

# Literacy & Nature for Educators

Guidance for a 2-3 hour training session, including  
The Lost Words resources

Developed by the John Muir Trust

**This outline is based on experience of developing resources and running a number of sessions in this format in varied locations. It's offered as guidance, to be adapted to location and group needs. Whilst a degree of facilitation and group management skills are needed, it's designed to be run by non-specialists – you do not need to be an expert in literacy or the outdoors. (See Page 4 of the [Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words](#) for further context setting).**

## **Aim & Structure**

The aim of this session is to stimulate thinking and give practical experience of activities that help develop literacy skills in the outdoors. It's for anyone from schools, youth and adult groups, or with an education remit or interest. Using the [Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words](#) and other resources we will explore writing and teaching techniques, make our own 'spells' and art work inspired by nature, and enjoy time in outdoor settings.

### **Welcome and context setting (10 mins)**

Signpost to any relevant local links to The Lost Words, or to the Literacy & Nature theme.

Note the broad theme of the session, with The Lost Words as a key reference point.

Note the purposefully inclusive educator audience; not just for schools/teachers, and relevance to a wide range of ages and backgrounds.

### **Structure of session**

**Discussion:** explore 'Literacy' in a broad sense - find out what attendees are doing and how this might be built on in outdoor settings.

**Hands-on:** experience different activities.

Set up a suitable balance of approaches - not prescriptive; adapt and create according to setting and group.

Include practising one of the key skills of an artist and writer - observation of nature.

**References & signposting:** web pages, literacy & nature resources, John Muir Award resources, #TheLostWords.

### **Icebreaker (10 mins)**

In pairs, choose a place or nature object that has been important to you (possibly current, or could be from childhood). Tell your paired person about this place/object and why you have a connection to it. Share the other person's place/object with group.

Alternative: Explorer's Guide 'Imagine yourself somewhere' (p7).



## Discussion

**'What is Literacy?'** (prior to introducing ideas and activities, 20-30 mins)

In small groups consider three questions:

- *What is 'literacy' to you?*
- *What are you already doing to promote literacy?*
- *How much do you/could you use outdoor settings?*

Summarise, feedback, discuss.

Note that literacy outdoors is not a 'new' thing. People have used the outdoors as a context and stimulus for writing for centuries. See this as an opportunity to celebrate and build on this.

Reference resources as appropriate e.g. Citizen Science, John Muir Award & the Curriculum.

(Use outdoor/indoor washing line, peg up responses on card/post it notes).

## Activities

***NB select and run through at pace to give a flavour of a range***

### **Visit the Ideas Tree/Table (10 mins)**

Give space to browse and discuss examples and resources.

Laminate photos of outdoor literacy in action e.g. journey sticks, pebble poems, mark-making with charcoal, reading books outdoors, Gaelic forage book, maps with place names, Citizen Science etc.

John Muir Award examples: Cardonald Primary School Proposal Form, [CALL Project Record eBook example](#), East Ayrshire Literacy box.

Prepare local/relevant examples.

### **Introduction to words (10 mins)**

Practice observing closely. In small groups (2-4) give your own names to plants and animals you see, based on what it looks like. Share the names created and then see if another group can tell what it is. What are the 'real' names?

Reference: [Mission Explore: John Muir](#) Mission 'Act like a Victorian Explorer' (p13).

Reference: Citizen Science [OPAL Tree Health Survey](#) – identification, learning scientific language.

### **Introduction to poetry (10 mins)**

Introduce The Lost Words (see text below) and the Explorer's Guide.

See 'What's it for' and 'How and Where to use it' (p4).

Introduce poetry – prompt close observation, descriptive language, clues...A mystery doesn't always need to be understood.

Read different poems aloud in groups.

### **Pebble poetry (10 mins)**

Explore the nearby natural area and 'collect' some descriptive words for what you find. Write one of them on a pebble using charcoal. As a group, place around a tree to create a poem.

### **Creature conversation (10 mins)**

In pairs, choose two creatures to have a conversation with each other.

Reference: An Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words, Newt (p23).



### **Hapa Zome (20 mins)**

Art activity to make the shape of a leaf onto a cloth. Write descriptive words around the shape.  
Reference: An Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words, Acorn 2 leaf shape poem (p9).

### **Movement poem (20 mins)**

Read Wren poem as an example to start. In small groups choose an animal. Observe (live, or video clip, or from memory/imagination) how it moves. Collect a word bank/hoard of words and join these together as a poem.

Consider how to share this with the group e.g. act out, sing, rap.

Create some (abstract) art to illustrate your poem.

Reference: An Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words, Wren (p29) and Kingfisher: Abstract art (p20).

### **Emotional literacy (5 mins)**

Think of an outdoor experience you have had (e.g. challenging, adventurous, unexpected, memorable, different), use a length of wool to chart the highs and lows. What would you change/have done differently? What have you learned about yourself through this experience?  
Link to emotional language, literacy; consider the role of outdoor experiences.

## **References & Supporting Information**

### **Signposting and wrap up (5 mins):**

Open discussion/round robin: "What can you take away with you from this session?"

[The Lost Words](#) information & resources - Web page hosted by John Muir Trust

[Padlet](#) for schools to share creativity

[#TheLostWords](#)

Other local specific points.

### **Other Workshop activity ideas that could be included**

- [Mission Explore: John Muir](#): Missions - 'Act Like a Victorian Explorer' p13, 'Have Vision' p20, 'Go somewhere remote' p18, 'Stand up for nature' p22.
- An Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words:  
Acorn: Grass hunt/chant (p8), write from perspective of an animal (p9). Bramble: How do you feel about brambles word hoard (p13), Collective nouns for animals - make up your own (p6). Otter: shape shifting poem (p24).
- [Mission Explore: National Parks](#): Mini National Parks (for talking and listening)
- Poetree (poems prompted by perspectives on trees)/story of a stone
- Gaelic: [Mission Explore: National Parks](#): CNPA example of Gaelic language and landscape; SNH foraging guide and John Muir Award story - [creating Gaelic names for lichens](#)
- Creative Star resources/[index](#)



## **Leaders' Notes**

### **Introduction to The Lost Words and Explorer's Guide**

In 2007 some noticed that as words were being added to the Oxford Junior Illustrated Dictionary, so words were being lost from it. These were words such as acorn, bluebell, conker and kingfisher. The meanings of words were changing too – Blackberry as a handheld device for example. Some people were interested, some were concerned. Writer Robert Macfarlane joined with artist Jackie Morris to create a beautiful illustrated 'book of spells' – designed to help us relocate and treasure nature words.

The Explorer's Guide is written by Eva John and produced by the John Muir Trust to accompany The Lost Words. It's for anyone with an interest in nature, words and images who wants to explore further some of the ideas and creatures conjured up by Robert and. It's especially useful for teachers, but also designed for educators, group workers and families to use.

How are schools/groups using these resources? Reference Curriculum context of the Explorer's Guide (p30).

### **What is Literacy?**

To support discussion, reference John Muir Award Literacy & Nature Resource Guide.

- Traditionally understood as ability to read and write
- Wider concept - use of language lies at centre of development and communication
- Social, emotional and economic importance to individual as well as society
- Key foundation for learning (ref Attainment)
- Curriculum for Excellence (Scotland): English and literacy curriculum outcomes - literacy skills as part of their work - evidence of impact
- Signpost: Juliet Robertson's [10 Reasons Why I Teach Literacy Outdoors](#)
- Consider emotional and ecological literacy

### **Signpost to resources (include in a follow up email)**

Have hard copies (or web access and links) of these resources available for participants to view. [John Muir Award Literacy & Nature Resource Guide](#) - highlights how nature and the outdoors can inspire and support literacy skills. It includes links to resources that have a natural theme or are specifically adapted for the outdoors, along with Award specific resources and examples. [The Lost Words](#) information & resources includes [Free Explorer's Guide download](#) plus [posters](#) of Dandelion, Otter, Kingfisher; [Padlet](#) for sharing creative outputs; [#TheLostWords](#). [John Muir Award Case Studies](#) - Larbert High School, examples of a whole school year group creative writing exercise inspired by Dams of Darley Nature Reserve. [John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe](#) - Graphic novel on life of John Muir, produced by Scottish Book Trust. Available to download for free. [Mission:Explore John Muir](#) - activities that will inspire people to follow in the footsteps of John Muir - available to download free. Juliet Robertson '*Dirty Teaching: a beginners guide to learning outdoors*' and *I'm a Teacher Get me Outside of Here* [blog](#).



## **Equipment list (suggested)**

Multiple copies of The Lost Words and An Explorers Guide to The Lost Words.

Laminated posters – Otter, Dandelion, Kingfisher

Tarps or sit mats

Line, post it notes, card/paper, pegs

Wool

Clip boards

Pencils

Charcoal

Chalk

Cloth

Pebbles, stones (if not available on site)

Ivy leaves, Dandelion leaves

Thesaurus

Relevant resources

## **Example of a follow-up email to attendees**

Dear all,

Thank you for your enthusiasm and creativity on xxxday during the Literacy & Nature for Educators workshop. Also, a big thank you to our wonderful hosts at the xxxxxxxxxxxx.

Below is a list of many of the links we touched on during the workshop – you can also search and share using #TheLostWords on social media.

Best wishes, and good luck with your spell-making, leaf bashing, creative adventures in nature.  
xxxxx



## **Key resources referenced**

[An Explorer's Guide to The Lost Words](#) – this free guide by Eva John and the John Muir Trust accompanies The Lost Words. It's for anyone with an interest in nature, words and images who wants to explore further some of the ideas and creatures conjured up by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris in their enchanting 'spell book'. It's especially useful for teachers and educators.

[John Muir Award Literacy & Nature Resource Guide](#) - highlights how nature and the outdoors can inspire and support literacy skills. It includes links to resources that have a natural theme or are specifically adapted for the outdoors, along with Award specific resources and examples.

[John Muir Award Case Studies](#) - Larbert High School, examples of a whole school year group creative writing exercise inspired by Dams of Darley Nature Reserve.

[John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe](#) - Graphic novel on life of John Muir- produced by Scottish Book Trust - available to download for free.

[Mission:Explore John Muir](#) - a unique set of activities that will inspire people to follow in the footsteps of John Muir - available to download free (and in Gaelic).

Juliet Robertson '*Dirty Teaching: a beginners guide to learning outdoors*' and *I'm a Teacher Get me Outside of Here* [blog](#).

[The Wren 'spell'](#) read by Robert Macfarlane via BBC Radio Four Tweet.

Linda Cracknell articles on Walk Highlands: [Putting Walks into Words](#) and [Growing in the Open Air](#).

## **Other resources referenced**

Curriculum for Excellence and the John Muir Award:

<https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/about/resources/356-john-muir-award-and-the-curriculum-for-excellence>

John Muir Award Case Studies, including Larbert Academy calligram poems:

<https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/in-action>

Mission:Explore Food & Water (free to download): <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/initiatives>

Mission:Explore (free searchable missions for all places): <https://www.missionexplore.net/>

Citizen Science & the Curriculum for Excellence:

<https://www.environment.gov.scot/media/1373/citizen-science-and-curriculum-for-excellence.pdf>

OPAL surveys: <https://www.opalexplorenature.org/>

iRecord: <https://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/>

RSPB Big Schools Birdwatch: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/fun-and-learning/for-teachers/schools-birdwatch/>

Digimap: <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/>

Bluebell from The Lost Words on YouTube – [a musical interpretation by You Are Wolf/Kerry Andrew](#).

