

W.O.W.--the Writers' Observation Walk

by April Halprin Wayland

Onsite Teachers:

Before class begins, scope out an outdoor space with growing things within a 1-2 minute walk of your classroom. Even a lawn or a strip of scraggly grass will do. Outdoor observations are best. But if this is not possible, the exercise works indoors. Indoor students scatter around the classroom and down the hall, finding an electrical socket, a lamp, a patch of carpet, a chair, etc. to observe.

Students:

- Go outside. Choose something in nature to observe. Choose something that is alive, or something that *was* alive; not a bench, a sidewalk or a rock. Avoid something that will fly or run away. A tree. One blade of grass. A rosebush. A snail shell. Don't be picky—choose something quickly. Or let it choose you. Even if it's imperfect. *Especially* if it's imperfect (i.e. one of the leaves is brown or the flower has been nibbled by a worm).
- Sit next to it. Observe it and take field notes for ten minutes. [Teacher: set a timer for ten minutes. Onsite Teachers: If your students don't need much supervision, model doing this exercise yourself.]
- In the **FACTS** column [see chart*], list facts about your object. Write quickly, without thinking too hard. In this column, list only facts, as if you are a scientist in a white coat, making a clinical observation: height, color, length, movement, etc. **Cover as many of the five senses** as possible--smell, sight, sound, taste, and touch. (For example: the leaf is about 3" wide and 4" long. It is green with a streak of white in the crease. It has a mossy smell. It is very smooth). **Write as many facts as you can in ten minutes—at least five, but ten or more is better.**
- In the **FEELINGS** column [see chart*], list quickly, without thinking too hard any memories, emotions, dreams, wishes, fears, etc. that come up when you observe your object. For example: this rose makes me want to dance; it smells just like the dance studio. The tree bark reminds me of Grandpa's hands. This thorn is how I felt when my parents got divorced. **Write as many feelings as you can in ten minutes—at least five but ten or more is better.**
- Note that describing smells, tastes and feelings can be challenging. Do the best you can. Make up words to describe them if it helps. For example, "The bark is scrumbly."
- You don't have to write complete sentences. These are field notes.
- The idea is not to think too much but to write as many observations in both columns as possible. **Write for ten minutes.** You don't have to complete one list first. You can jump back and forth between feelings and facts.
- Now, go back inside. Circle one item you've listed that really speaks to you (it can be from either column).
- Use this one observation or feeling to write either a poem or a story.

*See chart next page

JACARANDA TREE IN BLOOM ~ example of an Observation

(Note: an item listed in one column is NOT connected to the item across from it. Also, it's hard to describe how something feels or smells. Do the best you can.)

| <u>FACTS</u> (include as many of the five senses as possible) | <u>FEELINGS</u> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| This huge Jacaranda tree is eight years old. | Spring! |
| It's windy. | Love. |
| Its top sways | Fairy-like color |
| Many sparrows are chirping (maybe five?) | The pods remind me of fat cellos. |
| There is a squeaky sound as the branches rub against each other. | As the wind pushes the tree towards me, it nods, leans, almost speaks to me. I wonder what it would say? |
| The wind smells fresh. | I remember getting my stuffed dog, Lavender, in the mail when I turned ten. |
| The tree is two stories tall. | I remember old ladies with white hair and a slight lavender hue |
| There are 35 pods on it. | This is the color given at baby showers when you don't know the sex of the baby. |
| The tree has masses of lavender blooms. | Didn't my parents have a friend named Ed Moss? |
| The flowers are mostly at the top of the tree-almost none near the bottom. | A rolling stone gathers no moss. |
| The bark feels tickle-y on my palm. | The mossy smell reminds me of summers by the river. |
| There's a light green wash of moss along the trunk | |
| The smell of the moss on my hand is earthy. | |

Based on an exercise by poet Myra Cohn Livingston
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