

Nature Quest Journal

Abstract: Through an assignment titled, “A Campus Nature Quest or Neighborhood Nature Challenge,” Professor Emily Baird encourages students in her first-year college writing course to engage in sensory explorations of urban-area natural spaces. This collection includes a discussion of the project goals, the assignment guidelines, and sample student journal entries. Working through this project, students develop reflective abilities, descriptive writing skills, and confident voices for expressing unique observations about the world around them.

A Campus Nature Quest or Neighborhood Nature Challenge

Emily Baird

Centering a student in their own world and then asking them to plot their own path for exploration, the Nature Quest Journal assignment puts the student firmly in control of context and content. As students record their experiences in pictures and words, they map out their understandings of nature and their experiences of nature. These student-led journeys reckon with the larger world of the students’ choosing while enabling a reflective process which yields strong, personal voices and deep, honest engagement. The students are both experts and guides.

As an instructor, there’s much of value in this activity. Personally, I love the pictures and descriptions that come back from students. Their campus and neighborhood discoveries become moments of revelation through their writing: a turtle, a puppy, a possum; ravens, coyotes, sparrows; weeds, roses, vines, trees. I love the way that this activity engages students with their campus and neighborhood, building agency.

Additionally, this assignment has been particularly successful for students who struggle to provide details and to develop their writing. Taking pictures (whether individually, with a partner, or as part of a group) helps them connect the sensory experiences of the activity with the words necessary to describe that experience for someone who wasn’t with them. There’s room, as well, for those students ready to move beyond summarizing and reporting. Students often make important connections and share personal insights about their world and the way the different aspects of their world—family, friends, neighborhoods, campus, work, school—interact with and relate to one another.

Assignment Guidelines: A Campus Nature Quest or Neighborhood Nature Challenge



Purpose

An activity in preparation for and in response to reading “[Looking for Nature in Los Angeles](#)” by Emily Hartop and Lila Higgins.

This activity asks you to consider your relationship to and experience of nature here in your LA and LA adjacent neighborhoods. As we move through our days, how much thought do we give to the nature around us? How do we experience nature in our particular corner of the biodiversity hotspot that is Los Angeles?

Rather than just thinking, however, this activity puts the emphasis on action. After all, according to the reading, what’s the best way to experience urban nature? Take a walk! Your mission will take you out of the (virtual) classroom and into the (actual) world that is our campus and/your neighborhood. There are five elements to this activity.



Tasks

1. Explore: Head out into our CSULA campus (or your own neighborhood) and look for the nature that’s there. Take an inventory of campus/neighborhood environmental issues as well. How is the air quality? Are there industries or other sources of air pollution nearby? Is there a lot of noise-- from traffic, airports, business, people, or ? How much open space is there? Are there parks? Street trees? Safe healthy options for humans to be outside?
2. Catalogue: Look for flowers, trees, plants, animals and insects. Take pictures! Document what you find with photos as well as written descriptions of variety, numbers and sensory details (appearance, smell, sound, touch) where applicable.

Consider posting your photos to [iNaturalist](#) for identification! Keep track of pollution and pollution sources as well!

3. Observe: How do nature and our campus or your neighborhood interact? Is nature hidden, under attack, revered, unnoticed, constrained or otherwise affected by humans? Does nature help humans and do humans help nature? Again, photos can be a useful resource for you that will allow you to reflect more later. Take pictures!
4. Reflect: After looking for nature in your neighborhoods and/or on campus, taking photos and making notes, reflect on your experiences. Where did you see nature? Where did you look? How did you look? What did you find? What surprised you? How did this exploration change or expand your perspective on nature in your neighborhood?
5. Share: Finally, create a written journal of at least 500 words (1.5-2 pages) about your experience, using photos and personal reflections. The final appearance of your journal is up you but must include at least 6 photos: flower, tree, plant, animal, insect and view. Your journal must have at least 500 words and 6 photos to receive full points.

Submission and Criteria for Success

While the content and appearance of your journal is up you remember that your journal must have AT LEAST 500 words of text and SIX photos in order to receive five full points.

(Check out the rubric!)

Points: 5

Submitting: a file upload

Rubric:

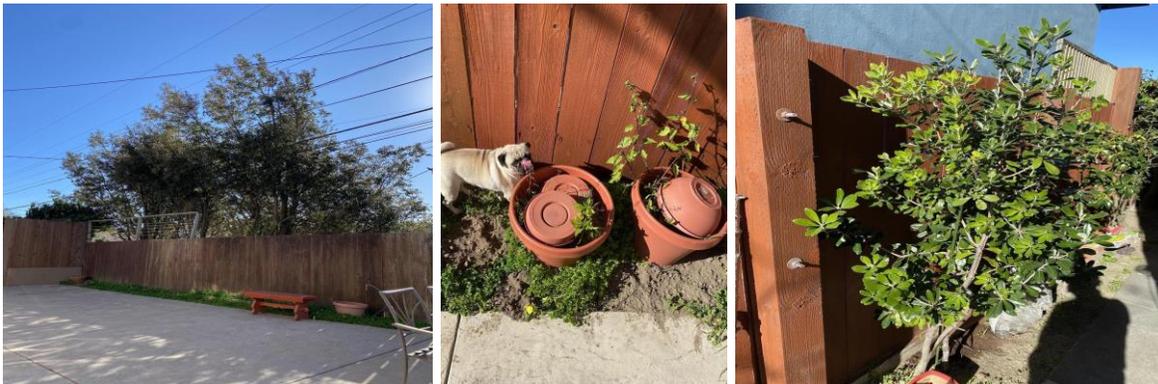
Ratings

Criteria	5 pts Full Marks Journal is at least 500 words and includes at least six pictures. Journal addresses the issues and requirements of the prompt.	4 pts 4pts Journal is 400- 500 words long and includes at least four pictures. Journal addresses the issues and requirements of the prompt.	3 pts 3pts Journal is 300-400 words long, contains pictures and addresses the topic, subject or ideas of the prompt.	2 pts 2pts Journal is 200-300 words long and relates to the topic/ prompt.	1 pts 1pt Journal is less than 200 words.	0 pts No Marks	5 pts
----------	---	---	--	--	---	-------------------	-------

The Nature of My Neighborhood

Angelo Abulencia

It was a beautiful Tuesday afternoon in South San Francisco, the city in which I reside. I was unable to walk around my neighborhood due to the fact I have COVID and have no energy, but I was able to sit outside in my backyard. While outside I was fascinated by how bright the sun was. I also noticed that the air was crisp and unpolluted. It was around 60 degrees as I was sitting outside with my little dog named Chai. She is a pug and almost 2 years old. In addition, I live near the airport so during my time outdoors I would hear occasional airplanes fly overhead. The airplanes were loud as they were only a couple hundred feet over my head when they took off and began to land. The traffic on my street is rare, but today was busy as cars went up and down my street pretty often. I also noticed a lot of birds were outside at the time I was there. I would hear the birds sing as I would play fetch with my little dog. The wind also began to pick up as the time rolled on. As I sat outdoors and observed from my outdoor seating area I would notice squirrels running along the fence line. Their bushy tails moved as they jumped from one tree branch to another. The animals around my neighborhood were full of life, and as a result so was my little dog Chai, as she would bark at everything and anything that moved. Her little eyes and movements when barking at the squirrels or birds and the way she looked at me as if I should do something made me chuckle a little.



Moreover, the weeds in my backyard had invaded the dirt area of my backyard. The weeds were vivid green and had yellow flowers sprouting out. I noticed the weeds looked kinda like clovers as their shape was similar. To add on, this one plant my family and I have was surrounded by nothing but weeds around it. Seeing nature and really paying attention to all its features was quite the treat. I would look by walking up to it and just examining how it would move in the wind and the color it gave. My dog Chai would join me as she would walk up to the weeds or plants and smell it as all dogs would. This expanded my initial thoughts about nature and made me realize that nature is right outside my backyard. Although I could not walk around my neighborhood, my backyard made up for it as I was able to still view trees, plants, wildlife, and enjoy the sunlight and cool breeze. In doing so, I was also able to spend time with my dog and really enjoy our time together. Nature is very beautiful and is something I look forward to viewing again. My favorite part was the clean air and the sunlight that just in a sense rejuvenated my body and gave me a sense of energy as I deal with COVID.



The Nature of My Neighborhood

Jaelyn Asamoah

I have never thought of myself as an “outdoorsy person.” I can appreciate nature and its beauty and love going to the beach or to pretty lookouts, but ever since I was a child the idea of playing outside in the DIRT was not very appealing. I grew up on a farm in a small suburb of Sacramento called Elk Grove in Northern California. Here, my family and I lived on 2.5 acres of land. 1.5 of those acres belonged to our goats. Yes, on this farm my family and I raised goats, sheep, and chickens, but my parents knew my disdain for getting dirty, so they never forced me to help in taking care of them. It is interesting to think that I grew up surrounded with a vast and spacious space of land that I could explore. Every time I stepped outside, I saw an eclectic array of animals, insects, and plants.

Moving from my hometown to LA has been a bit of a shock. The air doesn’t smell as crisp as back home, the leaves don’t change to beautiful shades of yellow, red, and orange, and seeing the stars most nights is nearly impossible. I never thought I would miss the nature that I experienced in my own backyard, but here I am missing my beautiful Sacramento the “City of Trees.” It wasn’t until this assignment that I realized this campus is just as beautiful and vibrant as the landscape I am used to. I just had to look a little harder.

On my walk and tour of campus, I saw many palm trees which I knew were for the ambiance of Los Angeles but nevertheless they are beautiful. I saw some yellow plants that looked almost like flowers, but I knew they were some type of weed. This reminded me of my mother because she loves learning about plants and seems to know the name of every one she sees. I sat with my roommate and did homework for a bit on the grass. We ate some lunch and a bit of her lettuce and cheese fell on the ground. Since she couldn’t eat it anymore, I watched her put the food on a leaf and asked what she was doing. She replied to me with a bright smile on her face: “I made a charcuterie board for the ants!” While we continued to do homework, insects did gravitate toward the leaf. After we had left, we cleaned up after ourselves and threw the food away. I noticed that our campus also has those trees with the stinky white flowers. The smell of these trees remind me of the high school I went to back home because there was a whole walkway lined with these trees leading to the portable classrooms. I looked up these trees, and they are called Callery pear trees. It is so interesting to me that a tree that looks so beautiful and aesthetically pleasing smells so terrible! I saw a roach on the side of King Hall and decided to take a picture of it. On our way back to our dorm I took a picture of the sunset. It was a beautiful muted yellow, orange, and pink color.

This assignment made me rethink what I consider as nature. Nature doesn't have to be a big, vast, open space but can be found anywhere.



The Nature of My Neighborhood

Aaron Luong

Inspired by Lila Higgin's "Looking for Nature in LA," I set out looking for nature. The first place I tried searching was in my backyard.



The first thing that caught my attention was an orange tree my mother planted. The zest of the oranges radiating in the sun captivated me and I knew I just had to grab one. As I rubbed the zest

of the orange, the oils of the orange released. And the next thing I knew, my nostrils were hit with a faint fruity citrus smell which had me salivating. I don't think I have to explain what happened to the orange after that.

After my orange, I went back outside to look for more nature. After a few seconds, I saw something whizz past my vision accompanied with a buzzing noise.



I spot and go towards a honeybee trying to pollinate my sickly lavender plants. Due to the state of the lavender, there is almost no smell unless you get up-close and personal with the plant where you will smell the faint scent of lavender. I felt almost sorry for the plant for being uncared for and the honeybee for trying to pollinate it.

After my findings in the yard, I decided the next thing I should do was to turn my sights to the sky.

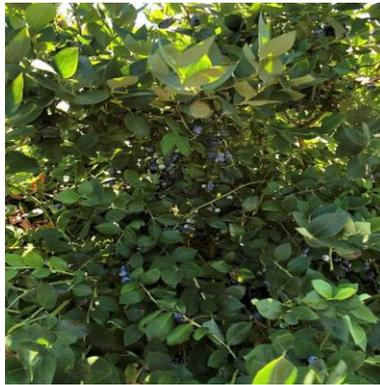


And I wasn't disappointed. I spotted a raven. Its wings flapping and generating the lift to keep it afloat and the black torso against the backdrop of the infinitely blue sky was all so majestic. This had me thinking: "I wish I could turn into a bird and fly away from everything." But I knew that wasn't possible.

A few days later, my family and I set out to the blueberry farm located in Temecula, California.



There was nothing but rows of blueberry bushes that spanned probably a mile long—it was incredible. Surprisingly, all I could smell around the bushes was the soil from the ground and not the actual blueberries.



Most of the blueberries were plump and ripe. I was able to sneak one into my mouth while I was picking them into my red pail. The taste was everything you would expect out of a good blueberry—juicy and sweet but warm from sun.

I was taking a stroll in the park when I saw a familiar face I haven't seen in a while.



It was a squirrel. It crawls around until it finds what seems to be its meal and stuffs it into its cheeks before climbing up a nearby tree to use as its hideout.

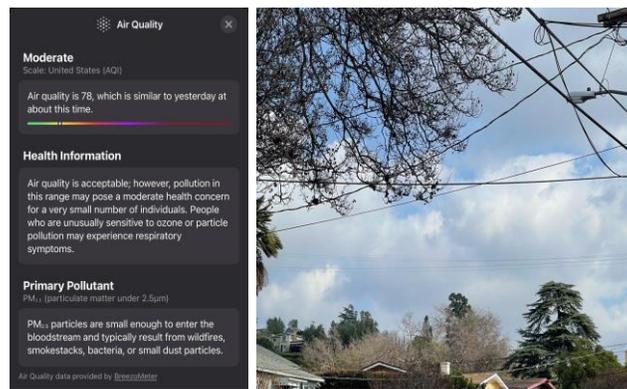
After these experiences, I realized how disconnected from nature I've become. Ever since the Coronavirus pandemic hit, I've stayed inside my home for three years attending my classes online and I thought I was fine with that, but now I am not. After witnessing nature again, I realize how much of the outside world I was missing out on, and now I am ready to break this cycle of staying inside.

The Nature of My Neighborhood

Areli Nunez

Never have I ever bothered to pay any attention to the nature in my neighborhood. But after observing it and paying attention, I see that the nature in my neighborhood is actually very nice. There are a few things we as humans do that ruin nature here. But generally, it is taken care of a lot better than I expected.

Let me begin with what we can't see in nature here in my neighborhood: the air.



The air quality in my neighborhood is pretty musty. It is kind of giving me chest congestion. It is windy but feels cool and fresh. According to my weather app, there are particles from wildfires, smokestacks, and bacteria in the air. Overall, it is bearable. Now, thankfully there is hardly ever a lot of noise. Just the sound of cars driving by. However, sometimes there is constant yelling from an annoying little brat next door. But that's the noisiest it gets in my neighborhood. There also isn't that much open space. There are a lot of houses and apartments close together. About two blocks down is where all the businesses are. The majority of my neighborhood consists of houses, apartments, and businesses. If I'm being honest, the possibly only health concern would be the air quality. Otherwise, it's safe for humans to be outside.

There's a lot of trees and plants in my neighborhood. These plants are well taken care of and very green. The flowers are always alive and beautiful when dogs aren't peeing all over them. It always smells like wet dirt, which I love. The plants feel kind of fuzzy. There is just something about the smell of the grass and plants around here that attracts me. I really like it. I saw someone walking their dog. I usually see a lot of people walking their pets. I see a lot of tiny bugs flying around, but they are difficult to capture in a photo. Overall, there are mostly a lot of green plants, trees, and a couple of animals.



I think people in my neighborhood are good at respecting nature around here. I don't think nature here is threatened at all by the humans here. The one and only concern might be people who don't pick up after their pets and leave the poopies lying in the grass. Or when their pets pee on the plants or flowers and burn it with their acidic pee. My mom absolutely hates that because she tries her best to keep the plants alive and well in front of our house. I think that in my neighborhood humans help nature because everyone is good at not pulling on flowers, stealing plants, or harming anything. In fact, sometimes my neighbors will go and water the plants, or plant more plants. But I think that nature helps humans too by making the neighborhood look nice, pretty, and presentable.



I saw nature in my neighborhood, just 4 blocks down from where I live. Of course, nature continues to look beautiful further down. But I went as far as I could go. I specifically looked at the nature on the sidewalks. I looked by taking pictures and comparing it to other neighborhoods. I found that my neighborhood is really good at taking care of the plants and trees out on the sidewalks. That is something that also surprised me because I never expected for people to care for public plants/trees. This exploration made me realize that the nature in my neighborhood is actually beautiful and well taken care of. It also made me realize that my neighbors are really respectful to nature.

The Nature of My Neighborhood

Giselle Sandoval

EXPLORATION!: When exploring my neighborhood and taking a walk I discovered that there was a more natural feel to this city than I first thought. I realized that even though I live in

an urban and busy area there is nature everywhere I look, some hidden and some out in the open. I searched the sky, the ground, the park, the cracks, and the walls for the nature that I had never realized was there before. High or low, it did not matter, there was nature everywhere. There were lush trees, not many bushes, plenty of flowers (of course, specifically in house gardens), and, obviously, grass all along the sidewalks. I never realized how much nature was around me before!



Before even exiting my gates to go on my walk, I encountered a bee resting on the outdoor table. I checked to see whether it had pollen on its legs, but sadly it did not. It flew away shortly after I took my picture but then it hit me: bees are a part of nature too! We constantly see them buzzing around, but it never clicked that they were just another life in nature. Bees have always fascinated me because of their pollen gathering and constant work so I was extremely amused when I realized that these insects are a part of nature and are often overlooked.



The bee wasn't the only insect I encountered; I also found this green little bug. It really was small. I am not sure what type of bug it is, but it looks a little like a baby mantis. I could be wrong since I am not a big fan of insects so I try to avoid that topic as much as possible. This little "mantis" was chilling on a dead weed and it blended in really well into the leaves and background. I almost didn't discover it because of its camouflage! This was when I tried to pay attention to my surroundings more cautiously. I didn't find any other insects besides the common ant, rollie pollie, spider, fly, and mosquito but even then, there were quite a few aspects that I never paid attention to previously. These were all things that I took for granted and never put them into the book of nature, but now I will keep an eye out for anything that pops out and screams NATURE!



Next on the list of encounters were plants! Plants, trees, flowers, any greenery you can think of, are all visuals we see and come across every day. Plants have always been labeled as nature but are often not recognized for the appeal they bring with their appearance, smell, and feel. There were weird plants, pretty flowers, medium sized trees, small trees, thin or large trees, and many others. I saw all types of greenery on this walk, including this weird white bushy plant. I am not sure what type of plant this is, but it seems to be a weed since it was growing out of a crack on the sidewalk near a wall. When looking at this oddball plant that had no friends and was one of a kind, I understood that nature really was everywhere and can grow anywhere; you just have to search for it. Then, I decided to experiment and followed my nose. I started smelling a sweet, fresh scent and followed it. It led me to this Hawaiian flower tree. It was extremely pretty and it smelled great. It was a fun experience following the smell because it turned out that the smell was coming from only a couple of houses away. I found other pretty and unique flowers but at that time, I was enjoying the nature around and forgot to take pictures, so instead, I took pictures of animals I encountered.



Animals! They are cute creatures who I love very much! I have always paid attention to the animals around me and the ones I encounter. Specifically, the most common are of course dogs and cats. But even if they are common, they too are also a part of nature. It just took me this little walk to realize this. Pets are often overlooked and just categorized as “pets,” not animals, and certainly not nature. I encountered a dog roaming, a cat that escaped from home, and a squirrel eating its food. The dog was very cute and I wanted to take it home, but I think it already had a home and was just taking a walk outside. I saw an escape in person—the cat slipped under the fence! It was very pretty and well-groomed with blue eyes with a silver with black tint coat. It was also friendly. It walked up to me and let me pet it; although, I was also used as a scratching post

that was rubbed against. There was also the calm squirrel enjoying its food on the side looking around. I found this squirrel at the park. It was used to humans being around it and did not get anxious when getting close to it. I realized then that animals, which are classified as nature, are very adaptable to the world around them. They can live peacefully and without worry even with all the cars, people, and buildings around.



Nature can be considered a backdrop to your everyday life. You can see it, smell it, hear it, or even touch it, but you won't notice it until you pay attention to nature itself. Going on this walk allowed me to realize that even in a busy city that is full of houses, buildings, and factories, you can see nature if you just look for it. It can be in front of your eyes, under a rock, in a crack, in the sky, and anywhere you can think of. Just understanding this point can help you realize that nature runs the world, not humans. For example, think about the Amazon Forest. The Amazon Forest is a very beautiful place, from the outside, but once you enter it, it is likely that you will not come back out. Just because nature is silent and not noticeable does not mean that it is nonexistent; it is just hidden. It can be a hidden gem, or a hidden poison, but there is no denying that nature is one of the greatest wonders in the world.



Nature in my neighborhood has surprised me very much. It changed how I previously saw my neighborhood, from a city area devoid of greenery and animals to an area that contains many beautiful organisms and plants. Although it took a long time for me to realize this, I will appreciate it and observe it more carefully from now on. It will be an interesting and new adventure to discover.

The Nature of My Neighborhood

Anonymous

Living on the second floor of an apartment has some downsides, but one thing I appreciate is being greeted by the view of the mountains every time I go out. On some days the mountains are barely visible due to smog or mist from the rain. Right outside my home is a bakery and sometimes smoke comes out from the chimney. It's not a concerning amount; I've never had a difficult time breathing so I don't think it affects the air quality much. If you were to exclude motorcycles, screeching tires, and ambulances driving by, there's honestly hardly any noise pollution in my neighborhood. During the night, I can faintly hear the train horn. Where I reside, there are three parks within walking distance. When I step outside, I see my neighbor's crops; there are many which I cannot identify, however I recognize dragon fruit and some type of melon.



During my stroll, I saw grass and clovers growing in cracks on the sidewalks, to my left the entire stone wall was covered in ivy—it makes for a pretty sight. At one point the sidewalk became uneven from the tree roots. I saw many types of unique flora growing from peoples' yards; to name a few, I saw cacti, aloe vera, birds of paradise flowers, a willow tree, a eucalyptus tree, century plants, palm trees, lemon trees, and (what I assume to be) desert flowers. As for fauna, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary; I saw squirrels, sparrows, pigeons, some hummingbirds, bees, ants, and crows. Interestingly, I saw three crows perched above me, two of which were bobbing their heads up and down. I will admit I don't know much about crows, but my best guess is that they were sizing one another up to impress the third crow.



Of course, some pollution is to be expected. At times there would be plastic or shredded paper entangled in the grass or bushes. Sometimes there'd be bits of glass on the floor. Admittedly

it's not as bad as I thought it'd be; it goes to show that this community cares about the neighborhood and does their part to keep the place clean. It's mind boggling how I never noticed the many diverse plants growing in peoples' yards; if anything it kind of reflects the house owner's priorities. Do they cultivate for aesthetic purposes (flowers, bushes) or for different reasons (vegetables, fruits)?



It's impressive how a thirty-minute walk (to the donut shop of all places) would expand my perspective on nature. Despite living here for about 7 years, I never gave much thought about the environment around me. Before, when I heard "Los Angeles," I thought of palm trees, tall skyscrapers, concrete, smog—all those stereotypical labels. After this activity, I'm starting to see why LA is considered to be a biodiversity hotspot. Everywhere I look, even when I'm not actively searching for it, nature is present and thriving. In my neighborhood, it's presence cannot go unnoticed. Nature always finds a way, even in places that appear unsuitable for life to grow.

