



YPAR in School

Developing Observation Skills

Lesson adapted from:
YPAR Hub. (n.d.). *Basic Skills of Observation*.
<http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/investigate/basic-skills-of-observation/>



Objective

To introduce students to observation as a basic skill of research that we use every day

To practice making observations and categorizing observations

Activity: Learning to Make Observations

Materials

- Flip chart paper
- Markers
- Scrap paper
- Ideas about a location where a small group of students can be active observers or video clips

Prepare Before

Decide how you will approach this activity. You can use a physical location or a video clip. Make sure you have a list of 5-10 post-observation reflection questions to have students answer after they complete the observation exercise. Include questions that require listening as well as observational skills, and observations about behaviors, environment, and interactions in addition to the observance of physical characteristics.



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Pre-Activity

Have students answer the following questions in their process journals:

How did you get here this morning? Write as many details as possible about your trip. What did you see? Smell? Feel? Hear? Be as specific as possible.

Have students share a few answers and answer the following questions:

- How accurate do you think your memories are?
- How hard or easy was it to recall the experience?
- What kinds of things were easier to remember? Harder to remember?
- What types of observations did most of you gravitate towards? (Things you saw? Heard? Felt?)

Activity

For all of your action research projects, you will conduct field observations related to your issue in an effort to gain more data to answer your questions and develop this research skill.

Observations are one of many formal data collection methods.

Lead a discussion on the following topics to help students connect concepts:



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Activity (continued)

To get us started learning and practicing this skill, think about when during the day you use your listening skills? Your observing skills?

What is a typical situation for you when you might be observing something (e.g., arriving at a party, walking into a class for the first time, sitting in a park)? These are research skills that you use everyday for your own purposes. When you are observing, what are you trying to figure out or learn?

Today, you are going to practice your observation skills. Everyone should have a piece of paper and something to write with. You are going to observe for 10 minutes.

Take notes on what you observe.

After the experiences, you will have to answer questions based on you've seen—you will be able to use your notes.

Observe and listen as closely as possible in order to gather as much information and as many details about what is going on as you can.

NOTE: You could all watch a short video or look at an object or a photograph together for a few minutes. The goal is to practice paying attention and, by looking at the same time, to ultimately surface that we will all tend to pay attention to and “see” certain things and miss others. What you choose will determine the kinds of reflection questions you use.



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Activity (continued)

Encourage students to write down lots of notes as they watch in their spot. Once the observations are finished, tell the group that you are going to test them on their observation skills. Pass out the “quiz” and using their notes, ask them to answer as fully as possible to as many questions as possible.

These answers should be recorded individually on paper first, and then shared as a group. Even though participants will think they have watched closely, some of the questions might stump them. Once everyone has shared their answers, let them know what the correct answers are.

After the sharing is over, ask the group to report as many other things they saw and heard from the location as they can remember:
What different things did people, even in the exact same location notice?

List these on a flip chart and post the pages in the room so the group can see them.

Then- have the groups work to categorize their observations in some way (whole group or small group). The categories are up to them.

(Note: There are example videos and questions attached to this lesson)



There are PowerPoints for each lesson available on YPARinSchool.com!



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Reflection

- What is challenging about observing?
- Was it harder or easier than you thought?
- Did it help to take notes?
- If you had to do this again, how would you do it differently?

Summarize

Observing and listening skills are critical to being a strong researcher.

We don't always see as much as we think we do, and we need to practice looking for information. Unless we are observing closely, we might not notice non-verbal behavior or other cues that tell us the meaning behind what is going on. Also, we tend to notice what we are already interested in — someone interested in sports might notice the football drills, someone interested in fashion might notice what people wear. Getting accurate information is a problem that comes up in real life and in field research.



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Example Videos and Questions

[The Marshmallow Test](#)

1. How many of the kids did not eat the marshmallow?
2. Describe the body language of the kids when they were left alone.

[Laquan McDonald Shot by Police](#) (Please make sure this video is appropriate for your students)

1. What was Laquan McDonald holding in his hand when the police arrived?
2. How long was McDonald on the ground after he was shot without being attended to by authorities?

[Kendrick Lamar Talks about His Depression & Suicidal Thoughts](#)

1. What does Kendrick Lamar say is most interesting about South Africa?
2. Describe Lamar's body language when talking about his struggles.