

## “A Word for Nature’: Creative Writing on the Natural World” Lesson Plan

### Overview

Henry David Thoreau was careful not only in his observations of nature, but in the way he expressed his reflections on the natural world. This reading and creative writing lesson will help students of a wide age range develop their writing skills through personal reflection and the genre of nature writing.

### Grades

6-12

### Suggested Time Allowance

1-2 class periods + home assignment for writing

### Resources

Projector, access to outdoors, computer/writing materials,

### Activities Summary

1. Discussion of Nature Writing and its role in American literature
2. Introduction to Henry Thoreau + Reading Activity
3. Nature Writing Activity/Assignment

*Compiled by Jill Dwiggins*

## “A Word for Nature’: Creative Writing on the Natural World”

### Learning Objects and Curriculum Standards

---

*This lesson addresses the following curriculum objectives identified by National Council of Teachers of English (Standards for the English Language Arts) and the Common Core State Standards Initiative.*

#### **National Council of Teachers of English**

Student activities address the following objectives:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

#### **Common Core**

Student activities address the following objectives:

Grades 6-8

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2 Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2b Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2c Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. CCSS.ELA-

Literacy.WHST.6-8.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

## Grades 9-10

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2a Introduce a topic and organize ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2b Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2c Use varied transitions and sentence structures to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic and convey a style appropriate to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of likely readers.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2e Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2f Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

## Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2a Introduce a topic and organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2b Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2c Use varied transitions and sentence structures to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2d Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic; convey a knowledgeable stance in a style that responds to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of likely readers.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2e Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation provided (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

## “A Word for Nature’: Creative Writing on the Natural World”

### Lesson Plan

---

#### Activity 1. Discussion of Nature Writing and its role in American literature

*Introduce* students to the idea of nature writing: Nature writing is a genre that encourages humans to think about the non-human world. It encourages readers to consider the natural environment and their relationship to it.

*Ask students:* What different relationships do humans have with the natural environment? Some possible answers: Agricultural development, food production, Recreation, Aesthetic experiences, travel.

*Ask students:* Nature writing has roots from all points in history, from early written language by indigenous people to the European Enlightenment writing. But why might nature writing be important in the United States today?

Some possible answers:

- 1.) The United States encompass a huge variety of geography types and climates, providing inspiration to citizens from all regions and walks of life.
- 2.) The cultures of the United States, as well as the diverse First Nations (Native Americans) who lived here before European settlers arrived, each their own relationships to the natural world.
- 3.) As a large first-world nation, the U.S. uses a large amount of natural resources like food and oil.
- 4.) Modern U.S. America has established a number of institutions that address the preservation, use, and control of the natural world (Natural Park Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Departments of Transportation).
- 5.) The United States was the home of the modern environmental movement, a decades-long effort to control the damage done to the natural world by humans.

When authors write about the natural world, they are writing about a subject that impacts every human on earth, yet is especially relevant to the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *Types of Nature Writing (Use with PPT slide)*

*Remind students* again that nature writing creatively emphasizes the importance of the environment, and reminds us that the world’s history is not only the history of humans. It is the history of humans, non-humans, and the relationships between the two.

*Discussion:* How might writers approach these topics?

On the projector or board, show the following three names of nature writing types. After each discussion, *ask students:* How might an author employ this type of nature writing if they wanted to write about the subject of x? [Example: bees]

1.) **Descriptive nature writing** describes plants, animals, or non-living parts of the environment. It uses sensory description to convey the essence of non-humans. Descriptive nature writing appears in natural history essays, field guides, or narrative scenes of plant and animal species. This type presents nature in terms of facts. The purpose of this writing is often to inform readers about the natural world, or glorify its power or diversity.

Example: A writer may describe the effects of pesticides on a bee hive, in contrast with a healthy bee community in a safer, more natural landscape, in order to demonstrate part of the reason why bee populations are plummeting.

2.) **Personal Experience nature writing** is grounded in a recent or distant experience of the author, that deals directly with the natural world or inspires thought on the environment. It may be a witness to the spoiling of the environment, an experience farming or spending time in the woods or beach, a group adventure or a simple solitary walk through some grass. This type presents nature in terms of a narrative, or the writer's experience.

Example: A writer may narrate an experience she had harvesting honey from a hive – the process of getting dressed in a suit, the procedure of extracting the honey.

3.) **Philosophical nature writing** is more contemplative. It attempts to articulate what nature is made of and how it works – what the relationships are between man and nature, and parts of nature with each other. It asks the questions: what do we value in nature? What is our relationship to it? Are we responsible for its fate?

This type of writing is often critical of human policies and practices that are detrimental to the natural world. As an alternative, philosophical nature writing promotes a strong sense of place within each individual, or a sense of respect for the place and environment we occupy. The purpose of this writing is often to persuade readers of environmentally-minded ideals.

Example: A writer may make parallels between the community life of bees (who work together in a hive) with humans, and draw conclusions about how humans labor and create.

*These three types of nature writing are NOT exclusive to one another; however, they will help us understand how nature writers often present their ideas.*

## **Activity 2. Introduction to Henry Thoreau + Reading Activity**

Introduce students to Thoreau while displaying the PPT image and quote by Thoreau. Henry David Thoreau was an American nature writer most known for living at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts for two years, from 1845-1847, and writing about his experiences there. One purpose of this book and his other writing is to call his readers to think more environmentally, and to be sensitive to the places where they live. *Walden* encourages readers to take their minds away from commercialism and trivial parts of life. Thoreau approached this idea by describing the rewards of his deliberate, contemplative life at Walden Pond.

*Give to each student* one of the following passages by Thoreau. Allow them time to read their passages individually, then show each passage one by one on a projector.

Ask a student assigned the posted passage to read it out loud. Then ask all the students assigned that passage to explain to the class:

Which type or types of nature writing does Thoreau use in this passage?

What is the purpose of the passage?

What language devices do you recognize?

How does Thoreau employ the uses of the senses in his writing?

### **Activity 3. Nature Writing Assignment**

*Explain* that Thoreau is a great model for nature writing – he is often called the father of American Nature Writing, inspiring other famous authors like John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Annie Dillard. Although his prose is technically advanced, it also inspires emotional responses in readers, encouraging us to pay attention to landscape and our sense of place.

Thoreau kept a daily journal, where he wrote descriptions of the natural world around him, and reflected on these experiences. For this assignment, ask students to venture into an inspirational environment such as a woods, small park, or even the school campus and write down their observations and reflections. Students need not immerse themselves in a fully “natural” place to contemplate the natural world or their place in it.

Students may employ any combination of the types of nature writing discussed today in their assignment: factual observations and creative descriptions, a more reflective narrative, or contemplations that their time in their chosen environment may inspire. They should not feel confined to the descriptions of common nature writing types; encourage students to be creative.

They should use sensory descriptions or language devices such as metaphors; what matters is that their journal is detailed and written in their own voice. Ultimately, this journal should be adapted into a short passage that serves an audience-oriented purpose. Does their experience in nature inspire them to entertain readers with an anecdote about an animal they saw; persuade readers to consider the natural world from a particular angle, or inform them of the inner workings of this patch of environment?

### **Assignment Summary**

*Review the assignment* for the class before concluding the lesson. On their own during the coming (three days to a week), students should:

1. Take a journal or paper into an outdoor environment
2. Record their observations of the natural world. Describe the sights, sounds, touch, and smell of their setting.
3. Express their personal reflections, memories, thoughts, and ideas based on these observations
4. Include in their final passage an awareness of their personal sense of place, role in nature, and/or relationship to nature.



Optional: After the completed assignments are brought in, ask if any students would like to read their passage to the class or let students share in pairs, and provide feedback for one another.

*Discuss as a group:*

What was difficult about describing a natural setting?

What is difficult or easy about meditative/creative writing, as opposed to more formal arguments or essays?

## “A Word for Nature’: Creative Writing on the Natural World”

### Reading Activity

---

*Make copies of each passage below, cut out and distribute one passage to each student. (So if your class has 24 students, make 6 copies.) Let students read to themselves, then display passages on a projector, included in the lesson PPT, for the whole class. Ask students assigned each passage to read out loud and comment on it.*

1. “As I was paddling along the north shore one very calm October afternoon, for such days especially they settle on to the lakes, like the milkweed down, having looked in vain over the pond for a loon, suddenly one, sailing out from the shore toward the middle a few rods in front of me, set up his mild laugh and betrayed himself. I pursued with a paddle and he dived, but when he came up I was nearer than before. He dived again, but I miscalculated the direction he would take, and we were fifty rods apart when he came to the surface this time, for I had helped to widen the interval; and again he laughed long and loud, and with more reason than before. He manoeuvred so cunningly that I could not get within half a dozen rods of him.

Each time, when he came to the surface, turning his head this way and that, he coolly surveyed the water and the land, and apparently chose his course so that he might come up where there was the widest expanse of water and at the greatest distance from the boat. It was surprising how quickly he made up his mind and put his resolve into execution. He led me at once to the widest part of the pond, and could not be driven from it. While he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine. It was a pretty game, played on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon. Suddenly your adversary's checker disappears beneath the board, and the problem is to place yours nearest to where his will appear again.” – Thoreau, *Walden*

2. “To the sick the doctors wisely recommend a change of air and scenery. Thank Heaven, here is not all the world. The buckeye does not grow in New England, and the mockingbird is rarely heard here. The wild goose is more of a cosmopolite than we; he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a luncheon in the Ohio, and plumes himself for the night in a southern bayou. Even the bison, to some extent, keeps pace with the seasons cropping the pastures of the Colorado only till a greener and sweeter grass awaits him by the Yellowstone. Yet we think that if rail fences are pulled down, and stone walls piled up on our farms, bounds are henceforth set to our lives and our fates decided. [...] The universe is wider than our views of it.” – Thoreau, *Walden*

3. “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life [...] Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails.” – Thoreau, *Walden*

4. “Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the bells, the Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, or Concord bell, when the wind was favorable, a faint, sweet, and, as it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness. At a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre [...] The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph.” – Thoreau, *Walden*