

GETTING STARTED WITH NATURE JOURNALING IN KINDERGARTEN

A Practical Guide for Educators

WHY KINDERGARTEN IS THE PERFECT TIME TO START

Kindergarten is the perfect time to introduce the practice of nature journaling. Not only does it support learning across multiple areas of the Ontario Curriculum, but in my experience, children at this age are naturally curious about the world around them. They notice the smallest details, ask endless questions, and are eager to explore. One of the things I love most about working with kindergarten students is that many haven't yet developed the inner critic that can make older students hesitant to draw, write, or share their ideas. They are willing to take risks, wonder aloud, and see every discovery as an opportunity to learn.

A wonderful way to begin is by taking students on short nature walks and introducing the prompts *I Notice*, *I Wonder*, and *It Reminds Me Of*. These simple prompts encourage students to slow down, observe carefully, celebrate their curiosity, and make meaningful connections with the world around them. Over time, these prompts become part of how students think and learn. They begin to make more detailed observations, ask more thoughtful questions, and connect what they see to their own experiences, memories, stories, and culture.

Nature journaling isn't about finding the "right" answers or creating the perfect drawing. It's about nurturing curiosity and helping students become thoughtful observers of the natural world. Along the way, they are also developing foundational skills in reading, writing, mathematics, communication, and fine motor development through authentic, hands-on learning experiences.

By encouraging students to notice, wonder, and make connections every time they step outside, we help them build confidence, resilience, and a lifelong sense of curiosity that extends far beyond the classroom.

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED...

One of the most important things to remember is that there are **no rules** when it comes to nature journaling.

There are wonderful frameworks, like the nature journaling scaffolding developed by **Emily Lygren** and **John Muir Laws**, that provide an excellent starting point. The prompts *I Notice*, *I Wonder*, and *It Reminds Me Of*, along with recording observations through words, pictures, and numbers, give students a simple way to begin. But every child is different, and every nature journal should reflect that.

Nature journaling is **not** about creating the most beautiful drawing or writing the perfect sentence. It is about slowing down, observing closely, asking thoughtful questions, and building a connection with the natural world.

Of course, if you have a student who loves to draw and fills their journal with beautiful illustrations, celebrate that! But remember, the artwork is not the goal. The goal is to help students notice more, wonder more, and become curious about the world around them.

As an educator, celebrate every observation, every question, and every connection your students make. Resist the urge to answer every question. Instead, encourage students to keep wondering, investigate together, and recognize that asking thoughtful questions is one of the most important skills they can develop.

Nature journaling is about the process, not the product. When students feel safe to observe, wonder, and express their thinking in their own way, they begin to see themselves as curious learners and careful observers of the world around them.

MATERIAL

- Clipboard or hard writing surface
- Pencils
- Paper or nature journal
- Pencil crayons or crayons (optional)
- Small whiteboard and marker (for educator)
- Magnifying glasses (optional) - These can be a wonderful addition but may also become a distraction for some students. Consider introducing them once students are comfortable with the observation process.

SAFETY & RESPECT OUTDOORS

Before heading outside, establish simple expectations with students.

- Stay with your group.
- Observe living things with care.
- Leave habitats as you found them.
- Only collect items that have already fallen to the ground unless permission has been given.
- Wash hands after handling natural materials.

Nature journaling doesn't have to happen all at once. Think of it as a progression. By introducing one skill at a time, students build confidence while developing the habits of observation, curiosity, communication, and connection.

STAGE ONE: LEARNING TO OBSERVE

1. Begin with Nature Walks

Before students ever put pencil to paper, spend time simply exploring outdoors.

Encourage students to slow down and use the prompts:

- I Notice...
- I Wonder...
- It Reminds Me Of...

These conversations help students learn how to observe, ask questions, and make personal connections with nature. There is no need to put paper to pencil just yet. Simply developing these thinking routines is an important first step.

PINE & PONDER TIP

Start with short nature walks to help kindergarten students build their stamina for being outdoors and develop their observation skills. Aim for 15 to 20 minutes at first, then gradually increase the length of your outings as students become more comfortable. Every class is different, so let your students guide the pace and build up to a full outdoor learning period over time.

Remember, your role as the facilitator is not to provide all the answers, but to spark curiosity. Ask open-ended questions like, "What do you see?" and "Tell me about it." Give students the time and space to share what they notice, wonder, and connect with. By allowing students to lead the conversation, you create opportunities for authentic inquiry and help them become confident observers of the natural world.

2. Build Metadata (Date, Weather, Location) Skills

Morning centres are a wonderful way to build the skills students will eventually use during nature journaling.

Ideas for centres include:

Date Station

- Practice writing the date using whiteboards, magnetic letters, stamps, or paper.

Weather Station

- Observe the weather outside.
- Draw symbols to represent sunshine, clouds, rain, snow, wind, fog, etc.

Location Station

- Practice writing the name of your school or places you regularly visit, such as a local park, forest, or schoolyard.

3. Build Drawing Confidence

Before students begin creating nature journal pages outdoors, give them opportunities to build confidence with drawing and observation through simple learning centres. These low-pressure activities help develop fine motor skills, pencil control, and careful observation.

Students can practise by:

- Tracing natural objects such as leaves, sticks, pinecones, or rocks
- Tracing their hands or everyday classroom objects
- Drawing simple natural objects freehand
- Making bark or leaf rubbings (when appropriate)
- Creating impressions of natural objects using plasticine and printing them with an ink pad

These short, engaging routines help students become more comfortable using a pencil and looking closely before they begin nature journaling.

4. Record Your First Observation

Once students are familiar with the observation prompts and have had opportunities to practise drawing, they're ready to begin recording their observations in a nature journal. Invite each student to collect one natural object to observe. Give each student a pencil and a piece of paper or their nature journal. Begin by recording the metadata together. Bringing a small whiteboard outdoors is a wonderful way to model the date, location, weather, and other observations for the whole class.

Next, invite students to carefully observe and capture their nature item. They may choose to draw it freehand, trace it, create a bark rubbing, make a leaf print, or use another technique that helps them record their observations. The purpose isn't to create a beautiful picture. Instead, pictures become a tool for careful observation, helping students slow down and notice the shapes, textures, patterns, colours, and details that make each nature item unique. As students continue their nature journaling practice, pictures work together with words and numbers to create a rich, holistic record of the moment they are observing.

As students work, encourage careful observation by asking questions such as:

- Do you notice any holes?
- Does the colour change?
- Are there any lines or patterns?
- Is one side different from the other?
- What shapes do you see?

At this stage, keep the focus on capturing observations. There is no need to add words yet. The goal is simply to help students build the habit of slowing down, looking closely, and recording what they truly observe.

PINE & PONDER TIP

Instead of saying - "Look closer"

Ask

- What surprises you?
- Which part is your favourite?
- What is different?
- What do you notice now?

Ontario Kindergarten Connections

- **Belonging and Contributing**
 - Exploring the schoolyard and local environment together.
 - Learning to care for and respect living things.
- **Self-Regulation and Well-Being**
 - Slowing down and focusing attention.
 - Developing self-regulation through mindful observation.

STAGE TWO: LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE

Adding Words To Observations

As students become more confident observers, begin adding simple words to their journal pages.

Encourage students to describe what they notice.

Examples include:

- colours
- textures
- sizes
- shapes
- feelings
- descriptive words

Students can label parts of their drawing or write simple describing words beside their observations.

Bring in Mathematics

Nature journaling is a wonderful way to build early numeracy skills.

Ask students questions such as:

- How many petals are there?
- How many veins can you count?
- Can you measure it using your fingers or hands?
- What patterns do you notice?
- What shapes can you find?

Students can also practice:

- counting
- tally marks
- comparing sizes
- measuring with non-standard units
- identifying repeating patterns
- Collecting simple data and representing it using graphs.

PINE & PONDER TIP

Learning centres are a wonderful way to extend nature journaling into the classroom. Set out a variety of natural objects or photographs and invite students to practise careful observation by recording colours and simple texture words, such as smooth, rough, bumpy, or soft. These short, engaging activities help build observation skills, expand vocabulary, and give students confidence before they begin creating their own nature journal pages.

You can also include a math learning centre using the same natural objects. Invite students to count seeds, petals, or leaves, identify and sort shapes, look for repeating patterns, compare sizes, estimate quantities, or measure length using non-standard units. By integrating mathematics into nature journaling, students begin to see that math is all around them and that careful observation is an important part of mathematical thinking as well.

Ontario Kindergarten Connections

- Demonstrating Literacy and Mathematics Behaviours
 - Recording observations using pictures, symbols, letters, and words.
 - Describing colour, texture, size, and shape.
 - Counting, measuring, comparing, sorting, identifying patterns, and collecting simple data.

STAGE THREE: LEARNING TO WONDER

Questions

- Gather as a class and invite students to share what they are wondering.
- Explore the difference between making an observation and asking a question.
- Work together to ask thoughtful questions.
- Record student questions on chart paper or a whiteboard.

These questions can become the starting point for inquiry projects, research, read-alouds, science investigations, or future nature journaling sessions.

PINE & PONDER TIP

Not every question needs to be answered through science. Nature journaling creates opportunities to explore the world through multiple perspectives. Using Two-Eyed Seeing, students can learn to appreciate the strengths of both Western science and Indigenous ways of knowing. Whenever possible, consider inviting local Elders or Knowledge Keepers to share their knowledge, stories, and perspectives. Their guidance can deepen students' understanding of place, strengthen relationships with the local community, and honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

As students explore their observations, different questions may lead them down different paths. Some may inspire scientific investigation, while others may invite students to listen to stories, reflect through poetry or art, or deepen their relationship with the land. Valuing these different ways of knowing encourages curiosity, respect, and a richer understanding of the natural world.

Ontario Kindergarten Connections

- Problem Solving and Innovating
 - Asking questions.
 - Predicting.
 - Investigating.
 - Developing inquiry skills.
 - Exploring multiple ways of knowing and understanding the natural world.

STAGE FOUR: CONNECTIONS

Make Personal Connections

- Finally, invite students to think about: It Reminds Me Of...
- What does their nature item remind them of?
- Students can respond using:
 - drawings
 - words
 - conversation

Some responses may reflect scientific thinking, while others may be imaginative or connected to personal experiences, memories, or culture. These connections help students build vocabulary, strengthen literacy skills, and deepen their relationship with the natural world.

PINE & PONDER TIP

Celebrate every connection your students make using the prompt "It Reminds Me Of." There are no right or wrong connections. Encourage students to think about what their nature item reminds them of, whether it's another natural object, something human-made, a favourite story, a personal memory, or an experience from their family or culture. These connections help students deepen their thinking, make learning more meaningful, and recognize that everyone brings their own unique experiences and perspectives.

Connections can also become a springboard for further learning. They may help students develop possible explanations for what they are observing or inspire even more questions to explore. Encourage students to share their thinking, listen to one another's ideas, and embrace the fact that one observation can lead to many different possibilities.

Ontario Kindergarten Connections

- **Belonging and Contributing**
 - Sharing personal experiences and cultural perspectives.
 - Respecting different ideas and viewpoints.
- **Demonstrating Literacy Behaviours**
 - Making personal, text-to-self, and world connections.
 - Expressing ideas through conversation, drawing, and writing.

EDUCATOR REFLECTION

Take a few minutes at the end of your nature journaling session to reflect on the experience. Consider the following questions:

- What surprised you today?
- What surprised your students?
- Which prompts generated the richest conversations?
- What inquiry questions emerged?
- What might you explore together next?

Reflection is an important part of the learning process. It helps you recognize what engaged your students, identify opportunities for deeper learning, and plan future experiences that build on their curiosity and wonder.

PINE & PONDER TIP: KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Outdoor learning looks different for every class, and that's okay. Planning for your students' unique strengths and needs is one of the best ways to ensure everyone feels successful outdoors.

One of the keys to a successful outdoor learning experience is knowing your students and planning for their individual needs. Taking time to think ahead helps create a safe, welcoming, and meaningful experience for everyone.

Before heading outdoors, consider the following:

- Do any students require additional support from an Educational Assistant (EA)?
- Do any students benefit from alternative ways of recording their observations, such as an iPad, tablet, or voice recorder?
- Does anyone have a safety plan or medical considerations that need to be taken into account?
- Will students need extra water, snacks, or scheduled movement breaks while outdoors?
- Are all students dressed appropriately for the weather?

Outdoor learning should be accessible to every child. If some students regularly arrive without appropriate clothing, consider how you can support families. A conversation about the value of outdoor learning, along with information about affordable places to purchase outdoor clothing, can make a big difference. Many schools also have access to donated boots, rain gear, hats, mittens, or extra clothing. Speak with your principal, Educational Assistants, and school support staff to explore what resources are available and develop a plan to ensure every student can participate comfortably and safely.

When we remove barriers before we head outside, students are free to focus on what matters most: observing, wondering, making connections, and enjoying time in nature.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

Nature journaling is a practice that grows over time. Start small, celebrate curiosity, and remember that every observation, question, and connection is an opportunity for learning.

If you'd like to continue your nature journaling journey, I'd love to help.

Whether you're looking to:

- Bring a hands-on Nature Journaling experience to your students
- Provide professional learning for your education staff
- Explore how nature journaling can become a cross-curricular practice in your classroom or school
- Offer an experience for your library, community group, or summer camp

I'm here to support you every step of the way.

Nature journaling has the power to inspire curiosity, strengthen observation skills, and create meaningful connections with the natural world. Together, we can help students become confident observers, thoughtful questioners, and lifelong learners.

QUICK START CHECKLIST

Use this checklist before your first nature journaling session. Remember, where you begin will depend on the stage your students are at.

Before You Head Outdoors

Choose Your Outdoor Learning Space

Take a few minutes to think about your students' needs before selecting a location.

- ☐ Is the area accessible for all learners, including students using mobility devices such as walkers or wheelchairs?
- ☐ Are there any potential safety concerns or hazards?
- ☐ Do I have students who may require additional supervision or support outdoors?
- ☐ Do I have enough staff or Educational Assistant (EA) support?
- ☐ If using the schoolyard, can gates be secured if needed?
- ☐ If leaving school property, do I have the required permission forms?
- ☐ What is my communication plan with the office or administration in case of an emergency?
- ☐ Have I completed an appropriate risk assessment for this location?
- ☐ Do I have a first aid kit and any other safety equipment?

Gather Your Materials

- ☐ Pencils
- ☐ Paper or nature journals
- ☐ Clipboards or hard writing surfaces
- ☐ Pencil sharpener or extra pencils
- ☐ Small whiteboard and marker
- ☐ Pencil crayons or crayons (optional)
- ☐ Magnifying glasses (optional)

Plan Your Lesson

- ☐ Plan a 15–20 minute nature walk (adjust the length to meet your students' needs).
- ☐ Introduce the observation prompts:
 - I Notice...
 - I Wonder...
 - It Reminds Me Of...
- ☐ Record the date, location, and weather together.
- ☐ Invite students to observe one natural object.
- ☐ Encourage students to draw what they observe.
- ☐ If appropriate, add one colour word or descriptive word.
- ☐ Celebrate every observation, question, and connection.
- ☐ End with a whole-class reflection.

© 2026 Pine & Ponder Outdoors

Written by Billie Jo Reid

This guide may be shared in its original form but may not be reproduced, modified or sold without permission.

Website: www.pineponderoutdoors.ca, **Email:** pineponderoutdoors@gmail.com, **Instagram:** @pineponderoutdoors