This Week’s Focus: Observation — Honing students’ observational skills

As your students begin to write more in-depth, angle-based stories (what some would call a narrative story), they’ll need to include more than just interviewing and research to keep readers engaged. That’s where observation enters as an information-gathering technique. Observation includes students objectively using all of their senses — sight, hearing, smell, taste and even touch — to help enrich a story and make it more memorable. But honing observation skills is a learned technique. To practice, first I like to share great examples of observational writing so students can see how reporters include it. We also “reverse engineer” that writing to see how a reporter actually gathered that information in the first place. Did they directly observe it or did they get the information some other way (via a detailed interview, for example).

THE LESSON: BE A ‘FLY ON THE WALL’

Once you’ve looked at examples, assign your students to find a place where people hang out — a busy coffee shop, a playground, a mall — and simply record everything they see, hear, smell, etc., and have them share those observations with you. I have mine focus one what I call the “Three D’s” — description, detail and dialogue. Here’s an example of an observation I wrote several years ago in our school’s media center computer lab.

Note that these observations aren’t yet stories. Next week, I’ll provide a lesson on how to turn those observations into actual story ideas.

FIND IT AT JEA.ORG
Fact Finding and Observation

Description
In this lesson, students will practice essential skills of a reporter: finding and researching facts, interviewing and observation. The lesson includes a school-wide scavenger hunt that requires students to use their reporting skills to uncover information while familiarizing them with the sources of information in their school.

Objectives
- Students will practice observation as a means of gathering information.
- Students will conduct research and interviews to find factual information.
- Students will become familiar with resources for reporting within their school.

The link
The link to the full lesson is HERE.

NOTE: This lesson is available free to everyone during the dates listed at the top of this page. Want to have access all the time? If you’re not a member yet, consider joining JEA today for access to all of the resources.

You’ve Got Style
Suggestions from Cindy*

DECADES
No apostrophe when you describe someone’s age as in their 20s, but use an apostrophe when you are referring to a year. The Class of ’24.

Design tips
Make sure the apostrophe goes in the correct direction. In some fonts, you may have to type a single quotation mark twice to get the proper one. Then remember to delete the first one. If you’re using a Mac computer, use this shortcut:

\[ \text{shift} + \text{option} + \text{} = \text{''} \]

* Stylist Cindy Horchem, CJE, is a retired adviser and the current JEA business and projects coordinator

Team Building

Sue Flaming, Caney Valley HS, Ramona, Oklahoma

WRAP IT!
Create an obstacle course
My editors used chairs, 2 x 4s and round floor waxer pads. Other things used for obstacles could be hula hoops, garden hose, Frisbees, etc. Divide the students into teams. Use plastic wrap to secure each team into a tight bunch. The team must communicate and work together to navigate the obstacle course.

Another version is to have an editor lead each team. The editors must stand outside the course. The wrapped team is blindfolded and the editor must guide them through the obstacle course with voice directions only. This utilizes trust, listening and leadership skills.

JEA members, I want YOU to share your awesome ideas with journalism teachers around the country. Fill out this GOOGLE FORM to be a part of this newsletter.