



## The Skill of Observation

Fill a clear glass container half full with tap water. The container can be a small fish bowl, a jar, a large drinking glass, or anything similar. Add enough vanilla extract to the water to discolor it to resemble tea. You should be able to see through the water. Also make sure enough extract is used to provide a fragrance when you sniff close to the water. Adding a rock or a floating leaf adds to the misdirection of the observer but is not necessary. These are not meant to fool the students but to teach them to observe fully using as many of their five senses as possible and to think critically, making inferences about their observation so they can determine the correct conclusion to the situation.

Put a sign with the single word “Observe” on a table next to the container. Situate the sign and the container so that they are noticeable as students enter your room. Do not draw any other attention to them. This is their first test of observation skills. When making the sign, print the letters black except for the ‘e’s. Use different colors for each; for example, one green, one red.

Before starting the next part of the activity, make sure the sign and container are now out of sight of the students. Use the following questions and instruction on a handout to test the observation skills of your student. No introduction is necessary, just begin providing the handout after they are seated and ask them to complete it as best as they can. Some may have no answers at all.

- What was on the sign as you came into the room?
- What were the colors used in the wording?
- What was the color of the first letter ‘e’?
- What was the color of the second letter ‘e’?
- Describe the object next to the sign with as much detail as you can.

Many of your students will not even see the sign, giving you a good lead-in to observation skills and their importance. For those who did see the sign and the container, many will not have observed it closely enough to complete each question. Assure them that this is alright and they will soon know the answers. Have the students continue to complete as much as possible without discussing it. Encourage individual work. When all are finished, ask for someone to tell you what was on the sign. Begin a brief discussion on what it means to observe. From there, ask for answers to the other questions. Don’t give away any correct answers yet.

When the questions concerning the sign are completed, show the students the sign without showing the container of water. Explain to them that each question becomes more detailed about the sign requiring sharper observation skills.

Next ask for volunteers to read aloud their description of the container and its contents. Don’t respond to anyone’s conclusions at this time, just descriptions. Don’t give them any evidence that their conclusion is right or wrong. When everyone has given their descriptions, show the container and ask “What are your conclusions to the source of this liquid? Where did I get it?”. Listen but don’t give away the correct answer

even if someone is sharp enough to get it right away. You will receive answers from a puddle to pond water to rain to tea. Maintain a straight face and don't give up the correct answer. Following these student answers, discuss with them how we as modern humans typically observe most of our surroundings, with our eyes. State that when observing natural resources, we must fully observe using as many of our five senses as possible. We must do this so that we reach the correct conclusions about our observations. Sometimes our eyes do not provide enough evidence to reach the correct conclusion. Sometimes in nature we are not given the chance to use our eyes before another sense is stimulated; such as smelling a skunk.

Tell the students that you will give them another chance to observe the container but only for a few seconds each. This brings your earlier unobservant students back into the activity for another chance. Before allowing them to do so, ask them to keep their observations quiet and do not discuss any new conclusions out loud so that all will have the opportunity to observe and come to their own conclusion. The best way to facilitate this second observation is to maintain a hold on the container and take it around to each student. Do not direct them further in how to make this observation. After everyone has observed again using the senses of their choice, ask for volunteers to share their observations and conclusions. Hold onto the correct conclusion as long as you like. It's fun to watch them think. Make sure they understand that good observations require more than a casual glance and that often we can be wrong about a situation if we don't give it a full observation.

Follow up with a recap on observation, the necessity to use as many of our senses as possible, and the need to observe natural resources over and over due to their dynamic nature. Encourage the students to always be observant but to be smart about using their sense of taste and touch since some things in nature can be harmful when touched or ingested.

Developing good observation skills is important enough to begin any natural resource study with this activity or something similar to stimulate that natural skill in your students.



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