



## **Increasing ELL Comfort With Writing: Observation Journals**

*by Patrick T. Randolph*

### **The Motivation**

Two major factors inspired the creation and ultimately the implementation of my version of observation journals. First, I noticed that my intermediate and advanced English language learners (ELLs) were spending most of their free time on their smartphones and not embracing all the valuable aspects of their host culture. I wanted them to spend more time observing and experiencing all the special elements that their host culture has to offer, both in terms of understanding the culture and using the target language. Second, I had hoped my students would practice writing on a frequent basis and use an interesting medium that would instill a sense of inspiration and joy during the writing process; that is, I wanted them to write often so as to develop a feeling of comfort and confidence. I hoped that the project would nurture a flicker of enthusiasm for writing that would kindle itself into a comfortable and constant flame.

### **The Observation Journals**

An observation journal entry includes a title that summarizes an observation and a reference to the kind of observation. The entry is one paragraph about an observation that consists of the following:

1. A lead-in sentence, which briefly introduces the topic
2. A topic sentence, which explains the focus of the observation
3. A reason that states why the content of the observation is of interest
4. A developed example/explanation elaborating on the observation or the reason of interest
5. A conclusion (For an example entry, see the [Appendix](#).)

I originally required my students to write five entries per week, each on a different day. Though this met my original intention of having them write frequently to develop confidence in their writing and make it a natural part of their daily lives, students complained that it was too much writing, which conflicted with my hope of making it an enjoyable and inspiring writing activity.

I needed to be careful not to make this project an added burden; I wanted it to be something that would inspire my students to engage in observations and write about them. The reduction to

three weekly entries seemed to satisfy my students' concerns and simultaneously make the project fun once again.

## Observation Categories

To help guide my students through the process, I created five general categories for their observations (Randolph, 2017, para. 13). These are as follows:

1. Culture-based observations (e.g., the cultural norm of one person holding the door for another)
2. Language use-based observations (e.g., how a certain buzzword or idiom is used among friends)
3. Classroom dynamics-based observations (e.g., students who sit in front of the classroom volunteer more than those who sit in the back)
4. Nature/environment-based observations (e.g., observing the first snowflake at dawn)
5. Self-reflection-based observations (e.g., being aware of a particular change in emotion and realizing how it affects them)

## Assessment

I created a grading rubric with six categories worth 5 points each. They are listed in Table 1 with a brief explanation of their focus.

Table 1. Rubric for Observation Journals

Item	Focus
Content and cohesion	How well has the entry generally expressed the observation through implementing the paragraph template?
Observation focus	How well does the entry focus on the specific observation and express it clearly in the paragraph?
Development of the example and explanation	How well is the example/explanation part of the paragraph expressed?
Vocabulary use	How much class-acquired vocabulary was recycled and used?
Takeaways	Does the writer appear to have learned something from the observation?
Care and caution	Does the entry appear to be carefully thought out and written, or does it appear to be quickly penned in a matter of seconds?

## Implementing the Journals Effectively

The two main problems that appeared in each of my classes were entries that either listed just a series of daily activities or listed multiple observations without any focused theme. That is, the first problem was that the entries were like common diary entries, and the second problem was

that they lacked any real focus. In both cases, there was an absence of logical development or cohesiveness (Randolph, 2017). You can avoid these shortcomings by implementing the journals using the following steps.

### **1. Review the Paragraph Template**

Go over the parts of the paragraph template in class, and discuss the significance of each point. Then, as a class, write up an observation entry based on one of the previous student-generated observations. This helps students review each point and see how each part is connected to the next.

### **2. Review the Rubric**

Review the 6-item rubric. Ask students to pair up and analyze the importance of each one, and discuss their responses. Write their insights on the board and ask that they record them in their notes. Then, use the rubric to evaluate your class-composed observation entry. Going over the rubric and applying it help students focus on their topic and develop detailed explanations.

### **3. Review the Major Pitfalls**

For added reinforcement, review the major pitfalls by listing them on the board. Discuss how they can be avoided. In my class, students were quick to respond by explaining the need to follow the directions regarding the paragraph template and the need to be aware of the demands of the rubric.

### **Additional Activities**

The observation journals can also be used as very effective and intriguing material for other writing and speaking projects. For example, I've employed the content of the journals to help students write poetry and short stories. I've also used the journals for academic writing and presentation projects that focus on their host culture and target language (Randolph, 2018). The various functions of the journals are indeed wide in scope and create a sense of refreshing excitement among language learners.

## **Conclusion**

I often tell my wife and our 5-year-old daughter that there is no such thing as boredom; there is far too much going on in our lives to observe and investigate for such a state to exist. By implementing the observation journals in my writing classes, my ELLs are slowly starting to realize the truth about our reality; that is, it is void of boredom. As my students develop and sharpen their observation skills and start to see the precious, simple things in life, they also develop and sharpen their ability to record these moments and insights in their journals. Our life offers a myriad of unique gifts on an hourly basis. The challenge, then, is to get our students to become and be aware of them through observations and then write about them with a sense of awe, excitement, and comfort.

*Note: A version of this article first appeared in the October 2017 issue of [SLW News](#).*

## **References**

Randolph, P. T. (2017). Observation journals: Inspiring ELLs to embrace a life worth living. *CATESOL News*, 48(4).

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## **Appendix: Sample Entry**

### **Holding Doors for Others, Opening Doors of Kindness—A Culture-Based Observation**

When one person holds a door for another, it not only helps the person in need, but it builds a sense of compassion and gratitude among both people. My favorite observation today was when I watched a young woman, who appeared to be in a hurry, actually stop and hold the library door for a stranger who had both hands full of books and a book bag. This interested me because the woman who held the door was in a hurry, but she took the time to be kind and patient with what appeared to be a complete stranger. I liked how the young man (the stranger) smiled and said, “Oh, wow! Thank you!” Then, he looked at the young woman. She smiled at him before disappearing down the hall. This would rarely happen in my own culture because people really only watch out for themselves. However, here, on the Nebraska campus, I see people hold the door for others all the time. But, today’s observation was special because I could feel a sense of humanity between the two people. In sum, I felt that the woman not only held the door for the man, but she also opened a door of kindness. Her actions said, “Look, I’m busy, in a hurry, but I want to offer you a helping hand to make the day a little brighter.”