

Nature as Teacher

These exercises are intended to help you find inspiration in nature. Try them in any outdoor location - it might be your backyard, the playground at your school, a group of trees in a park, or along a trail. It doesn't matter; there is life to discover everywhere. Bring a journal or sketchbook for drawing or taking notes. You can do these exercises on your own, or with your friends or family.

Basic Observation “Sit and Stay”

The most basic way to observe nature is to simply sit in a natural setting for 25-30 minutes without doing anything (not even taking photographs). The first ten minutes pass relatively easily, as there's a lot of new stuff to look at. The next ten minutes often get challenging; you may find your mind wandering and your body feeling fidgety. Stick with it. If you push past those distractions and remain in place for the rest of the time or even longer, it's amazing what is revealed to you in this deeper state of observation. Describe or sketch your observations.

Some questions you can ask yourself during or after your experience might be:

- What did the plants and animals show you or let you see about their lives?
- What are the surroundings like? What conditions (hot, wet, rugged) are plants and animals dealing with in this environment?
- What are some natural strategies you see in this context?
- What function(s) are being served?
- What relationships do you see?
- Do you notice any patterns?



More Nature Observation Exercises:

Focused Drawing

Sit in front of a plant, animal, or other living thing. Make a quick sketch of it (don't worry if you "can't draw"). Now draw the organism again, but this time look only at it and not at your paper while you draw. Try to make your pen follow the path that your eyes take. Compare drawings. What was something new you discovered the second time?

Make Believe

Imagine being one of the plants or animals that you observe. Imagine how you do the functions you need to survive. What are you made of? How do you get food and water? What and who do you depend on to survive? Who depends on you to survive? What roles do you play in your ecosystem throughout your life?

Finding Function

Explore your environment looking for examples of nature performing functions that human designs also seek to perform. Some examples: Moving water, filtering (air, water, etc.), sticking to something, cleaning, transforming waste, storing carbon, and communicating.

Zooming In

Mark off a small area of ground in any natural environment, using string or sticks or a hoop (about a square foot or 0.1 square meter). From a standing position, look at the marked off area for 5 minutes. Notice what you see. Then kneel down and observe it from that perspective for 5 minutes. Notice the things that you missed while standing. Next, lie on your belly or lean closer to explore the area in detail. Look at it as if you were an astronaut on a strange planet. If you find something that captures your attention, such as an insect, worm, or plant, observe it as long as you want, then explore somewhere else in your area. Stay with your exploration for at least 10 minutes.

