

Getting Started with Nature Writing, by Vanessa Wright

This is not a prescriptive list but is designed to provide helpful prompts to get you started and develop your writing. You certainly don't need to use all of these ideas in a single piece. Most of all, experiment with your process and your words. And have fun!

Observe

Choose your location

Where will you watch? From behind a window or outside? Where will you visit? Town centre, park, woodland, coast? Or somewhere else? Think about whether you will focus on one location or several. How does it change at different times of the day, throughout the year, or in different weather?

Focus on your senses

What are you seeing? What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you touch? And if it is safe, what can you taste?

Use your eye as a camera

Zoom in to details – what do you notice? Think about looking at the object under a microscope. What if you were watching in slow-motion? Zoom out to the big picture – what do you observe about the landscape around you? What if you looked from above or below, or from space?

Outside in

How do you feel? What are you thinking? What memories does this trigger? Does this make you dream? Does it remind you of someone?

The human touch

What do you notice if you are still? Consider how it changes if you walk, cycle, on public transport, or in a car. Remove distractions – put the phone down for a while.

Write

Don't worry about the words yet. Just write what comes into your head. A stream of consciousness. If you don't know what to write, start with a mind map of single words, scribbles, sketches, or sentences. Start to join them up to become a first draft. This is not about perfection at this stage; it is about getting something on a page. Keep all versions so you can return to the original – and see your progress.

Develop

Descriptions

Is there a metaphor or a simile that is unusual or interesting? Reminder – a simile is saying something is like something else; a metaphor is saying it is something else. Example: the bird squeals like a dog's toy; the sea is a witch's cauldron. Be imaginative and use a description that you haven't seen before.

Feelings

What do you feel inside? Consider how your body is responding to what you are experiencing. How does the weather reflect your feelings or your mood – are there any parallels? Think about how or what you observe reflects your feelings. For example, does a bird symbolise freedom?

Research

What was here in the past? Investigate old maps or photographs. Can you relate what you are seeing to current events in the news? How have humans affected what you are observing now? Are the animals you are watching seasonal visitors or permanent residents? Discover where they come from. Where do they go? How do people generally feel about the animal or plant? Is it considered 'good' or 'bad'? Why? Beware of adding facts for the sake of it – what will be interesting for the reader?

A message

Is there a deeper meaning you want to convey to the reader? How does what you observe relate to climate change? Think about a social, economic, or political issue you are passionate about and whether you want to incorporate this into your writing. Do you want to convey this message in an obvious or subliminal way? What if this place or creature wasn't there anymore? How would you, your family or your community feel about that?

Play

Allow yourself to have fun with your piece. This is an opportunity to mould your content in different ways and find out what you like and what works best.

Structure

What if you changed the order? Is the middle or the end a better beginning? Is there a framework – will you use the course of a day or a year as a framework? Is there a surprise? Does something unexpected happen?

Length

Will you write this as a short or long piece? Consider whether there are several short pieces instead of one. How could you take the writing and reduce or expand it? Could you reduce it to a 50-word tweet? A 500-word article?

Format

What if you experimented with a different format? It could be a piece of prose – but how would this change if you wrote it as a diary, a letter, a poem, or a play? What about a song or a speech? Is there an opportunity to think about incorporating art, a painting, or photographs to accompany your writing? What if you used your observations to create a fictional story instead of a non-fiction piece?

Point of View

What if you changed the viewpoint of the narrator? What if you wrote this from the perspective of an animal or tree? What would they say? Consider what the planet would say if it could speak. How would you fit into the story if you weren't narrating it?

Think about how you might adapt your writing to your audience. Who are you writing for? Peers, politicians, parents? What about younger children? How would you change it?

Refine

This is an opportunity to introduce 'literary devices' that can enhance your writing. Here are a few tips and tricks to consider introducing intermittently:

Alliteration – where you use the same starting letter in a sequence of words.

Example – a brisk and bracing breeze.

Assonance – where you use words with the same vowel sound in a sequence of words.
Example - silvery wisps kiss the hills.

Onomatopoeia – where the word sounds like what you are describing.
Example – the river rushed and gushed, or the clonk of stones.

Rule of three – it is said that humans like to process information in patterns, and listing things in threes can be very satisfying and memorable.
Example – My fingers are icicles. My feet are icebergs. My lungs burn with cold air. You can also use the rule of three effectively for single-word sentences. Dank. Drab. Dreary.

Verbs - Why use a weak verb when you can use a strong one?
Example – weak verb = look; strong verb = peer, glimpse, gaze.

Edit

Only half of a writer's work is done once they have put pen to paper. Like the sea polishes a pebble, smoothing the rough edges comes from the editing process. First of all, be kind to yourself – you have done an amazing job to get something created. Here is a checklist of editing tips:

Read aloud – you will hear more than you see in the corrections you need to make. Are there any sentences or words you trip over? These will be the sections that need more work.

Spellcheck – if you are using a laptop, make sure you run spellcheck. Lookout for words that sound the same but are spelt differently, such as there and their.

Grammar – do you need to use more commas? If you need to take a breath in the middle of a sentence, it might mean you need more of them.

Repetition – how many times do you use the same word? Use a thesaurus or look online for the word with 'synonym' for alternative suggestions. But only use words you would normally use. It won't sound authentic otherwise.

Sentence length – are there sentences that are very long? Are they all a similar length? Short sentences can be effective. Very.

Presentation – is there enough white space on the page? Will new paragraphs or images help break up the text?

Walk away – leave it for a few days and come back to it with fresh eyes. You will spot new things.

Read aloud – yes, again. And then ask someone kind to look at it. Or read it aloud to them.

Reflect

As you work through the process of creating your piece, it might be helpful to record your thoughts in a journal. These may provide an interesting accompaniment to your creative writing process.

What is working for you? What is not? What experiments did you like? What did you struggle with? What are you learning about your writing and yourself? What aspects of the process do you enjoy, and what is less fun? Are there topics or themes you enjoy writing about or keep returning to? Were there any surprises?

Congratulations! You've done it! You have created something that only you could have written.

Further reading and listening suggestions

The Guardian Young Country Diary – these are contributions from writers aged 8-14. I have picked 'My walk in an English paradise' as the young author uses many literary devices effectively. I also chose 'Grandma's favourite walk' as it was emotionally moving and called on memories.

[Young country diary: My walk in an English paradise | Walking | The Guardian](#)

[Young country diary: Grandma's favourite walk was to see the herons | Birds | The Guardian](#)

Dara McAnulty 'Diary of a Young Naturalist' – This charts a calendar year as he navigates his struggles with school and life as an autistic teenager and the power of nature to help him. An example of a different format to tell a story. You can use the 'Look Inside' feature on Amazon to read the first few pages:

[Diary of a Young Naturalist: Amazon.co.uk: McAnulty, Dara: 9781571311801: Books](#)

Rob Cowen 'Starling' – This poem changed my perception of poetry. Not only are there fantastic descriptions of the bird, but there is a deeper meaning. This bird is in decline. But to me, this also seemed to be about the fall of the coal industry. This is an excellent example of introducing bigger picture issues such as biodiversity loss and changes to industry.

<https://vimeo.com/553360906>

Kate Bush 'Aerial' – The second half of this album (from Prelude onwards) includes birdsong within the music and describes the nature and landscape from dawn to dusk. This tells a story through several songs.

Vanessa Wright 'Storm on Howmore' – This is an example from my writing. I demonstrate that you can write about nature in bad weather as well as good.

[New Nature Writer of the Year 2022: runner up 3 - BBC Countryfile Mag | Countryfile.com](#)

About the Author



Vanessa Wright was previously Vice President for Pearson Edexcel before leaving corporate life to pursue her passion for the natural world. She has recently completed a Masters in Nature and Travel Writing and has been announced as a Runner-Up for the *BBC Countryfile* New Nature Writer of the Year. She writes for *Bird Watching*, *Country Walking* and *Simple Things* magazines, runs writing workshops and is a consultant working on the new GCSE in Natural History. She can be contacted on Twitter and Instagram at @elgeeko1506.