

Common Core Unit: A Close Reading of Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels”

Unit Summary

This unit has been developed to guide students and instructors in a close reading of Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels.” The activities and actions described below follow a carefully developed set of steps that assist students in increasing their familiarity and understanding of Dillard’s essay through a series of text dependent tasks and questions that ultimately develop college and career ready skills identified in the Common Core standards.

This unit can be broken down into five days of study and reflection on the part of students and their teachers, including a series of interconnected journal entries created both in and out of class describing different features of Dillard’s text:

The Text of Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels”

Day One: Getting Acquainted with Dillard’s Essay

Silent read of the “Living Like Weasels” & journal entry on paragraph 1 (homework in advance of Day One)

Discussion of paragraphs 1&2 & in-class rewrite of journal entry on paragraph 1

Discussion of paragraphs 3-7 to end Day One

Journal entry on paragraphs 5&6 (homework for Day Two)

Day Two: Uncovering the Meaning of Dillard’s Essay

Silent (re-)read of paragraphs 8-13 & discussion of paragraphs 8-13

In-class journal entry on paragraphs 10-12

Day Three: Analyzing the Import of Dillard’s Essay

Discussion of paragraphs 14-17

Re-write of journal entry on paragraphs 10-12 augmented by evidence from paragraphs 14-17

(homework for Day Three)

Day Four: Investigating the Words and Structure of Dillard’s Essay

Discussion of rhetorical devices in Dillard’s essay

In-class journal entry on one of Dillard’s sentences followed by a discussion of those responses

Discussion of the structure of the essay as a whole

Day Five: Writing in Response to Dillard’s Essay

Students write an essay on the title of Dillard’s Essay

Additional Student Activities

Text of Dillard's "Living Like Weasels"

Note: Those words that students would likely not be able to define from context are underlined and given an initial gloss to the right of the text.

1 A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go. One naturalist refused to kill a weasel who was socketed into his hand deeply as a rattlesnake. The man could in no way pry the tiny weasel off, and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label.

2 And once, says Ernest Thompson Seton—once, a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat. The *supposition* is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel swiveled and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won. I would like to have seen that eagle from the air a few weeks or months before he was shot: was the whole weasel still attached to his feathered throat, a fur pendant? Or did the eagle eat what he could reach, gutting the living weasel with his talons before his breast, bending his beak, cleaning the beautiful airborne bones?

Twisted
Decoration
that hangs
from a
necklace

3 I have been reading about weasels because I saw one last week. I startled a weasel who startled me, and we exchanged a long glance.

4 Twenty minutes from my house, through the woods by the quarry and across the highway, is Hollins Pond, a remarkable piece of shallowness, where I like to go at sunset and sit on a tree trunk. Hollins Pond is also called Murray's Pond; it covers two acres of bottomland near Tinker Creek with six inches of water and six thousand lily pads. In winter, brown-and-white steers stand in the middle of it, merely dampening their hooves; from the distant shore they look like miracle itself, complete with miracle's nonchalance. Now, in summer, the steers are gone. The water lilies have blossomed and spread to a green horizontal plane that is terra firma to plodding blackbirds, and tremulous ceiling to black leeches, crayfish, and carp.

Indifference
Solid earth
Shaking

5 This is, mind you, suburbia. It is a five-minute walk in three directions to rows of houses, though none is visible here. There's a 55 mph highway at one end of the pond, and a nesting pair of wood ducks at the other. Under every bush is a muskrat hole or a beer can. The far end is an alternating series of fields and woods, fields and woods, threaded everywhere with motorcycle tracks—in whose bare clay wild turtles lay eggs.

6 So. I had crossed the highway, stepped over two low barbed-wire fences, and traced the motorcycle path in all gratitude through the wild rose and poison ivy of the pond's shoreline up into high grassy fields. Then I cut down through the woods to the mossy fallen tree where I sit. This tree is excellent. It makes a dry, upholstered bench at the upper, marshy end of the pond, a plush jetty raised from the thorny shore between a shallow blue body of water and a deep blue body of sky.

Luxurious
Structure that
juts out over
the water
Soft moss

7 The sun had just set. I was relaxed on the tree trunk, ensconced in the lap of lichen, watching the lily pads at my feet tremble and part dreamily over the thrusting path of a carp. A yellow bird appeared to my right and flew behind me. It caught my eye; I

swiveled around—and the next instant, inexplicably, I was looking down at a weasel, who was looking up at me.

8 Weasel! I'd never seen one wild before. He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert. His face was fierce, small and pointed as a lizard's; he would have made a good arrowhead. There was just a dot of chin, maybe two brown hairs' worth, and then the pure white fur began that spread down his underside. He had two black eyes I didn't see, any more than you see a window.

9 The weasel was stunned into stillness as he was emerging from beneath an enormous shaggy wild rose bush four feet away. I was stunned into stillness twisted backward on the tree trunk. Our eyes locked, and someone threw away the key.

10 Our look was as if two lovers, or deadly enemies, met unexpectedly on an overgrown path when each had been thinking of something else: a clearing blow to the gut. It was also a bright blow to the brain, or a sudden beating of brains, with all the charge and intimate grate of rubbed balloons. It emptied our lungs. It felled the forest, moved the fields, and drained the pond; the world dismantled and tumbled into that black hole of eyes. If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders. But we don't. We keep our skulls. So.

11 He disappeared. This was only last week, and already I don't remember what shattered the enchantment. I think I blinked, I think I retrieved my brain from the weasel's brain, and tried to memorize what I was seeing, and the weasel felt the yank of separation, the careening splash-down into real life and the urgent current of instinct. He vanished under the wild rose. I waited motionless, my mind suddenly full of data and my spirit with pleadings, but he didn't return.

12 Please do not tell me about "approach-avoidance conflicts." I tell you I've been in that weasel's brain for sixty seconds, and he was in mine. Brains are private places, muttering through unique and secret tapes—but the weasel and I both plugged into another tape simultaneously, for a sweet and shocking time. Can I help it if it was a blank?

13 What goes on in his brain the rest of the time? What does a weasel think about? He won't say. His journal is tracks in clay, a spray of feathers, mouse blood and bone: uncollected, unconnected, loose leaf, and blown.

14 I would like to learn, or remember, how to live. I come to Hollins Pond not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it. That is, I don't think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular--shall I suck warm blood, hold my tail high, walk with my footprints precisely over the prints of my hands?--but I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical sense and the dignity of living without bias or motive. The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons. I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should. And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will.

Without
dignity

15 I missed my chance. I should have gone for the throat. I should have lunged for that streak of white under the weasel's chin and held on, held on through mud and into the wild rose, held on for a dearer life. We could live under the wild rose wild as weasels, mute and uncomprehending. I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur,

sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses. Down is a good place to go, where the mind is single. Down is out, out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses. I remember muteness as a prolonged and giddy fast, where every moment is a feast of utterance received. Time and events are merely poured, unremarked, and ingested directly, like blood pulsed into my gut through a jugular vein. Could two live that way? Could two live under the wild rose, and explore by the pond, so that the smooth mind of each is as everywhere present to the other, and as received and as unchallenged, as falling snow?

Something
said

16 We could, you know. We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—even of silence—by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting. A weasel doesn't "attack" anything; a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity.

Flexible

17 I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles.

Day One: Getting Acquainted with Dillard’s Narrative

Day One Activities

- Students first read Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels” on their own (homework in advance of Day One)
- Students write a journal entry on the first paragraph regarding what makes a weasel wild, particularly concentrating on images of violence (homework in advance of Day One)

- The teacher reads aloud paragraphs 1&2 of Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels” (5 minutes)
- The teacher then leads the class in a discussion of a set of questions about paragraphs 1 & 2 (10 minutes)
- Students then (re-)write their journal entry regarding the wildness of weasels (15 minutes)
- Students then are asked questions about paragraphs 3-7 by their teacher (20 minutes)
- Students then write a journal entry on paragraphs 5-6 of Dillard’s essay on the connection between nature and humans (homework for Day Two)

	Journal Question	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
Homework	In your journal, write an entry on the first paragraph of Dillard’s essay describing what makes a weasel wild.	<p>“sleeps in his underground den”</p> <p>“he lives in his den for two days”</p> <p>“he stalks”</p> <p>“dragging the carcasses home”</p> <p>“Obedient to instinct”</p> <p>“he bites his prey”</p> <p>“ splitting the jugular vein at the throat”</p> <p>“crunching the brain at the base of the skull”</p>	<p>The teacher should instruct students that they will be keeping a running journal charting their ongoing exploration of critical moments in the text. The process of journaling brings to the fore the tension that Dillard is exploring in her essay—choosing to live like a weasel (in the moment and unreflective) while writing about that choice (in a highly reflective and self conscious way).</p> <p>Students should consistently be reminded to include explicit textual evidence in their journals to back up their claims and avoid non-text based speculation (i.e. no answers of the sort “Weasels are wild because they live outdoors and are not pets”).</p>

Discussion of Paragraphs 1-2 (10 minutes)	Guiding Questions	Evidence from Dillard's Essay	Instructional Commentary
	(1) What features of a weasel's existence make it wild? Make it violent?	<p>"sleeps in his underground den"</p> <p>"he lives in his den for two days"</p> <p>"he stalks"</p> <p>"dragging the carcasses home"</p> <p>"Obedient to instinct"</p> <p>"he bites his prey"</p>	This question harkens back to the journal entry students wrote for homework and helps students identify the alien nature of a weasel's existence.
	(2) At what point does the author start speaking about herself? What's the focus of her observations?	<p>"I would like to have seen that eagle from the air"</p>	Once students find this section, they can be led in a discussion of the markedly different tone it sets, as well as identifying Dillard's concerns (not the callous death of the eagle, but imagining different outcomes regarding what happened to the weasel attached to the eagle's neck). The appearance of her voice at this juncture foreshadows how Dillard will move later in the essay from factual description to speculative observation (and finally to admonition).
	(3) According to Dillard what displays the idea of being "obedient to instinct"?	<p>"he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label"</p> <p>"a man shot an eagle...and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat"</p>	These stories illustrate vividly the instinctual nature of weasels to hold on no matter what, hinting at the final paragraphs where she encourages her reader to live like a weasel and choose a life that is worth holding onto.

Discussion of Paragraphs 3-7 (20 minutes)	Guiding Questions	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
	(4) What features of Hollins Pond does Dillard mention?	<p>“a remarkable piece of shallowness” “covers two acres... with six inches of water and six thousand lily pads” “In winter, brown-and-white steers stand in the middle of it” “The water lilies”</p>	<p>This question sets the stage for the introduction of the human and man-made into that natural world in paragraphs 5 & 6.</p>
	(5) What evidence does Dillard cite of a human presence at the pond?	<p>“a 55 mph highway at one end” “Under every bush ... a beer can” “motorcycle tracks... motorcycle path” “two low barbed-wire fences”</p>	<p>This question generates more evidence for students to use in their journal entry for homework, which links the natural to the presence of man.</p>
	(6) What is she grateful for in paragraph 6?	<p>“The tree is excellent. It makes a dry, upholstered bench”</p>	<p>On the literal level she is grateful that she doesn’t have to walk through poison ivy; on the figurative level she’s grateful for how the presence of humans allows for the conscious description of the non-conscious natural world in human terms. That process foreshadows the task before her in later paragraphs—and the students on Day Two—when they examine how she attempts to fathom the wildness of the weasel through the human perspective.</p>

	Journal Question	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
Homework	(7) In your journal, write an entry describing how Dillard connects the constructed world with the world of nature in paragraphs 5 & 6 of Dillard’s essay.	<p>“There’s a 55 mph highway at one end of the pond, and a nesting pair of wood ducks at the other.”</p> <p>“Under every bush is a muskrat hole or a beer can.”</p> <p>“...fields and woods, threaded everywhere with motorcycle tracks—in whose bare clay wild turtles lay eggs.”</p> <p>“traced the motorcycle path ... through the wild rose and poison ivy”</p>	Good answers will identify the way in which nature uses the human and humans use nature, but excellent answers will also include mention of how Dillard (at the end of paragraph 6) employs “manmade” adjectives like “upholstered” and “plush” when describing the natural world.

Rationale for Day One Activities

Dillard’s text presents a rich, challenging text of considerable subtlety and meaning, and over the course of the unit students will engage in a close reading of the narrative to uncover its considerable power and insight. To begin that process, students should first encounter the text by themselves without the assistance of a teacher in order to encourage independence as a reader and cultivate a habit of close reading when encountering a text for the first time. The provided text is lightly glossed for vocabulary that is particularly challenging and not context dependent.

Some students might come to class not having completed the reading or the journal homework assignment. Having the teacher slowly and methodically read the first two paragraphs of “Living Like Weasels” out loud both acquaints those that didn’t read with the topic of Dillard’s narrative and familiarizes the whole class with the rhythms of her sentences. Instructors should avoid over inflecting Dillard’s language and rather allow her images and metaphors to speak for themselves while clearly stressing punctuation to emphasize the sentence as the unit of composition for Dillard.

The instructor then asks the students precise, text-dependent questions directed at deepening student comprehension of the opening of the text. After covering the questions regarding the first two paragraphs, students are given the opportunity to rewrite (or write, as the case may be) their journal entries on the wildness of weasels. Teachers then end the class discussing the next section of the text (paragraphs 3-7) and

assigning as homework another journal entry—this time on the link between the humans and the natural world at Hollins Pond. Standards covered on Day One include RI.9-10.1-5.

Day Two: Uncovering the Meaning of Dillard’s Essay

Day Two Activities

- Students silently (re-)read paragraphs 8-13 (5 minutes)
- Then the teacher leads the class in a discussion of these paragraphs (20 minutes)
- The teacher then reads aloud paragraphs 10-13 (5 minutes)
- Students then write an in-class journal entry regarding the effect locking eyes with the weasel had on Dillard (20 minutes)

	Guiding Questions	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
Discussion of Paragraphs 8-13	(1) What comparisons does Dillard make to describe the weasel?	<p>“thin as a curve”</p> <p>“a muscled ribbon”</p> <p>“brown as fruitwood”</p> <p>“his face was fierce, small and pointed as a lizard’s”</p> <p>“he would have made a good arrowhead”</p>	This analysis sets up a later question on similes and metaphors and helps establish a tone of close reading for the day. Excellent students will raise the question of what Dillard precisely meant by comparing the weasel’s eyes to a window that you don’t see.
	(2) Describe what is meant by being “stunned into stillness” drawing on evidence from paragraph 10.	The whole of paragraph 10 is worth looking at closely for evidence of what Dillard meant.	A close analysis of this passage will examine how Dillard moves from literal to figurative description of the impact of seeing the weasel and being “stunned into stillness.”
	(3) When she sees the weasel Dillard says “I’ve been in that weasel’s brain for sixty seconds.” What did she find there?	Once the weasel disappears Dillard’s mind is “suddenly full of data,” foreshadowing the fact that the brain of the weasel was a “blank tape” revealing only the “urgent current of instinct.”	The discussion could go on to elaborate Dillard’s reaction to the experience—her dismissal of psychological explanations in favor of describing it as “a sweet and shocking time.” The discussion would fruitfully end by pointing out that while the weasel doesn’t think, it does keep a “journal,” segueing to that night’s homework assignment.

	Journal Question	Evidence from Dillard's Essay	Instructional Commentary
Journal Assignment	(4) In your journal, write an entry describing the effect seeing the weasel had on Dillard. What experiences does she compare it to?	<p>"a clearing blow to the gut"</p> <p>"a bright blow to the brain, or a sudden beating of brains"</p> <p>"the charge and intimate grate of rubbed balloons"</p> <p>"It emptied our lungs"</p> <p>"It felled the forest, moved the fields, and drained the pond"</p> <p>"the world dismantled"</p> <p>"I retrieved my brain from the weasel's brain"</p> <p>"my mind suddenly full of data and my spirit with pleadings"</p> <p>"the weasel and I both plugged into another tape simultaneously... Can I help it if it was a blank?"</p>	Good answers will explore what Dillard meant by saying that the look she shared with the weasel was "as if two lovers, or deadly enemies, met unexpectedly." While they should include reference to the physical effect of that encounter, they should also explore the metaphorical and metaphysical dimensions that Dillard develops in these paragraphs.

Rationale for Day Two Activities

Beginning the class by having students silently (re-)read paragraphs 8-13 reinforces independence while ensuring a fruitful conversation to follow. By reading aloud the paragraphs that will subsequently be written about in their journal, students gain exposure to these particularly dense paragraphs through a different modality.

Day Three: Analyzing the Import of Dillard’s Essay

Day Three Activities

- The teacher reads aloud the final four paragraphs of Dillard’s essay (10 minutes)
- Then the teacher leads a discussion on these paragraphs (40 minutes)
- Students rewrite their journal entry from class for homework, augmenting it with evidence from paragraphs 14-17 (homework for Day Three)

	Guiding Questions	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
Discussion of Paragraphs 14-17	(1) What was the purpose of Dillard coming to Hollins Pond?	<p>“to forget... how to live”</p> <p>“learn something of mindlessness”</p> <p>“the purity of living in the physical sense”</p> <p>“the dignity of living without bias or motive”</p> <p>“I would like to live as I should”</p> <p>“open to time and death painlessly”</p> <p>“noticing everything, remembering nothing”</p> <p>“choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will”</p>	
	(2) Find evidence for what Dillard means by “living in necessity” in paragraph 14 and describe it in your own words.	<p>“to forget... how to live”</p> <p>“mindlessness”</p> <p>“the purity of living in the physical sense”</p> <p>“the dignity of living without bias or motive”</p>	
	(3) In paragraph 15, Dillard imagines going “out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses.” What does she mean by “careless” in that sentence, and how is	<p>“live under the wild rose, and explore by the pond”</p> <p>“very calmly go wild”</p> <p>“I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair</p>	<p>On a literal level, Dillard means that living by ones senses is to set aside human cares and concerns and merely live in the moment. On a figurative level, she seems to imply that one can see more by caring less. Advanced students would bring in evidence from before the quote, e.g. “I should have gone for the throat... I should have lunged” and “mute and</p>

	that reflected in the rest of the paragraph?	tangled in the roots of grasses”	uncomprehending.”
	(4) Dillard urges her readers to “stalk your calling” by “plug[ging] into” your purpose—yet she describes this process as “yielding, not fighting.” What message is she trying to convey in the final two paragraphs of her essay with these words?	<p>“We can live any way we want”</p> <p>“to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way”</p> <p>“to locate the most tender and live spot”</p> <p>“A weasel doesn't ‘attack’ anything; a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity”</p> <p>“grasp your one necessity and not let it go”</p> <p>“Then even death... cannot you part”</p>	By returning to the opening symbol of the weasel dangling from the eagle’s neck, Dillard illustrates the sort of tenacity she’s asking of her readers in pursuing their purpose.

To be added: examples of non-text dependent questions (“What’s *your* calling?”)

	Journal Question	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
Homework	(5) Dillard revisits the opening image of a weasel dangling from the neck of an eagle in the final paragraph of her essay, but this time substituting the reader. In your journal describe the effect of that image and how it contributes to your understanding of her overall message.		

Rationale for Day Three Activities

Day Four: Investigating the Words and Structure of Dillard’s Essay

Actions

- Students discuss answers to the guiding questions on rhetorical devices (25 minutes)
- Students write a final journal entry to one of Dillard’s sentences (15 minutes)
- Then the teacher leads a discussion of the responses to those prompts (10 minutes)

	Guiding Questions	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
Rhetorical Devices	(1) How does Dillard use similes and metaphors to describe the weasel? What’s her point in doing so?	<p>“like a stubborn label”</p> <p>“a fur pendant”</p> <p>“thin as a curve”</p> <p>“a muscled ribbon”</p> <p>“brown as fruitwood”</p> <p>“his face... small and pointed as a lizard's”</p> <p>“he would have made a good arrowhead”</p> <p>“a dot of chin”</p>	<p>This first example is interesting, as it symbolizes her reaction to seeing the weasel – she can’t shake it loose either like the naturalist, and writing this essay is like soaking it off (soaking being a slow, methodical process). Note that the image of the weasel as a fur pendant parallels the image of the weasel at the end of the first paragraph as well.</p> <p>Her point in describing the weasel through metaphors is two fold; first, she cannot see what it is like to be a weasel as there is no conscious mind there comparable to a humans; second, she wants to describe the weasel vividly in order to make her ultimate comparison of what it would be like to be a person living like a weasel.</p>
	(2) Dillard describes things in antithetical terms, such as “a remarkable piece of shallowness.” How do phrases like this help advance her observations regarding what it’s like to live like a weasel.	<p>“two lovers, or deadly enemies”</p> <p>“very calmly go wild”</p> <p>“the perfect freedom of single necessity”</p>	<p>Examining how Dillard writes also serves the function of exploring the central paradox of the essay—choosing a life of necessity, or in Dillard’s particular case, reflectively writing about being inspired by the unreflective life of a weasel living by its instincts.</p>

	(3) Dillard also employs reflexive structures in her essay, such as “I startled a weasel who startled me.” Identify additional instances of this. What effect do these sentences have on the essay?	“I was looking down at a weasel, who was looking up at me”	Great at introducing reflexive self-consciousness into the discussion again.
Sentence and Essay Structures	Guiding Questions	Evidence from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
	(4) Several of Dillard’s sentences at the beginning or the ending of sentences are short—some even one word long. What’s the effect of these sentences in their particular location in her essay?		Explore abruptness.
	(5) Paragraphs 12 and 13 (which end a section of the text), contain several questions instead of statements. What’s the effect of these sentences at this point in Dillard’s essay?		Trailing off and inconclusiveness.

	<p>(6) Dillard gives you the plot summary early and efficiently in paragraph 3, and returns to the vision of the weasel in paragraph 7, effectively bracketing the description of Hollis Pond with mention of looking at the weasel. Why does she give you this “bare bones” summation at this point? What’s the effect of bracketing the discussion of Hollis Pond with mention of the weasel?</p>	<p>Paragraph 3: “I have been reading about weasels because I saw one last week. I startled a weasel who startled me, and we exchanged a long glance.”</p>	
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	Guiding Question	Sentences from Dillard’s Essay	Instructional Commentary
In-class Journal Prompt	(7) Students write a final journal entry responding to one of Dillard’s sentences, exploring how she develops her ideas regarding the topic both via the content of her essay and its composition.	“The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons”	
		“I remember muteness as a prolonged and giddy fast, where every moment is a feat of utterance received”	
		“If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders. But we don't. We keep our skulls. So.”	

Rationale for Day Four Activities

Day Four is devoted to a close examination of Dillard's essay through examining both her use of similes and metaphors, crucial sentences and rhetorical structures within the text, as well as looking holistically at the entire essay. The day culminates in a final journal entry that analyzes the impact of her craftsmanship on the meaning of the text.

Students will be guided by their teacher by being asked pointed questions about how Dillard constructs particular sentences and rhetorically shapes the development of her theme through her writing. While the focus of the journal at the end of the day is on the craft of her prose, the understanding of the essay students have developed over the course of the unit serves as an essential backbone against which students will develop their analysis of her "poetic" prose.

Day Five: Writing in Response to Dillard's Essay

Actions

- Students review the evidence they have gathered and the answers they have created in preparation for essay writing (10 minutes)
- Students then write an essay on the meaning of the title to Dillard's narrative (40 minutes)

Rationale

What point is Dillard making by calling this essay "Living Like Weasels"?

Good essays might explore the desire to live by instinct and necessity, and then the choice humans have to "latch on" to the life they choose to the death (and how Dillard symbolically represents that possible choice).

Additional Student Activities

Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish"

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled and barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
--the frightening gills,

fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly--
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
--It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip

--if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,

the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything

was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?"

Conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon. It occurs at many levels of animal life... the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism... [A]nyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally alien form of life... [they] present a range of activity and a sensory apparatus so different from ours that the problem I want to pose is exceptionally vivid (though it certainly could be raised with other species).

Now we know that most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. We must consider whether any method will permit us to extrapolate to the inner life of the bat from our own case...

Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications (*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974), 436, 438-9)