Nature Journaling

Nature is good for us! A large body of research shows that spending time in green open space has positive effects on heart disease, high blood pressure, asthma, diabetes, and obesity, as well as on many indicators of health. Exposure to nature also improves mental health, reducing stress, anxiety, and the expression of behavioral disorders in adults and children. To reap these health benefits, spend at least 120 minutes in natural areas every week.

Why use a nature journal?

- To slow down, pay attention, and experience awe and wonder
- To develop creativity and critical thinking skills
- To develop science identity through authentic science practices
- To nurture connection with nature
- To build an inclusive culture of curiosity in the family, classroom, or community
- To support interdisciplinary learning

Journaling deepens our observations, thinking, and memory. Journal entries that include words, pictures, and numbers lead us to think in different ways and make a more complete record of what we see.

Writing strengthens our thinking because we must organize our thoughts as we put them down on the page. The physical act of writing cements memories better than tapping keys does. Drawing leads to close, careful observation and improved memory. When we draw, we look again and again at the least familiar parts of a subject, paying careful attention to structures and shapes. Using numbers helps us make different kinds of observations and reveals significant patterns. Qualifying observations will lead us to questions we wouldn't have thought to ask.

Combining writing, drawing, and numbers on a journal page creates a dynamic and rich learning experience!

Use the following activities as guides to help you begin your nature journal. Make it your own and use it to observe your surroundings or simply focus your thoughts.

I Notice, I Wonder, It Reminds Me Of

Learn observation and fundamental inquiry skills through this simple routine.

1. Find a comfortable spot outdoors or walk a trail with your journal and pause to ask and answer these prompts along the way.

2. I notice…
   This prompt focuses our attention and helps us articulate and remember our observations.

3. I wonder…
   This prompt sparks inquiry and invites us to question deeply and broadly.

4. It reminds me of…
   This prompt leads us to connect what we observe to what we already know, which builds stronger memories.

5. You may observe and use these prompts for as many objects or views as you'd like. Together, these prompts can change the way we experience the world, offering a routine and practice of learning about anything.

Nature Mapping

Engage your senses to create a map of your surroundings in your journal.

1. Find a comfortable spot outdoors. You choose the size of the area around to include on your map.

2. You can choose to map a particular subject around you (perhaps a squirrel or a specific tree), or you can map everything around you.

3. Look, listen, and smell your surroundings.

4. Make a map of the subject in this area within the boundaries described.

5. Consider using symbols to show where things occur and make a key to what each symbol means.

6. Include a North arrow and perhaps a scale.

7. Include a few landmarks on your map.

Sit Spot

"Find your sit spot and see what comes." This activity gives time and autonomy to connect with nature on your own terms. As simple as it sounds, Sit Spot is one of the most memorable and potentially life-changing journal experiences.

1. Find a place in an outdoor area that is special to you or that you are drawn to.

2. Open your senses and sit quietly.

3. Observe and record your experiences in your journal (in whatever format you prefer).

4. Consider making this activity part of your routine and return regularly to your Sit Spot to notice and document seasonal changes.

Resources

- Portage Park District's video on making your own nature journal: https://youtu.be/eVi3ndkAhzw
- Ideas, resources, and examples of nature journals: https://johnmuirlaws.com/