

Writing assignment #1 : Making sense of nature

Assigned Monday, September 27th

Due Wednesday, September 29th (in class)

Activity that will produce the experience about which you write:

The point of this exercise is to just be in the forest, which will allow you to experience and observe it much differently than you do when you are moving through it, focused on outcome (such as *getting there* or *spotting a particular species*). This exercise is about being in the moment and slowing down enough to really see what is around you, and to observe what starts happening when you become background in a forest and let the ecosystem come alive around you.

Your instructions are this: Go to a spot in the forest on the Evergreen campus (or another forest that you know and feel safe in) that is out of sight and preferably out of earshot of any frequently used trail or encampment. Pick a spot in which you are comfortable, both physically and psychologically, both because you will be sitting here for two hours this week, and will be returning to this spot every week for the duration of the Fall quarter.

Take on this sojourn: a watch with timer capability, a notebook and pen, a tarp to sit on, and clothing that will keep you warm and dry for two hours. Get comfortable, set your stopwatch for two hours, put it out of sight, and just be. It will be difficult to resist the urge to check your watch; please do so. You will have a better and deeper experience if you can get beyond the desire to know how much time is left, and simply be.

For these two hours: Sit, listen, observe, be still. Do not make noise or move around. When you feel compelled to get up and track down a latte, resist the urge. You will be free to act on those sorts of desires in two short hours.

At whatever point that you are comfortable in your space, and feel like doing so, write about what you are experiencing, including both description and analysis. ***Describe*** what you observe around you, and ***analyze*** what is going on inside your head (how you are reacting to being alone in the forest, and to the ecology that you are describing). What you write during this exercise will serve as notes for your first writing assignment.

Adopt-a-spot

Every week of Fall quarter you are expected to go back to that same spot and just sit, for fifteen minutes at a bare minimum, and observe your surroundings. How is the forest changing with the season? In what ways is your experience changing as a result of your knowledge and experience changing, rather than as a result of changes within the forest itself? What can this teach you about the roles of observers and observation in science, in narratives about place, in outdoor experiences generally?

At the end of the quarter, you will be summarizing your experience in your own personal spot.

The writing assignment

1. Discuss your observations of some organism or system that you observed. What, if anything, could you discern about any aspect of the natural history or ecology of the organisms or ecosystem? What do those terms mean?
2. Go beyond point one and address other aspects of your experience. Other questions that you might consider include: What questions did you have about what you saw? Of the organisms that you observed: What were they doing? What do you think it meant? Did you make value judgments about what you saw? What does society think about what you saw? (I.e. does American society have a greater fondness for large fuzzy animals than it does for small creepy ones?)

If you are not yet confident in your writing, consider writing a straight-forward essay which is organized clearly and simply. If you are more confident, and have a handle on writing basics, we encourage you to be creative. This paper could be written as a thesis-driven essay, in which your thesis might be anything from “Western red cedars dominate the Evergreen forest and my experience of it.” to “A two-hour snapshot of one piece of habitat is both less and more informative than the shelves of books that have been written on the subject.” Alternately, you could write a piece of creative non-fiction, in which the narrative style and lyric quality of the writing help tell the story you want to tell. You could even, if you can fulfill points 1 and 2 above, write a piece of fiction—all fiction has truth in it, and this would be no exception. You may bring in your own experiences or knowledge if you want—the best writing almost always does. Finally, don’t forget a title—creative or informative titles clues the reader in as to what to expect in the paper to come.