

SIT SPOT

“Find your sit spot and see what comes.” This activity gives students the time and autonomy to connect with nature on their own terms. As simple as it sounds, Sit Spot is one of the most memorable and potentially life-changing journaling experiences.

Time

Introduction: 10 minutes
Activity: 20–50 minutes
Discussion: 10 minutes
With practice, this activity can be expanded to take an entire morning or a day.



Materials

- Journals and pencils
- Loud whistle



Teaching Notes

Part of building self-motivated learners is giving them the autonomy to direct their own experience. This demonstrates your confidence in them and their ability to work beyond your supervision. The directions for this activity are intentionally open ended, giving students the room for highly personal and creative work.



Your introduction of this routine will be more authentic if you have done it yourself. To inspire students, share stories of your own memories of sitting quietly outside. You do not need to have seen an owl catch a mouse or a coyote walk by. Any memory will do. Model finding wonder in the smallest things, and your students will follow suit.

Read the needs of your group to help you set boundaries and determine a time limit. You might need to shorten the activity for more energetic groups. This is OK. Even 5 minutes of sitting still and quietly in nature can produce profound effects.

The experience of being on your own in nature, with a flexible structure and permission to encounter it on your own terms, is a formula for magic. Some educators fear that if they are not in direct control of a group, students will go off task and will not make productive use of their time. However, trusting students and giving them autonomy open up the possibility for powerful and personal experiences beyond what we can direct. This is an opportunity for students to focus not just on observing their surroundings but also noticing what it is like for them to be there.

In this activity, students find their own place in an outdoor area, then pay attention in whatever way inspires them. They can record their experience in their journal, and share about it afterward. Self-directed experiences like *Sit Spot* can help form a bridge between assigned work and students' own journaling, supporting them in adopting a nature journaling or exploration practice outside of assigned school projects. This is also an opportunity for students to think about their own story and identity, and how to craft a narrative of who they are and what is meaningful to them.

This is not a new activity or practice in nature. Cultures all over the world have and had ways of slowing down to observe their surroundings.

NATURAL PHENOMENA

Initiate this activity in a natural area that is big enough or has enough cover for students to spread out and get a sense of privacy and being alone. Define clear boundaries for the group with general safety considerations in mind (heat, cold, falling hazards, water, snakes, etc.) and an awareness of others who may be in the space (in public areas). Spots that offer concealment and a sense of safety from which students can look out on a broad view are ideal. This activity does not have to be done in a remote wilderness area. Forests, schoolyards, classroom gardens, ancient forests, or waterfronts are all places that can work for sit spots if there is enough space and cover to provide a sense of autonomy.

PROCEDURE SUMMARY

1. Find a special place.
2. Open your senses, sit quietly, and observe using “I notice, I wonder, it reminds me of.”
3. Document your experience.

Note: There is no demonstration for this activity because students can construct their journal pages however they like.

PROCEDURE STEP-BY-STEP

1. **Create a sense of anticipation and excitement about the activity by telling students that they will get time to sit by themselves, paying attention to whatever is interesting or important to them.**

- a. "We are about to do an amazing activity. It is called *Sit Spot*. This can be a powerful experience where people make amazing discoveries, have close encounters with wildlife, or have insights about their lives. No two people will have the same experience."
 - b. "In a moment we will break from this area. You will go out, on your own, to find your own sit spot. This is a place that is just for you, where you get to sit quietly and just be."
 - c. "Once there, you will pay attention to whatever is interesting or important or whatever is going on. That may be something you find, or it may be the feelings and thoughts you have in this place. Then you will record this in your journal in whatever way feels appropriate."
- 2. If you, the instructor, have had an opportunity to do sit spots before, share some of your experiences or journal entries.**
- 3. Set expectations and state the sit-spot ground rules and boundaries: Find a place that calls to you, sit alone, stay within boundaries, and respect others' solitude by being quiet.**
- a. "The first thing you will do is find your sit spot. Go alone and look for a place that interests you or somehow calls you. This may be at the base of a special tree in a wide-open area, or somewhere kind of hidden."
- 4. State clear boundaries for where students can find their spots, designate any areas that are off-limits, and explain any rules that your group of students might need in order to focus on the experience.**
- a. "When you get to your spot, the only thing you are required to be is alone and quiet."
 - b. "Be respectful of others' solitude and quiet. In order to make the most of this experience, you should be alone. You do not want to sit close to other people, as this might distract you or them."
- 5. Offer guidance (but not requirements) for how students might engage with their surroundings at their sit spot, suggesting that students focus on one sense at a time or on making careful observations.**
- a. "Once you have sat down, pay attention. Relax and tune in to the environment around you."
 - b. "You could try focusing on one your senses one at a time to see what you notice, or look around at different things next to you."
 - c. "There is no wrong way to do this. As long as you are quiet, still, and alone, you can be in whatever way feels right for you."
 - d. "If you are drawn to some object or view, experience it as fully as you can, observing, asking questions, and looking for connections. The 'I notice, I wonder, it reminds me of' observation routine may be useful here."
 - e. "Getting up and walking around will distract others, so when you find your spot, stay put. The longer you remain still and quiet, the more the animals might get used to your presence and begin to emerge near you."
 - f. "You don't need to work in your journal the whole time you are in your sit spot. You can also just be still, relax, let your mind go quiet, or take in the view."

6. Offer guidance (but not requirements) for how students might engage with their inner world, suggesting that they turn their observation prompts inward to slow down and focus on their state of being.

- a. "You may find that the experience brings up personal thoughts and reflections. If this happens to you, you can focus on and deeply experience these feelings."
- b. "To intentionally turn your attention inward, you can notice and wonder about your own state of being, or think about what this experience reminds you of."
- c. "You may find that partway through the experience you feel done and that there is nothing else to see. This is normal. If this happens to you, just relax and remain where you are. Try focusing on senses you do not



A fall day, looking down a valley toward a distant farmhouse. This is a memory that will be kept forever.

Stefan, age 11

usually use. Notice what you observe after you pass the 'I'm done' boundary."

7. Offer guidance (but not requirements) for how students might record their experience in their journal, suggesting that they write, draw, and record observations or whatever else feels right to them.

- a. "After you have sat for a little while, you may document your experiences and thoughts in your journal in whatever way seems the most appropriate. If you are inspired to draw, draw. If you want to write a poem (it does not need to rhyme), write a poem."
- b. "Whatever approach you use to capture the story of this moment is OK."
- c. "If you are curious about a phenomenon or object you found, you can explore it with writing, drawings, questions, and observations. If you go deep into personal thought, record these ideas and feelings."
- d. "This is your time to be however you want to be, as long as you are not disturbing others. No two people will have the same experience. Let your journal reflect yours."

8. Give reminders about boundaries and expectations, and set a time limit that is appropriate for your group and context.

- a. "We will give this [three, fifteen, twenty] minutes. If you have your own watch, you can keep your own time. If you do not have a watch, listen for my whistle. I will blow it

two times when it is time to come in. Stay within earshot of the whistle if you do not have a way to keep time."

- b. Share any reminders based on the needs of your group.

9. Let students go, and trust them.

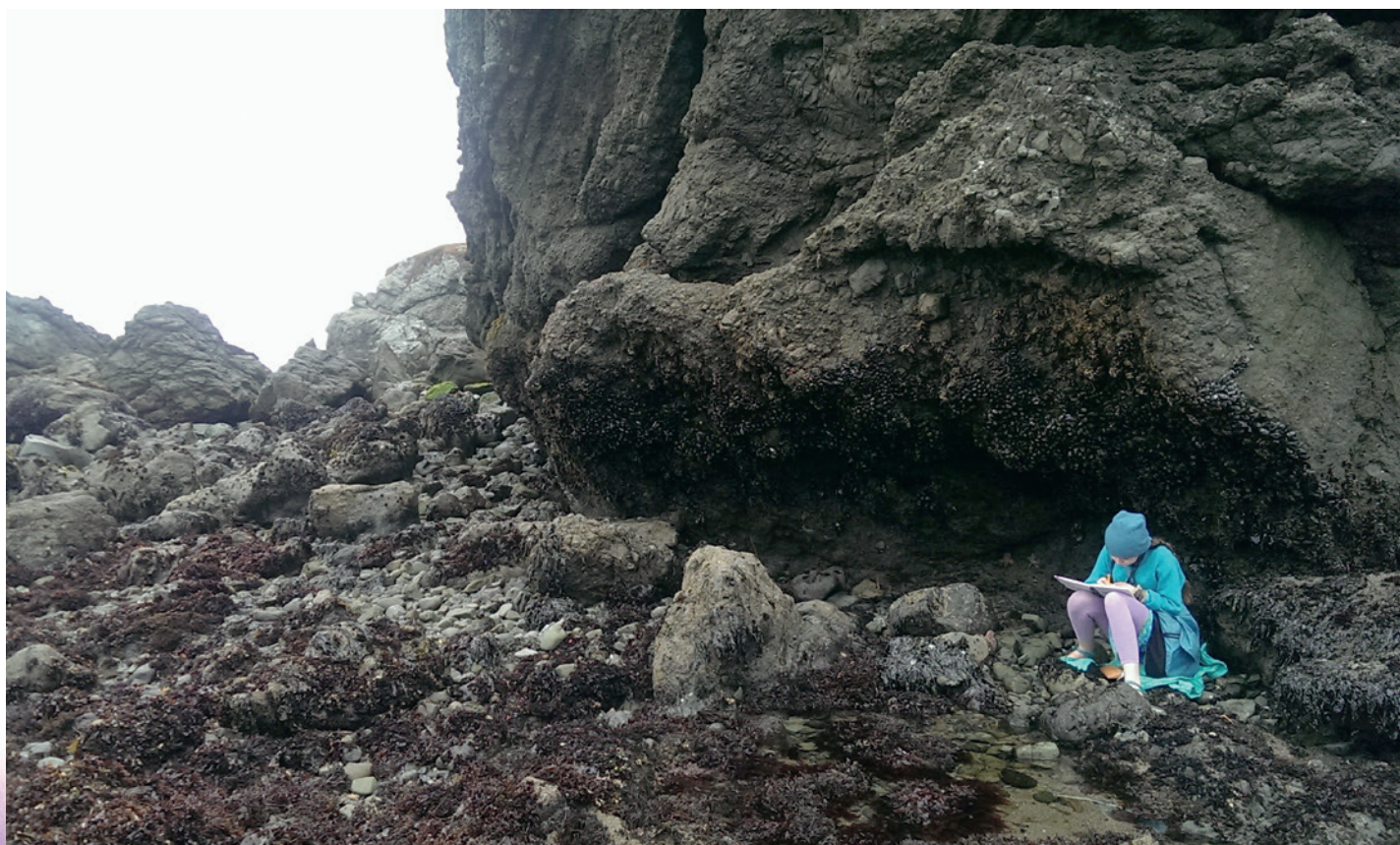
10. Pay attention to the needs of the group as the time elapses. Call the group back early if they are becoming restless, or let them stay longer if they are quietly engaged in the experience.

DISCUSSION

Lead a discussion using the general discussion questions. Interperse pair talk with group discussion.

General Discussion

- a. "Find a partner and share about your experiences. You may share your journal entries. If you found yourself writing personal things, or do not want someone else to see the entry, you may keep it private."
- b. "Let's come together as a big group. If you feel comfortable doing so, open your journal to the *Sit Spot* page and place them on this picnic table. Take some time to see what other people experienced." *Note:* Sharing journal entries among peers can be a vulnerable act. Only offer this as an option if your students already have experience with protocols for observing others' work.



- c. "Let's gather as a group. Think of one word that describes your experience at your sit spot, and share it with the group when you are ready."
- d. "What was the sit-spot experience like for you? Does anyone want to share a story of something they experienced or felt at their sit spot? What made this experience special?"
- e. "Find a way to craft your sit-spot experience into a story. This could be a story about what you saw or how you felt. If you do not want to share from your own perspective, you could imagine the story of an organism you observed, or the story the land around might tell. Then share your story with a partner or with the group."

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Repeated Visits to the Same Spot

Students can repeat this activity throughout the day, week, or year, which will give them insights into their spot at different times. If you have consistent access to the same place for outdoor explorations, you could also institute a routine where students return to their sit spot for 5 minutes at the beginning of each foray outside. This quick "check-in" will be enough to slow them down and notice patterns, and engage in the study of phenology (seasonal changes).

Sit Spots in New Places

Once students understand this routine, you can initiate the activity in different habitats or places you visit just by saying, "Find a sit spot; you have ten minutes." This is a great way of slowing students down in a new place, or offering some time to "reboot" in the midst of a busy or social learning experience.

Longer Sits

Once students are familiar with the activity, they may be ready for longer sit-spot experiences. For longer time periods, students may spread farther apart (for more seclusion and autonomy). They may also want to move around more, as it is hard to sit still for half a day. Think of it as a "sit area" as opposed to a spot. They will still need to stay generally in one place and be careful to respect the privacy of others by staying hidden and not approaching other students.

The Green 15

One middle school teacher assigns students the "Green 15" every week. This is a "homework assignment" that requires students to spend 15 minutes outside at least once during the week. What the students do is up to them. This autonomy and continual practice helps students develop a routine of being outside in a way that feels good for them.

