for the time being.

5. Encourage students to brainstorm how they want to describe their setting using writing diagrams (webbing) and jotting down notes.

6. After fifteen minutes or so, encourage students to begin the writing process. Explain to students that this process does not need to be perfect; rather, the purpose of the exercise is for them to experiment with figurative language and description.

7. Once students have had enough time to put together a few paragraphs explaining their setting, have them partner up and share their narrative.

8. Partners should provide constructive feedback (what they liked, suggestions for improvement, etc.).

9. Provide students additional time to make changes.

10. Come back together as a large class and ask students about the writing process.

    a. What parts were frustrating?

    b. What parts came easy?

    c. How do they feel about this type of writing compared to expository writing?

11. *Optional:* This process can be repeated providing students new settings, or if teachers choose, they can make this exercise a part of a larger writing activity, whereby students develop a complete story. If teachers choose to do this, it will of course be a process that takes a number of weeks.
Section 3
Additional Resources


