

Observation vs. Insight

ob•ser•va•tion n. the action or process of watching something or someone.

in•sight n. the capacity to gain an accurate and deep understanding of something or someone.

An English class is not just about “observation”; it is about digging beneath the surface of what we’ve observed in order to discover its deeper meaning. Through such interpretation we make connections between what we’ve read and the purpose behind it or the effect that accompanies it. Making an observation is simply telling me what something *is*. Making an insightful statement is telling *how* and *why* something is. Often, such insights are made with certain transition words: *because of, due to, if/then, perhaps, although*, etc. When we develop insights we are establishing connections and building a more complex understanding of something.

So how do we go from observation to insight?

Observation

Huck and Jim are floating down the Mississippi River.

Observation + One

The Mississippi River symbolizes freedom.

Insight

The Mississippi River symbolizes two kinds of freedom (spiritual and physical) *because* Huck is escaping a society that wants to confine his behavior (to “civilize” him), *while* Jim is escaping a society that wants to confine him physically (as a slave).

Insight + One

The Mississippi River symbolizes two kinds of freedom (spiritual and physical) *because* Huck is escaping a society that wants to confine his behavior (to “civilize” him), while Jim is escaping a society that wants to confine him physically (as a slave). *Although* Jim may find his freedom in Cairo, Illinois (a free state), Huck will still have to “grow up” no matter where they travel.

While observations are the foundation of an English class, insights are the next step in learning. Whenever we read, write, or discuss something in class, I expect us to form insights. Observations show me that you are awake. Insights show me that you are thinking!

Observation vs. Insight

con•cept n. an abstract idea.

A concept is often the cornerstone of good interpretive analysis. Such abstract ideas or general notions provide a foundation upon which to build analysis, scaffold our thoughts, and construct meaning. Do not confuse simple “things” or “actions” or “observations” with actual concepts. Below is a partial list of concepts that are often explored within literature. Feel free to use them.

Political Concepts

Democracy
Capitalism
Nationalism
Totalitarianism
Rebellion
Censorship
Freedom
Control
Socialism
Imperialism

Social Concepts

Racism
Sexism
Xenophobia
Civil Rights
Community
Alienation
Identity
Class
Change vs. Tradition
Conformity
Nature vs. Nurture
Individualism
Human Nature
Beauty
Love
Faith and Doubt
Fate vs. Free Will
Chaos vs. Order

Personal Concepts

Hypocrisy
Truth
Shame
Idealism
Ignorance
Sacrifice
Pride or Vanity
Temptation
Greed
Betrayal
Envy
Regret
Loneliness
Disillusionment
Innocence and Experience
Self-awareness
Self-reliance
Knowledge vs. Wisdom
Dignity
Selfishness
God-complex