

## Essay #2: Observation

The observation essay is “an essay that draws on the writer’s observations of people, places, and/or events to support the writer’s claims about what these observations mean.” – *Student Guidelines*

### Preparation

This preparation for writing this essay is a two-tier assignment. **First**, you will closely observe another person as they use an alternative literacy in the environment that they would be most likely to use this literacy (e.g., a gamer at home, playing his game system; a cheerleader at practice, interacting with other cheerleaders and learning routines; a waitress at work in a restaurant) **Second**, after your observation, you are to interview that person about the impact of that type of literacy in their lives. You want to consider how they use it (e.g., work? hobby? family? friends?), how long they’ve used it, its personal value, if it has helped them become more proficient in academic literacy, and if so, how.

### Writing

In your essay, you should detail who, what, and where you observed and incorporate what you feel are the most interesting/important parts of your interview. You should not include everything your subject says. **Your thesis should tell me the importance of this alternative literacy in this person’s life, whether it has helped them with academic reading and writing or otherwise, and the rest of your paper should support this assertion based on what you saw and heard from the subject.** You should make a point, not just give a play-by-play of your observations. Use what you learned about yourself and your own familiar literacy through Essay #1 to provide a framework for examining someone else’s alternative literacy.

### Format

This essay should be 3-4 double-spaced pages and include a title. Use 12-point Times New Roman font and one-inch margins.

### Timeline

Rough draft for peer review: Monday, Sept. 23  
Student conferences: Wed., Sept. 25-Fri, Sept.27  
Final draft due date: Monday, Sept. 30

## *Observation Tips*

- Make sure you label your observation notes with the date, time, place and/or event.
- Record only what you see. Avoid making judgments. You will make inferences and draw conclusions in your essay but not during your observation itself. You should be able to ask yourself “How do I know this?” and then answer yourself “It’s exactly what I saw and heard, not my interpretation of what the behavior meant.” For example, rather than recording “Susie was happy as she entered the room” record Susie’s actual behavior: “Susie had a bounce in her step and laughed with her friends when she entered the room.” (This depicts an outgoing, confident person as well as a happy person). Look beyond obvious surface details.
- Record everything you see, positive and negative. Closely observe students’ attitudes.
- Record even minor details, including sights, sounds, and even smells. This is crucial to showing, not telling, in your essay
- You may have an idea about what you want to write about before your observation, but keep an open mind. What you see/hear may change your mind.
- Try to be as inconspicuous as possible when note-taking. If students ask you what you’re doing, just tell them – an observation assignment for a class. If you sense anyone is very uncomfortable, stop taking notes and record your thoughts as soon as possible after your observation.
- Things to observe and document: The physical arrangement of students, who is speaking to whom, who is silent, bits of dialogue, depictions of activity. “Mapping” is a useful tool. You can make a physical map to show where tables and chairs are located and the members of a group interact with each other. A “time map” can show the kinds of activities that occur at different times of day.
- If you write your notes after the observation, record your thoughts as soon as possible; try to at least collect brief notes to make it possible to flesh them out later.