

LESSONS

Field Journals

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GRADES 3–5

TYPE

INFORMATIONAL
STEM

Students will become naturalists for the day by performing field observations and recording their thoughts in a field journal.

SESSION 1 : INTRODUCTION TO FIELD JOURNALS AND SHARED OBSERVATIONS

In this session you will introduce field journals to your students and give them the opportunity to observe a subject with classmates, create a field journal entry, and share their work with others.

YOU WILL NEED

- [Field Journal—Handout](#)
 - 1 copy per student (students use pages 1–7 in this session)
- Objects from nature for students to observe in STEP 3. See “Before You Start” for ideas.
 - 1 per small group
- Rulers
 - 1 per student
- Optional
 - [“Field Journals: Documenting the Natural World”](#) (teacher resource)
 - [“Keeping a Field Journal”](#) by Dr. Eleanor Sterling

(teacher resource)

BEFORE YOU START

- Print one copy of the [826 Digital Field Journal—Handout](#) for each student before beginning the lesson. Students will use this packet in each session, referring to work from prior sessions, the checklist, and word bank as tools.
- In STEP 1 students will learn about the purpose of field journals and who uses them. For additional information, you can read [“Keeping a Field Journal”](#) by Dr. Eleanor Sterling, published by the American Museum of Natural History.
- In STEP 2 students will look at example field journal entries from [International Nature Journaling Week](#). Decide if you want to provide additional examples of field journal entries to look at as a class.
- Gather objects from nature for students to observe in STEP 3. These objects could be leaves, pinecones, acorns, plants, etc. For the observation, we suggest breaking the class into small groups and providing each group with an object.
- The Field Journal Entry Checklist refers to the Scientific Word Bank on page 13 of the Field Journal – Handout. Review the vocabulary provided and decide whether you would like to include any additional vocabulary, based on your students’ content area knowledge.
- Gather objects from nature for students to observe in STEP 3. These objects could be leaves, pinecones, acorns, plants, etc.

Write the term *field journal* on the board. Then, share with students that they are going to be creating field journal entries to record observations they make. First, cover up the word *field* and ask students to share what they know about the word *journal*. Then, cover up the word *journal* and ask them what they think of when they hear the word *field*. Finally, ask students to put their two definitions together to create a fuller picture of the term. Add the following ideas if they have not been shared:

- Used to record data (information that’s been learned)

- Used to document observations of a subject (the thing you are studying)
- Includes drawings and writing

Now that students have determined what a field journal is, ask the following questions:

- How do you think field journals are used: In what kinds of jobs might people need to record information they observe?
- What do you think happens to the information that's learned?

Introduce the word *naturalist* to students. A naturalist is someone who studies the natural world and makes connections between life forms and their environments. Students will become naturalists during this lesson and will share their findings with each other and their school community.

Guide students to look at the Field Journal Examples on pages 1–2 of the [Field Journal—Handout](#), and display them if possible. Observe the example entries as a class, and ask students the following guiding questions:

- What do you notice?
- What is surprising to you?
- How are these field journal entries different from regular journal entries you have written before?
How are they similar?

Students will record their observations on page 3 of the handout.

Then, ask students to read the criteria on the Field Journal Entry Checklist on page 4 of the handout. With students, discuss any criteria that may need additional explanation. Have students review the California Poppy field journal entry on page 5 of the handout and go over how this example meets the criteria on the checklist.

Provide students with an object from nature to observe. Remind students that naturalists call the thing they're observing the subject.

- Students will draw the object from different angles. Their drawings should include descriptive details of the subject, a measurement of the subject, and any other relevant information on page 6 of the handout. Refer students to the first seven criteria of the Field Journal Entry Checklist on the bottom of the page.
- Students will also record sensory details on page 7 of the handout. They will use these details when writing the informational paragraph in STEP 4.

Give students time to self-evaluate before sharing their work with others. After working independently for 5–7 minutes, have students share their work. As students share, have them notice what was similar and different between their work and the work of their classmates.

Refer students to the Field Journal Entry Checklist on the bottom of page 6 in the handout, and ask them to share what still needs to be completed.

Ask students to reread the California Poppy journal entry on page 5 and to underline parts of the text in which the author makes an educated guess. Their informational paragraph will also include an educated guess, or inference, about the subject based on their observation.

“The poppies were sticking out of a small dirt patch and peeking out from cracks in the sidewalk. This tells me that poppies can survive in harsh conditions. It was a beautiful sunny day with a slight breeze, so I bet the poppies were very happy.”

Educator Note: If you anticipate that identifying inferences will be too challenging for your students as an independent task, generate possible inferences as a class and chart those examples for students to refer to when writing the informational paragraph.

Before students start writing, remind them that the paragraph needs to be five sentences, include an educated guess or inference, and include at least three words from the Scientific Word Bank on page 13 of the handout

Students will write the informational paragraph on page 8 of the handout. They will self-evaluate their writing using the Field Journal Entry Checklist before sharing their work with others. As students share, have them notice what was similar and different between their work and the work of their classmates.

Ask students to share something they learned today. This share-out can be something about field journals, something about the subject they observed, or even something about themselves. Then, tell students that they will complete another observation, outside of the classroom, for their next field journal entry. Based on what you have decided for the observation, you can share additional details with your students.

SESSION 2 : FIELD OBSERVATION

Using the observation skills they practiced in Session 1, students will take a field trip and observe a subject in its natural habitat.

YOU WILL NEED

- [Field Journal—Handout](#)
 - 1 copy per student (students use pages 9, 10, and 13 in this session)
- In-person or virtual field observation location
- Field trip supplies – 1 of each per student
 - Rulers
 - Goggles and gloves if recommended by your district or state (N/A for virtual field trip)

- Clipboards (N/A for virtual field trip)

BEFORE YOU START

- Decide how students will complete the field observation. Depending on your location, you may not need to travel far—a trip to the playground works great. If you are taking students to an outdoor space, be sure to check what permissions, additional supervision, or safety precautions are needed, if any. If there is not an outdoor space available for the observation, consider providing a live virtual experience, like watching an animal at a zoo on a live stream or taking a virtual tour of a national park. Some options include the following:
 - [Crater Lake National Park 360 Video Tour](#)
 - [Shenandoah National Park](#)
 - [Channel Islands National Park Live Stream](#)
 - [Katmai National Park Bear Cam](#)
- If you're taking students on a virtual tour using one of the options above, consider these suggestions:
 - Together, spend some time learning about the places (the wildlife, the native plants, etc.) you're viewing before taking the tour.
 - Spend time with at least two of the live stream videos. You never know what you'll see if you wait.
 - Choose virtual tours that showcase different landscapes.
- Decide which field observation guidelines to review in the How to Begin step.
- While this session is planned to be 45 minutes, the time may need to be adjusted to account for travel time to/from the location for your observation.
- Decide if you will complete the reflection questions in STEP 3 at the field location or once you return

to the classroom.

- Plan how you will help students choose what subject to observe. For some students it may be beneficial to provide guidance and/or limited choice.
- The recommended on-site field trip supplies are rulers, clipboards, and goggles and gloves (if recommended by your district or state). You will need one of each per student.

HOW TO BEGIN

Ask students to recap the work that they did in the previous session, and share with students that today they will observe a subject in its natural habitat. They will use their notes from today's observation to complete the published field journal entry in the next session. If you're heading outside, go over a few simple class guidelines. Feel free to adjust these for your students, but we suggest the following:

- Stay with the group.
- Observe with your eyes first. If you'd like to feel the texture of something, get permission first.
- Leave no trace. The first rule of observing nature is to respect it, so whatever you look at stays outside and doesn't come home in your pockets.

Give students time to choose a subject and observe it. As they observe, have students use pages 9–10 of the handout to draft their illustrations and take notes using sensory details. Students can refer to the Scientific Word Bank on page 13 of the handout as needed.

After students have completed their observations, drawings, and notes, discuss these reflection questions. These questions will both wrap up the experience and encourage further learning. Students can either share as a whole group or turn and talk to a partner.

- What is something cool you observed today?
- How do you think this place might have looked fifty years ago? What do you think has changed?

- What are you still curious about?

Finally share with students that in the next session they will design their field journal entry using the information they gathered today.

SESSION 3 : PUBLISHING AND SHARING FIELD JOURNAL ENTRIES

Using the observation skills they practiced in Session 1, students will create a field journal entry with a labeled drawing and written description of the object they independently observed in the natural environment, and they will share their work with classmates.

YOU WILL NEED

- [Field Journal—Handout](#)
 - 1 copy per student (students use pages 11–12 in this session)
- Coloring supplies. Colored pencils would work best.

BEFORE YOU START

While this session is planned to be 45 minutes, if you have more time available, students can spend longer amounts of time completing their field journal entry in STEP 1 and/or sharing in STEP 2.

HOW TO BEGIN

Ask students to recap the work they did in the previous session, and share with students that today they will create a field journal entry using the notes they took while observing a subject outside the classroom.

Review the Field Journal Entry Checklist on page 3 of the Field Journal – Handout, reminding students that their field entry should include an inference and at least three words from the Scientific Word Bank. Give students time to complete their field journal entry. Remind students to reread and edit their writing for content and mechanics, as well as to use the checklist to ensure they have included all required information.

Educator Note: If there is a specific resource you have students refer to when revising and editing their work, you can provide that at this time.

Give students time to share their field journal entry with classmates:

- Students can share their work in small groups or through a gallery walk. During a gallery walk, all students' work is displayed, and students can view all work or spend more time reading just a few pieces.
- Give students the opportunity to share feedback with one another by leaving a note for the author on a sticky note or by verbally telling the author what they appreciated about or learned from the field journal entry.

Ask students to share something they learned. This share-out can be something about field journals, something about the process of completing this piece of writing, or something they learned from a classmate's field journal entry. Taking time to reflect on the process, not just the product, can transfer to future writing projects.

Conclusion: While this session provides students the opportunity to share their work with classmates, consider ways they can also share their work with the larger community. We suggest hanging their journal entries outside your classroom, or even sharing them on your classroom website!