

BECOME A SITE DETECTIVE

Read the yard before you change it.

CORE IDEA

Every landscape tells a story. Sunlight, shade, slope, water, soil, structures, plants, and people all affect what can successfully be built or planted there.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What can a landscaper learn about a property before doing any work?

TARGET AGE

10-12

LESSON TIME

20-25 MIN

HANDS-ON OUTCOME

SITE DETECTIVE MAP

NOTICE FIRST -> DECIDE SECOND



FIELD GUIDE MINDSET

A landscaper reads the site before changing the site.

Students begin seeing a yard as a system of clues. The goal is not to memorize landscape vocabulary; it is to slow down, notice what is actually happening, and support decisions with evidence.

Lesson at a Glance

Objectives, materials, teacher preparation, and the six clues.

TEACHING FOCUS

Good landscapers observe before they change anything. Students should leave seeing a property as a set of interacting conditions - not simply grass, trees, and flowers.

BY THE END, STUDENTS CAN...

- 01 Explain why landscapers inspect a site before designing, planting, or building.
- 02 Identify important site conditions: sun, water, slope, soil, existing features, and people.
- 03 Record observations on a simple overhead map.
- 04 Use evidence from the site to make one basic landscape recommendation.
- 05 Distinguish an observation from a guess or hypothesis.

KEEP IT TACTILE

Clipboard or firm writing surface
Pencils + simple site-map worksheet
Tape measure
Small level or line level
Wooden stakes or landscape flags
Clear cup + small soil sample
Watering can or bottle of water
Optional: compass, chalk, cones, magnifying glass

THE SIX SITE CLUES



SUN



WATER



SLOPE



SOIL



WHAT IS HERE



PEOPLE

TEACHER PREP

Choose an ordinary site with several clues: sun/shade, a building, trees or shrubs, lawn, slight slope, a downspout or drainage path, sidewalk, bed, bare soil, fence, or worn path. Identify 3-4 clues you hope students notice, but do not point them out first. Let students discover them.

THE SITE DOES NOT NEED TO BE IMPRESSIVE. ORDINARY PROPERTIES MAKE GREAT CLASSROOMS.

Hook + The First Three Clues

Start with a contrast, then teach students what to look for.

0:00-3:00 | HOOK

"Would You Plant Here?"

Bring students to two visibly different spots - for example, a sunny open area and deep shade beneath a tree or beside a building. Ask whether the same plant would grow exactly the same in both places, and why. Then point to a low area or downspout and ask what might happen if you planted or built there.

LANDSCAPERS LOOK FOR CLUES ABOUT HOW A PROPERTY WORKS.



CLUE 1

SUN

Where does sunlight hit?

Plants need different amounts of light. Shade changes temperature and comfort; sun changes where plants, patios, and grass may succeed.

CODE: SUN



CLUE 2

WATER

Where does rainwater go?

Look for downspouts, low spots, wet areas, drains, dry areas, and slopes. Water always has to go somewhere.

CODE: FLOW ->



CLUE 3

SLOPE

Is the ground really flat?

Even a yard that looks level may have grade. Slope affects drainage, walls, mowing, planting, patios, and erosion.

CODE: DOWN



ASK, DON'T TELL

While students explore, use questions like "What do you notice?" "What makes you think that?" "Where might the water go?" The instructor is training observation, not rewarding speed.

Finish the Clue Set + Think Like a Detective

Soil, existing features, people, and the difference between evidence and a guess.



CLUE 4

SOIL

Is all "dirt" the same?

Notice texture, moisture, drainage, compaction, and organic material. Do not turn this into soil science yet - Module 4 goes deeper.

CODE: O



CLUE 5

WHAT IS ALREADY HERE?

What is part of the puzzle?

Trees, shrubs, grass, beds, buildings, sidewalks, fences, utilities, and driveways all shape what can happen next.

DRAW IT



CLUE 6

PEOPLE

How is the space really used?

Look for doors, walkways, seating, worn paths, play areas, pets, parking, and shortcuts. A beautiful landscape that ignores people is not a good solution.

CODE: P

8:00-10:00 | DETECTIVE RULE

Observation vs. Guess

Good detectives do not make things up. Teach students to separate what they can see or measure from what they think might explain it.

OBSERVATION



"The grass is thin under this tree."
What I can see or measure.

HYPOTHESIS



"The tree may be affecting the grass."
What I think might explain it.

10:00-11:00 | PRO CHECK

LOOK -> THINK -> PREPARE -> WORK -> CLEAN

Establish boundaries. Scan for holes, traffic, sharp objects, insects, uneven ground, or equipment nearby. Today the most important tool is your eyes.

Hands-On: Site Detective Challenge

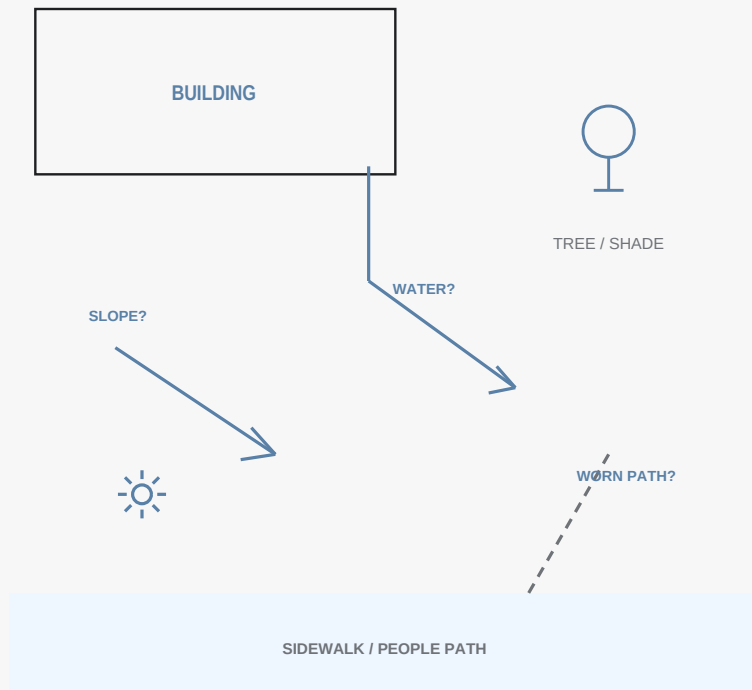
Students map real evidence from the property.

11:00-18:00 | FIELD ACTIVITY

Find the clues. Mark the map.

Give each student or pair a simple overhead map. Their mission is to find evidence for all six site clues and record it with simple symbols. Artistic skill does not matter; the map is a communication tool.

EXAMPLE SITE MAP



YOUR MISSION

01 SUN

Mark 1 sunny area: SUN

02 SHADE

Mark 1 shade area: S

03 WATER

Draw an arrow showing where water comes from or might move.

04 SLOPE

Draw an arrow pointing downhill.

05 SOIL

Circle 1 place where you would want to investigate soil.

06 FEATURES

Draw at least 3 things already on the site.

07 PEOPLE

Mark 1 clue showing how people use the space.

ASK DETECTIVE QUESTIONS

"What makes you think that?" "What is different here?" "How do you know which direction is downhill?" "Where are people actually walking?"

Optional: pour a small amount of water on two safe surfaces and ask, "What did the water tell us about this site?"

The Client Calls + 30-Second Site Report

Use evidence to make one basic recommendation.

18:00-22:00 | APPLY IT

The client wants a new flower bed.

Students choose one of two or three possible locations. They are not allowed to answer, "Over there because I like it." Every recommendation has to use evidence from the site.

I WOULD PUT IT _____ BECAUSE I NOTICED _____.

ADD A TWIST



TWIST 01

Full-sun flowers

"The homeowner says the flowers they want need a lot of sunlight." Does that change your answer?



TWIST 02

Visible from the door

"The homeowner also wants to see the flowers from the front door." Now students must balance more than one condition.

GOOD LANDSCAPE DECISIONS RARELY DEPEND ON ONE CLUE.

The point is not to find one perfect answer. Reward students for using multiple observations and explaining their reasoning.

22:00-25:00 | EXIT CHALLENGE

The 30-Second Site Report

I NOTICED...

What can you directly observe?

I THINK...

What might those observations mean?

I STILL NEED TO KNOW...

What would you investigate before doing the work?

WHAT COMES FIRST: CHANGING THE SITE OR READING THE SITE? -> READING THE SITE.

Home Project: Landscape Site Detective Report

A real-world observation assignment. No digging or power tools required.

HOME ACTIVITY | 15-25 MIN

Turn a familiar outdoor space into a field report.

Students choose a small outdoor area - yard, grandparent's yard, church property, apartment courtyard, school property, or park. They observe only; they do not need to dig or disturb plants.



01

DRAW THE SITE

Create a simple bird's-eye map. Include major features such as a building, sidewalk, driveway, fence, trees, beds, lawn, or patio.



02

FIND SUN + SHADE

Mark the sunniest area with SUN and a shaded area with S. Write what creates the shade.



03

TRACE WATER + SLOPE

Find one clue showing where water comes from or goes. Draw an arrow. Then mark which way the land appears to fall.



04

READ SOIL + FEATURES

Describe visible soil without digging. Then list five things already on the property.



05

NOTICE PEOPLE

How do people use the space? Walking, playing, parking, sitting, pets, entering a building, or another activity?



06

OBSERVATION OR GUESS?

Write three direct observations. Then make one hypothesis using: "I think ____ because I noticed ____."

PART 4 + 5

Make one recommendation - then name one unanswered question.

I would add: flower bed, small tree, bench, walkway, garden, or patio.

I would put it here because I noticed: _____

Before I actually started building or planting, I would want to learn more about: _____

Assessment + Facilitation Notes

What competency looks like and how this module connects forward.

ASSESS FOR COMPETENCY

 OBSERVE Identify real site conditions.	 RECORD Put observations on a basic map.	 DISTINGUISH Separate what was seen from what is guessed.	 CONNECT Tie a recommendation to evidence.	 QUESTION Name something that still needs investigation.
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A successful student can say: "I noticed ____, so before we do ____, we should think about ____."

TEACHER NOTE

Do not correct too quickly.

If a student says, "Water probably flows this way," do not immediately say yes or no. Ask: "What evidence would help us figure that out?"

Possible evidence: a level, rain, a hose, elevation measurements, or visible drainage patterns.

The professional does not have to know everything instantly. The professional knows how to investigate.

TEACHER NOTE

Let imperfect maps be imperfect.

This is not drafting class. Students do not need perfect scale, survey measurements, landscape architecture symbols, or beautiful drawings.

Use one standard:

Could another person look at your map and understand what you noticed?

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Module 2 taught the Pro Check. Module 3 deepens LOOK + THINK.

Module 1: Different professionals read the same site differently.

Module 2: Look -> Think -> Prepare -> Work -> Clean.

Module 4: Students move from visible clues into soil, water, roots, sunlight, and plant systems.

TRANSFERABLE TRADES PRINCIPLE

DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU PRESCRIBE.

Look carefully before reaching for a solution.