

MICROSCOPES and TELESCOPES

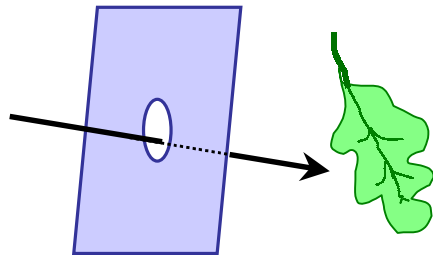
Activity 2
20 – 90 minutes
STUDENT HANDOUT

AIMS. To use the senses to zoom in and zoom out on a scene.

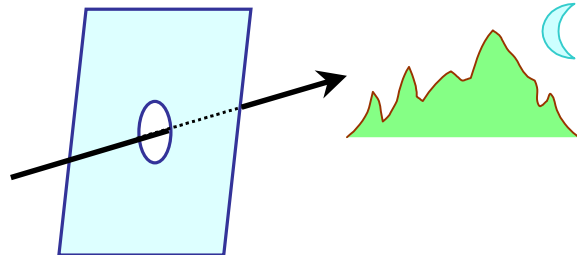
For writers to explore the imaginative potential of precisely-framed observation.

Suitable for: Year 8 + ; creative writing courses & MAs; adult writers. Youngest users may need guidance.

Tear a small hole (1 or 2 cm wide) in an A4 sheet of paper, to make a ‘frame’ (use your fingers: no need to be exact). You can now use this simple piece of technology as a kind of microscope or telescope...



‘Microscope’... ZOOM IN



‘Telescope’... ZOOM OUT

[1] Press the frame, gently, *against* any surface. Something ‘ordinary’ will do: bricks, grass, a mat, teaspoon or volunteer’s elbow...

[2] Look into your ‘microscope’. Focus on the qualities of the tiny area exposed.

[3] Detect temperature, texture, smell. Note the smallest details, things you never noticed before. If appropriate, imagine how it tastes.

[4] Now compose a short piece of writing based on your close observations. For example, if you’re familiar with haiku why not compose an ‘ultra-close-up haiku’?

[1] Using your ‘telescope’, frame a small part of the view: a doorway at the end of a long corridor, a section of horizon, a chimney, a distant block of flats, a car windscreen at the end of the road, etc.

Note: You may need the hole to be further from your eye than with the microscope. Adjust the distance to suit you.

[2] Watch and listen for any shifts or changes in your observed sector – however slight or obvious they might be, make a note of them. Ignore nothing!

[3] Focus your mind on the scene like an astronomer. Be patient. Note all thoughts and feelings that arise. Describe any subtle quality of the view that emerges.

Things to talk about... How does the microscope/ telescope influence the way you write about things? Do you sense the world differently using the frame? Does it encourage certain kinds of alertness?

Further work. Repeat the activity *without* the frame, trying to focus your senses as if it were still there.

For older/ adult GROUPS

DISCUSSION ...

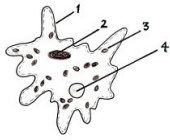
- When writing, what is the value of building up a scene ‘scientifically’ – that is, attending to observed and actual detail, cataloguing relevant characteristics carefully, in a systematic and revealing way?
- Do you think the artist’s and the scientist’s eye are, in some ways, similar? Is the ‘scientific approach’ given in this exercise necessarily the best (or only) way to generate a crisp picture or vivid atmosphere?
- What do you think it means to ‘frame’ a subject? Does this activity suggest new ways to write about things?
- Have you noticed how, the moment you present someone with a hole in a piece of paper, they almost always have to look through it? Do you think a good piece of writing should be a bit like that? If so, how?

FURTHER ACTIVITY ...

Think of a memorable incident or situation – a striking memory, or a historical event you know about. Focus on **one** aspect of it. Now write **three** accounts of that same event, using the following ‘frames’:

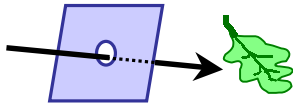
- First, describe it from a far-off perspective [where everything is ‘**IT**’, i.e. detached and distant];
- Now describe the same situation again, but from ‘middle distance’ [things are closer now, so use a ‘**YOU**’ voice];
- Finally, produce a third version of what happened, *close up* [use all the senses and a personal, intimate ‘**I**’ voice].

Share your results with a reading partner, or the group. How do the three views differ in style and impact?



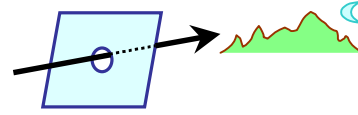
Activity 2: MICROSCOPES and TELESCOPES... STUDENT/TUTOR SUPPORT

Some examples of writers' responses...



'Microscope'... ZOOM IN

- (a) Close-set lines – raised to fingertips and curved: like blank, melting music awaiting my notes... (*grain pattern of desk-top*)
- (b) **Example of an 'ultra-close-up haiku' ...**
An ear-ring of water, trying to –
oops, cling to the upside
of a blade of grass.



'Telescope'... ZOOM OUT

- (a) Black gate. Five bars of iron. Maybe. Swish of crow across it. Arm tired – tired as a gate. Can't keep still. Any move I make, that speck on the glass moves opposite way. Gate blurs...
- (b) Pylon playing out wire. Eyes making each thin wire double. Itself and its ghost. A six to a twelve-stringed silence. Flaccid. Swaying as though a breeze had plucked it in slow motion...

'FURTHER ACTIVITY' : useful examples (older/ adult groups)

For those who are stuck, here are some incidents/ situations other writers have come up with...

Personal memories:

Falling off a bike	Moving house	Wonky holiday tent	Forgetting my lines
Where <i>is</i> my passport...?	Interview from hell	My last exam	First injection
Meeting my first friend	The jelly accident	Ballet lessons	Dad's heart attack

Public / historical subjects:

First human on moon	Building Stonehenge	Socrates' last drink	One of Houdini's escapes
Ski slopes: global change	The last Tyrannosaur	Great Fire of London	Stephenson's <i>Rocket</i>
Boarding the Titanic	The Battle of Britain	Slave badges	The grassy knoll (J.F.K.)

Here are some examples of the kinds of approach one might adopt for each of the three (IT/ YOU/ I) voices...

- (a) **IT:** Checking Stonehenge on a map. **YOU:** Approaching the stone circle. **I:** An ancient stonemason works/speaks.
- (b) **IT:** Sold house, at a distance. **YOU:** Room without furniture/ carpet. **I:** In your hand, an item left behind.
- (c) **IT:** Skier glimpses Alps from a plane. **YOU:** Skier sees how thin the snow is. **I:** The warming snow speaks for itself.

Notes for tutors/ teachers leading 'further activity'...

If students use current events, avoid *everyone* picking the 'big' zeitgeist topics (9/11, Princess Diana, etc.). Such subjects should never be taboo, but can sink into predictability or be difficult for younger and less experienced writers. It's helpful, in any case, to get a mix of ideas which includes the distinctively personal and idiosyncratic. Boys may suggest the usual sporting triumphs – which is fine, as long as they're also encouraged into other areas.

When participants go the historical route, make it clear they don't have to be experts on the chosen theme. Nor should they feel obliged to latch onto famous world events or wars. Minor historical incidents reflect the human condition just as poignantly. Where a major historical occurrence *is* chosen, help them to focus on one manageable aspect of what happened, or might have happened – something they can sketch in vivid detail. So, rather than attempt to describe the entire Battle of Britain (by resorting, perhaps, to abstract generalities), they might do better to imagine the thoughts of a losing pilot in a particular dogfight.

The activity can vary greatly in length. You can ask for the three views to be developed in some detail and introduce editing sessions, or else request just a few lines or a single paragraph for each 'frame'.