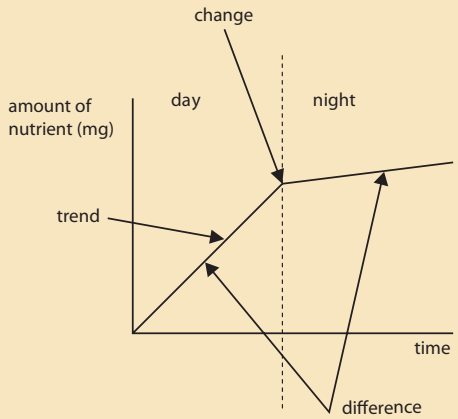
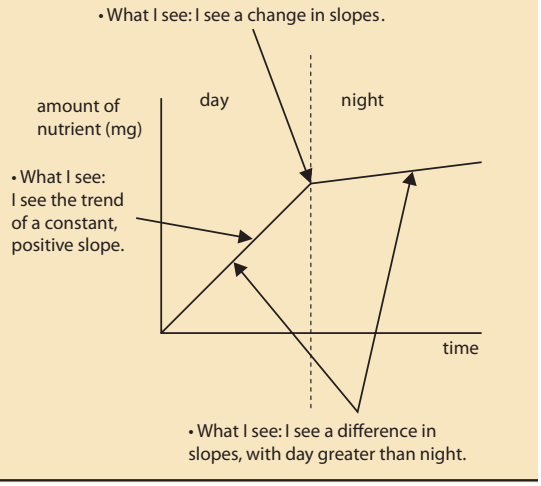
How to Use the Highlight Comments and Caption Strategy

How do you make sense of charts, diagrams, graphs, and sketches? Sometimes it is difficult to pick out the important information. A good way to try to make sense of these visuals is to do what scientists have been doing for centuries. You note what you see, then try to say what it means. This process will allow you to gather the evidence in a diagram, graph, or sketch that you will need to draw a conclusion.

Highlight comments help you link observations from graphs, charts, and other visuals to possible interpretations. To write highlight comments, start by writing short phrases that describe changes, trends, or differences in the graph or figure. Then, add short phrases that describe what each of your observations means.

A caption helps you tell the story of the figure or graph. The caption uses the highlight comments to make a coherent paragraph. It is the summary of the graph, chart, or figure, just like the captions you have seen in newspapers and magazines. The combination of highlight comments and caption helps you communicate more effectively about science and technology. It will also give you a better understanding of what you are studying.

Suppose you did an investigation about trees. In the investigation, you studied how much of a nutrient the trees took in over a 24-hour period. How would you make sense of the data? Follow the steps in figure 1 and use them as a general guide for any graph, chart, diagram, or sketch you make.

1. Look for changes, trends, or differences. Draw an arrow to each change, trend, or difference in the graph.	
2. Write what you see. Each arrow has a different description. Be concise. Write only the essence, or *highlights*, of what you see.	

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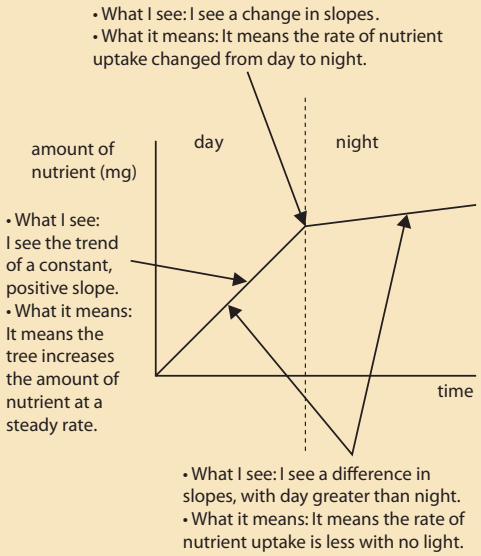
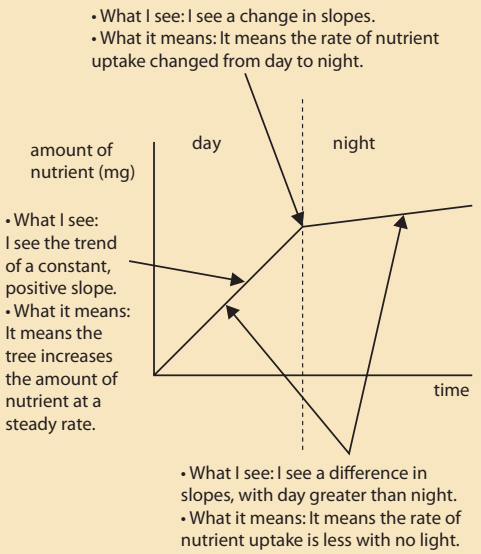
3. Interpret what you see. Write what each observation means. Do not interpret the entire figure at once; rather, interpret just one observation at a time.	
4. Write a caption. Think of the caption as an executive summary. Start by joining each "What I see" to its "What it means" to form a sentence. Then, build a coherent paragraph out of the sentences. Begin your caption with a topic sentence describing the overview of the figure.	 This graph shows the uptake of nutrients in a tree over a 24-hour period. The graph shows a constant, positive slope during the day, meaning there is a steady rate of uptake. At night, the rate changes as shown by a change in slopes. This suggests that light changes the rate of uptake. Finally, the night slope is less than the day slope, meaning the uptake of nutrients slows at night.

Figure 1: Steps for writing highlight comments and caption. You can use this strategy for many visuals, such as graphs, figures, and charts. Although the work you are analyzing will change, the basic steps will stay the same. Follow these four steps any time you want to use the highlight comments and caption strategy.