Introduction

WHAT IS A DESCRIPTOSAURUS?

*Descriptosaurus* is a new and innovative model of creative writing that is a thematic expansion of a dictionary and a thesaurus.

To be creative when writing, it is first necessary to have the requisite knowledge and skills: the vocabulary to describe and the structure to organise ideas.

*Descriptosaurus* provides children with a comprehensive resource to help them expand their descriptive vocabulary, experiment with language and sentence structure and build up narratives based around the following areas:

- ★ Settings – landscapes, settlements and atmosphere
- ★ Characters – appearance, emotions and personality
- ★ Creatures – appearance, abilities and habitats.

A dictionary teaches children the meaning of words and a thesaurus expands their vocabulary. *Descriptosaurus* teaches them how to describe a setting using their senses; how to describe a character using expressions, voice and movement, to add detail, depth and colour to their writing.

It positions the words – whether for appearance, expression, landscape, smell or sound – classifies them as nouns, adjectives and verbs, zooms in to examine their meaning and then expands them into phrases and sentences. It shows how they can be used and provides alternative sentence structures.

The model was created – and continues to evolve, with additional components and models being added to each new edition – as a result of feedback from children about the resources they require to inspire and assist them with their writing. For reluctant writers or those faced with the ‘blank page syndrome,’ *Descriptosaurus* provides invaluable starting points to encourage putting pen to paper.

Alison Wilcox has extensive teaching experience in schools in England and Scotland. Colleagues describe her methods as ‘innovative and inspirational to even the most reluctant of writers.’ She is also the author of the *Descriptosaurus* genre series, which includes *Action & Adventure, Ghost Stories, Myths & Legends* and *Fantasy*. In addition to writing, Alison continues to work for periods as a full-time teacher, and has collaborated with the National Literacy Trust on two very successful creative writing competitions.

WHY IS DESCRIPTIVE WRITING IMPORTANT?

The importance of children being able to express their ideas using good descriptive language is widely accepted, not just for creative writing, but also for non-fiction.
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Developing descriptive language to communicate effectively is an essential tool across the curriculum. History is concerned not merely with dates and facts, but with describing and interpreting past events. In Geography, children need to be able to describe the world around them. In Science, they need to observe carefully and then be capable of describing what is happening in an experiment. In all areas of the curriculum, children need the vocabulary to enable them to describe and interpret.

To be able to describe effectively, we first need to be taught how to look and listen. We need to learn the vocabulary to use in order to express our ideas. As well as encouraging children to use interesting language, Descriptosaurus aims to improve children’s observation skills in both their own environment and their reading.

We describe sights and events differently because we see and interpret things differently. To any situation or piece of writing we bring our own personality, experience and imagination. As educators, both parents and teachers, we need to open children’s eyes to the world around them, stimulate their imaginations and sow the seeds of effects that can be achieved in their writing. With the vocabulary, knowledge and understanding of how to use language to achieve depth and colour in their writing, children will grow in confidence and motivation to experiment, find their ‘voice’ and develop their own style of writing.

WHO SHOULD USE DESCRIPTOSAURUS?

Although the age range for Descriptosaurus is 8–14, it is beneficial for older children, or even adults, who need assistance with vocabulary or who who suffer from ‘blank page syndrome’.

WHERE CAN DESCRIPTOSAURUS BE USED?

Descriptosaurus is a resource that can be used at home or school by pupils, parents and teachers.

Although consideration has been given to specific curricula, Descriptosaurus is a general tool applicable to any creative writing syllabus in any territory where there is a desire to improve descriptive writing.

WHY IS DESCRIPTOSAURUS A USEFUL TOOL FOR PARENTS?

We all agree that there is no substitute for reading to improve children’s writing. However, we live in a world dominated by the moving image, be it television, mobile phones or games consoles. As a teacher, I have encountered the problems reluctant readers face when challenged to write creatively. As a parent, I have encountered the problems of developing a ‘reading habit’ at home alongside an obsession to use their fingers to operate a keyboard or console rather than turn a page.

How then can we develop children’s writing when there is a reluctance to read or engage with a text? The answer is to feed the children’s imaginations with pictures, sounds and games, and use Descriptosaurus to describe what they see, hear, smell, touch.

One of the main rationales for developing the Descriptosaurus model into a book was in response to comments from other parents regarding the advantages enjoyed by my own children having an English teacher as a parent. Parents and teachers have never been under
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As much pressure as they are today, with the demands of SATS and 11 plus exams to improve writing levels. Parents felt relatively confident about helping their children with grammar, maths and science because these had rules, a method and a right or wrong answer. They found creative writing to be very different. Many of these parents felt that their own descriptive vocabulary was inadequate and thus struggled to assist their children with writing tasks.

Not only have I witnessed a marked improvement in the descriptive writing of the children using a Descriptosaurus, I have also noted an increase in confidence in their parents.

### IDEAS FOR PARENTS

**PLANNING**

When children bring home any piece of writing, the most important assistance a parent can provide is getting them to plan it carefully.

- Get the children to mind map words and phrases to answer the questions:
  - ★ *Who* (appearance, personality, and emotions – expressions, voice, body language)
  - ★ *Where* (senses – sights, sounds, smell, touch)
  - ★ *When* (atmosphere – time of year or day, weather).

Planning sheets, which structure this process, can be downloaded from the companion website at www.routlege.com/cw/wilcox.

- Frames for action, and character and setting descriptions, including modelled writing – can be found on the companion website. These frames break the text into bite-size tables, which make it easier to focus on the quality of the writing.

  - ‘How to use this book’ is also a useful guide.

**FILMS**

This is an opportunity to use the moving image to improve creative writing.

- Watch a film together and examine how:
  - ★ atmosphere and suspense are achieved using
    - ★ weather
    - ★ light/dark
    - ★ sound
  - ★ the body language and tone of a character is used to express their emotions.

**MAKING THE MOST OF JOURNEYS OR FAMILY LEISURE TIME**

When embarking on a journey, use the following as boredom busters.

- ★ Audio books are a great way of passing the time and develop descriptive vocabulary and discussion.
- ★ Use a sentence from the Prompt Cards section for a game of ‘What happened next?’ or ‘Where is it?’ Each player can take it in turns to contribute an idea to each of the
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questions. The benefit of sharing ideas, imaginations and discussion should not be underestimated. Children can also be encouraged to create their own Prompt Cards and questions.

★ The alternative version of ‘I Spy’ on the companion website is a great, fun way of improving children's vocabulary.

★ Playing ‘I Can’ helps improve children's understanding of how using senses in their descriptive writing can dramatically improve the quality of their work.

★ The ‘Character Profile’ cards can be used to create interesting and even bizarre characters.

★ When stuck in a traffic jam, an amusing game to pass the time is to make up character profiles for the occupants of neighbouring vehicles. Where are they going? What are they going to do? What is their job? What sort of house do they live in? What is interesting about them? Are they famous, a secret agent, etc.? How are they feeling? This is a good way of getting children to notice body language. For example, are they drumming their fingers on the steering wheel?

PHOTO ALBUMS, SCRAPBOOKS

Collect photos, postcards, leaflets, travel brochures, pictures from newspapers and magazines.

Make an album of old photos. Instead of listing where the photo was taken, who is in the picture – describe the scene. There may be an opportunity here to practise using dialogue by imagining what the people in the photos are thinking or what they are saying to each other.

Use cuttings and leaflets to produce a scrap album. Collect a list of words and phrases to describe the settings and characters.

The companion website includes a number of additional elements, ideas, frameworks and models to assist with the description of setting and character:

★ Tour Guide demonstrates how to develop a description of a setting.

★ Missing Person demonstrates how to develop a description of a character.

See also Guess the Portrait in the ‘Games’ section of the companion website.

CHARACTER CHARADES AND ‘DON'T MOVE’

These can be played at home and are great fun.

SENTENCE STRUCTURES

Many parents receive feedback that to improve their writing their children need to use conjunctions. For many, this has proved a minefield. Model sentences have been included for each element, and the companion website includes the sentences on individual display cards and on flash cards, where each sentence has been broken down into individual words.
IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

PLANNING

When planning a piece of creative writing, use planning sheets, mind maps, etc. to collate words and phrases to answer the questions:

★ Who (appearance, personality, and emotions – expressions, voice, body language)
★ Where (senses – sights, sounds, smell, touch)
★ When (atmosphere – time of year or day, weather).

For more ideas go to the following sections on the companion website:

★ Writing tips to build atmosphere, tension and suspense
★ Hooks to build interest and tension
★ Mountain Pyramids
★ Little Red Riding Hood
★ Scene Setters
★ The Wolf
★ Creature description using the opening of *The Iron Man*
★ Emotion Riddle
★ Missing Person
★ Tour Guide
★ S/C-I-R
★ Planning sheets
★ Action frames, description frames for setting and character (*these include a model, outline and blank forms*).

TRADITIONAL STORIES, MYTHS OR LEGENDS

Take a traditional tale, such as ‘Red Riding Hood’, in which the structure is already in place, and get the children to fill in the descriptive detail.

Detailed lessons plans are included in ‘Lessons plans for descriptive writing’ on the companion website.

Part 5 of the book has been based on a wolf chase to demonstrate how a basic story can be innovated.

Myths and legends can be used in much the same way. For example, the journey through the tunnel to meet the Minotaur.

Resources for developing a creature description are included in the companion website. They include a poem, plan, vocabulary bank, and a model of how to incorporate the description in the structure of an existing text. The Coming of the Rhinogasaurus uses the opening from Ted Hughes’ *The Iron Man*.

‘I SPY’

The alternative version of ‘I Spy’ on the companion website is a great, fun way of improving children’s vocabulary.
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‘I CAN’
Playing ‘I Can’ helps improve children’s understanding of how using senses in their descriptive writing can dramatically improve the quality of their work.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?
Use a sentence from the Prompt Cards section for a game of ‘What happened next?’ or ‘Where is it?’ Children can also be encouraged to create their own Prompt Cards and questions.

Prompt Cards are designed to stimulate and aid creative writing, and encourage the inclusion of a range of senses in description. The questions scaffold the structure and description. The benefit of the Prompt Cards is that they can be used as a quick-fire verbal planning burst or for modelling, but also as a piece of descriptive writing, a poem or to scaffold a story.

They are designed to stimulate children’s imagination by getting them to consider a number of different settings and atmosphere – use their senses to build a detailed picture of the setting and create different scenarios and characters that could apply to the sentence prompt. If the children need help with ideas or vocabulary, they can use the main Descriptosaurus text to assist them.

The same technique can be used with the sentences in Hooks (companion website).

CHARACTER DETECTIVES
Pick a sentence from the Character Profile Cards. Centre it in a mind map and develop a profile. See also Missing Person.

WHERE AND WHEN PAIRS GAME
Give the children a number of Setting and Atmosphere Cards. Challenge them to arrange them in pairs by matching a setting card with an atmosphere.

STORY SEQUENCING
The Prompt Cards can be combined with the Character Profile Cards and used in a warm-up activity. Divide the class into groups and give each group a number of cards.

Set the children the challenge of organising the cards into a story, using the connectives to link the descriptions.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE
The cards can also be used for an activity for examining sentence structure and also punctuation. For example:

★ Varying the length of the sentences to build tension
★ Changing the sentences so that the children make a series of simple, compound or complex sentences
★ Changing the order of the sentences.

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**CHARACTER CHARADES AND ‘DON’T MOVE!’**

We continually reinforce to children the need to ‘show not tell’ when developing their characters. These are two easy and fun games that can be used to get the children to really think about character traits and use speech, tone of voice, expressions and movement to describe their characters, but also to devise situations where the character’s reaction and their interaction with other characters clearly demonstrates the character’s personality. There are six levels and the characters and vocabulary get progressively harder. The children may need to look up some of the words in a dictionary to find the meaning and an easier synonym. The games, therefore, also work as vocabulary builders.

**LOCATION POSTERS**

These can be completed in groups for different settings and displayed as prompts. For example, forests, mountains, beaches, islands, water (sea, river, waterfalls), cities, towns, villages.

- A–Z lists for nouns, adjectives and verbs. The work on ‘I Can’ can be recorded and used to produce these posters.
- Senses mind map (sight, sounds, smells, touch). The work on the Prompt Cards can be used as planning sheets for this activity.

**WANTED POSTERS**

Use the Character Profile Cards to produce:

- A Missing Person poster for a missing hero/heroine. A Missing Person report form, together with a description frame model, outline and blank form (see companion website), provides a framework, outline and model.
- A Wanted poster for a dangerous criminal.

Challenge the children to describe the personality, abilities and exploits of the characters to explain why they need to be found.

*Extension*: The characters are in disguise. The children now need to think of distinguishing features, voice, movements and gestures in their description.

**GUESS THE PICTURE/PORTRAIT**

Collect a selection of pictures (could be taken from studies in history, space or geography).

- Give each pair or group a selection of three/four numbered pictures.
- Pairs/groups label the pictures with important details that will help identify them.
- Using their notes, describe the picture to the rest of the class, who have to guess which of the numbered pictures is being described.

*Extension*: Each group adds extra detail to develop a class description of the picture.

*Portraits*: It is also a useful exercise to develop skills in describing characters. www.npg.org.uk is an excellent source.
ADVERT FOR A HERO/HEROINE

The task for the hero/heroine can be linked to a historical topic. For example, join an expedition to search for an Egyptian tomb. It can also be linked to a study of legends, where the children can first analyse the personality, abilities of the hero/heroine in the legend and use this information to develop their advert.

Challenge the children to describe the task and the characteristics required to secure the job. They should also include a description of the setting and the perils likely to be encountered.

Extension: Write a Curriculum Vitae and an accompanying letter asking to be considered for the expedition, task or job.

TRAVEL BROCHURES, ADVERTISING PAMPHLETS

Collect photos, postcards, leaflets, cuttings from newspapers, magazines, brochures and store in a Setting/Character file.

Make a travel brochure/advertising pamphlet for:

★ an adventure holiday
★ a relaxing beach holiday
★ a ghost-hunting expedition.

POETRY

The grammar elements of the literacy curriculum have been incorporated into a variety of poetic forms. Using these is an effective way to demonstrate the use of vocabulary and phrases from Descriptosaurus to model the various target sentence structures. It also enables pupils to approach the task in small, manageable steps, by focusing on:

★ word choice
★ the target phrase or clause
★ the sentence structure.

DETAIL, FLOW AND IMPACT (DFI)

Models for each target sentence structure, themed for a forest setting.

SETTING/CHARACTER, INTERACTION AND REACTION (S/C-I-R)

Use the S/C-I-R passages to discuss detail, flow and impact and the techniques used. Combine the individual sentences into a descriptive paragraph of an action scene, and then experiment with different ways of combining the sentences, openers and length.

The exercise can be extended to changing tenses, including adverbs, etc.