



## INSPIRING AWE

*"Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.*

*—John Milton*

### OVERVIEW

Students watch a video of “awesome” nature and discuss whether the experience changed how they think and feel.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the beginning of a unit that emphasizes nature, the human experience, or any topic related to the vastness and beauty of nature and life
- When students are feeling stress or getting bogged down in the mundaneness of everyday life
- Before brainstorming a new project, especially a service-oriented project

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

#### LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College

#### MATERIALS

- Equipment to show a video with sound
- [Awe video](#) (Note that any video that inspires awe can be used. See “Instructions” section for more specific criteria.)

- Other suggested videos:
  - [Amazing animals](#)
  - [Yosemite](#)
  - [The world dancing in unity](#)
- Writing materials (optional)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Students will:
  - Experience the vast diversity and beauty of nature (or other topic, depending on the video)
  - Develop their self-awareness by reflecting on their internal response to the experience, e.g., emotional, physical, mental
  - Shift their perspective about the world, reduce the importance of everyday concerns, and/or renew their belief in human potential (note that not all students will experience one or more of these things)

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Awe
- Wonder

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a few minutes to watch either the suggested video in this practice or a video that you find awe-inspiring.

- Notice how you feel both during and after watching the video. Did you have any physical effects? Did it shift how you feel? If so, how? Do you notice whether you have a different perspective on your place in the world? Do your everyday concerns seem less important? Do you have a renewed sense of human potential?
- Prior to using this practice with students, consider whether this practice privileges your values over theirs in any way. For example, if you see nature as a source for awe, do your students have safe access to nature? What might your students and/or their families find awe-inspiring?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Note that this video is just one example of a visual experience that can elicit awe; there are countless others, and being exposed to them can have similar effects. The videos and other stimuli that inspire awe tend to share two key features:

- They involve a sense of vastness that puts into perspective your own relatively small place in the world. This vastness could be either physical (e.g., a panoramic view from a mountaintop) or psychological (e.g., an exceptionally courageous or heroic act of conscience).
- They alter the way you understand the world. For instance, they might make your everyday concerns seem less important, or they might expand your beliefs about the reaches of human potential.

Also note that [not everyone feels awe](#), and that's okay. If students don't have a reaction, let them know that there is nothing wrong with them. Some [researchers](#) think that the ability to feel awe depends on your [personality](#), e.g., openness to new experiences, [social class](#), or your ability to handle [ambiguity](#).

One final note: [research](#) has found that cultures respond differently to awe-inducing stimuli. Please be sensitive to your students' cultural backgrounds prior to showing this video. You might discuss with parents how they think their children would respond.

### INTRODUCING AND WATCHING THE VIDEO:

How you introduce the video depends on your purpose for watching it. For example:

- If you're starting a new unit that emphasizes nature, the human experience, or any topic related to the vastness and beauty of nature and life, you might ask a few introductory questions about the topic.
- If you want to lessen student stress or to snap them out of a thinking rut, you might invite students to notice how they feel while they're watching the video.
- If you're starting a new project or want to teach students about the impact of positive emotions, including awe, you might ask them to notice what thoughts come up for them while they're watching the video.

Set aside four or so minutes to have students watch the video below. Put the video in full screen mode and ask students to give it their full attention.

### AFTER WATCHING THE VIDEO:

Give students a few minutes to write down, draw, and/or discuss with a partner what they felt while watching the video. Depending on students' age, you might ask them whether their response was physical (e.g., goosebumps—a common awe reaction), mental (e.g., they felt small in comparison to the size of the world), or emotional (e.g., tears, a warm feeling in the chest). Did they notice a shift in their belief in human potential? Did everyday concerns seem less problematic? Be sure to validate the experience of students who didn't have any kind of reaction.

Invite students to share their responses with the whole class, including those who didn't feel anything. To accommodate those who didn't have a response, you might ask them to share a time when they felt amazement or wonder or surprise.

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## CLOSURE

Depending on your purpose for showing the video, close with a discussion related to your purpose.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did your students respond to the video? Did you notice whether their thinking broadened? Did they mention feeling part of something larger than themselves? If you were using this video to introduce a new unit and/or project, did you notice whether students expressed greater interest in the new content?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In [three experiments](#), participants were induced to feel awe—such as by watching an awe-inspiring video—as well as other emotions. People who experienced awe felt that they had more time available to themselves, were less impatient, were more willing to volunteer their time to help others, preferred having positive experiences over material products, and reported greater life satisfaction.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Awe is a natural part of learning. It inspires us, making us feel connected to something larger than ourselves and changing how we think about our place in the world. In other words, awe can help students find meaning in what they're learning—a powerful tool for motivation and engagement. Here is a beautiful [story](#) from [Humans of New York](#) about a student who most likely experienced awe during a science experiment.

Awe can also help students who feel bogged down by daily routines and mundane concerns, stifling their sense of creativity and wonder. Feeling awe can help students reawaken those feelings of inspiration. [Research](#) suggests that awe has a way of lifting people outside of their usual, more narrow sense of self and connecting them with something larger and more significant. This sense of broader connectedness and purpose can help relieve negative moods and improve happiness.

## SOURCE

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