

# On Being An Observationalist

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SUMMARY: Being an “observationalist” isn’t hard work; in fact, it’s fun! You just have to look around and see the patterns in your natural world.

First there was [“The Mentalist,”](#) the hit CBS series that focused on Patrick Jane’s (played by Simon Baker) ability to use his mind to find clues, piece them together and, in the process, mess with the minds of others.

Now comes “The Observationalist,” played by yours truly.

I didn’t assume the role. Rather, Joseph Williams, Jr. assigned it. Williams was a counselor and science assistant at Howard University’s summer 2009 weather camp and I was the Camp’s Director. Williams caught me “observing everything around me – bricks on walls, sidewalks, people, and especially the clouds.” Shortly after giving me my alter ego, Williams started becoming an observationalist himself. He told me that he had never looked up to see the clouds (even though he was a graduate chemistry major).

In fact, developing a keen sense of observational skills is what most detective shows and movies are all about. The key questions are: “What do you see?” and, more importantly, “What DOESN’T fit?” What does fit is easy to

accept. What doesn't fit is typically out of place for a reason (usually, but not always, related to the crime).

I don't solve too many mysteries in real life (although I do get involved a bit as an [expert witness](#) in event reconstruction for weather-related lawsuits). But as a practicing meteorologist, I have to always look for weather-related clues in the clouds (Fig. 1), radar and satellite images and even computer model weather forecasts. In a similar sense, my wife and I operate a [math-tutoring center in Naples, FL](#). Here we emphasize to our tutees that solving math problems is much like solving a crime. What information is there, how do the pieces fit together, who did it (a.k.a., the answer)? Even the numbers themselves have patterns that beg to be discovered. In several college-level classes and teacher enhancement programs that I have taught, I have emphasized observational skill-building. Yes, my goal is to have everyone be better observers, especially of the natural world around us.

And I am not alone. Most other professions require keen observational skills (although they are often not emphasized). Football quarterbacks have to be consummate observers. Otherwise, they couldn't constantly scan the landscape and find an open receiver. Police have to find the one driver that is driving most erratically or the fastest. Artists have to "see" their world in order to paint it.

Perhaps Louis Pasteur, noted French chemist and microbiologist (1822-1895), understood best. He noted, "[In the fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind.](#)"

But one doesn't need a career to be an observationalist. Just looking at patterns in our natural world can be fun. For

example, I love the banded patterns in many cloud types (and colorful coronas that sometimes accompany them) (Fig. 2) and the patterns contained within flower heads and the insects that visit them (Fig. 3). Wave patterns at the beach fascinate me, especially when the waves interact with one another (Fig. 4) for selective reinforcement and interference. Take me a road trip through the Desert Southwest and I am in awe at the rock formations that grace the landscape. And, I ALWAYS grab a window seat on the airplane. After all, it is the closest I will ever come to being an astronaut, so why not observe the Earth as most others do not (Fig. 5)? Still, birdwatchers, as a huge group, may offer up the consummate observationalists. If you aren't already into watching birds, this [web site](#) is a good place to start.

I am not sure where and when I became an observationalist. But, I know I was already one at nine years old (that's back in 1954). I recall watching from my New York City apartment window as several hurricanes blew past. I also watched winter cloud lines march southward down the Hudson River. And these observational experiences clearly pushed me over the brink and into a lifetime weather career.

With my first camera (and more and more advanced technology ever since the late 1960's), I have had a chance to be a photographic observationalist. This lets me document what I see and share my observations with others (as I have done a little bit here).

To further this end, I will continue populating this blog with other stories (and associated imagery). These could include my photographs (<https://bit.ly/2Jcy3ly> or <https://bit.ly/3aHfli4>), images from others, weather maps and charts, and/or satellite or radar imagery (<http://bit.ly/2y1tqXK>) from online sites.

While I didn't discover the quote until after I developed my secondary character, Yogi Berra really nailed it when he said, "[You can observe a lot by just watching.](#)" Yogi was right - You really can!

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H. Michael Mogil is a Certified Consulting Meteorologist (CCM), Certified Broadcast Meteorologist (CBM), and NWA Digital Media Sealholder. He is a consummate lifelong learner and loves to share any new-found knowledge he gains, as he researches life, nature, and world/universe around him. In addition, Mike tutors students from middle school to college in math science, language, and test-taking skills; he also serves as an expert witness in legal and insurance matters involving weather.