

The logo for the National Literacy Trust features the text 'National Literacy Trust' in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a dark red square. This square is overlaid on a series of other semi-transparent squares in shades of purple, pink, orange, and yellow, creating a layered, colorful effect.

National
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The Descriptosaurus Writing Challenge

Ideas and activities to help you run the competition in school

The *Descriptosaurus Writing Challenge* provides a great opportunity for encouraging your pupils to expand and experiment with descriptive language in order to develop their ability to add more depth and colour to their writing. In this resource we provide you with lots of activities for incorporating the competition into teaching and learning, including ideas for warm up games, extension activities and planning tips and templates. But first, let's remind ourselves why we teach descriptive writing...

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.

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. 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, experiences and imaginations.

As educators, 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.

Wispy white
clouds dotted
the vivid
blue sky.

Warming up to descriptive writing

Before the children can start planning their competition entries, they'll need to develop a toolkit of the descriptive language and techniques at their disposal. Here are some examples of warm-up games you could play to develop children's vocabulary and get them geared up for descriptive writing.

Older children should of course already be familiar with descriptive language and techniques, but a little refresher will do no harm!

For all of these games you could give children access to cards with different descriptive words, connectives and phrases on them to act as a prompt.

Games for describing settings

"I SPY..."

It's an oldie but a goodie! This version of "I Spy" can be played as individuals, pairs or small groups and is a fun way of improving children's vocabulary.

- Choose a setting, for example a forest, mountain, cave, beach, street, haunted house etc.
- Ask the first child/group to select a noun associated with the setting, for example, "I spy with my little eye something beginning with B" (branch). The other children/groups have to guess.
- Either the first person/group to guess correctly can have the next turn, or it can be done by taking turns. Add a competitive edge to the game by allocating points to the individual or group that has the largest number of guesses before their noun is discovered.
- **Extension - Add an adjective:** This is played in the same way, but the object of the game is to guess two words: a noun and an adjective. For example: "I spy with my little eye something beginning with TT" (twisted trunk).

"I CAN..."

This game helps improve children's understanding of how using senses in their descriptive writing can dramatically improve the quality of their work.

- In small teams, children must choose a setting, for example a forest, mountain, river, street or garden, and write "I CAN SEE" at the top of a sheet of paper.
- They then have five minutes to write down as many things as they can think of that people could see in that setting, for example flowers, weeds, rubbish, furniture, pictures, animals, birds, insects etc.
- They could then do the same for the other senses: I CAN... SMELL... TOUCH... HEAR... TASTE...
- **Extension:** Ask children to zoom in on the setting they have chosen, choosing a noun from their list and adding an adjective to describe the way it looks, then adding a verb to describe how it moves. Children can draw their noun, labelling size, shape, colour, texture and movement.

Games for describing characters

Note: The games in this section are supported by Character Cards (**Appendix 1**), each of which are printed with a character trait. These cards are arranged in levels from one to six, with the characters traits and vocabulary becoming progressively harder with each level. The children may need to look up some words in a dictionary to find the meaning and an easier synonym.

CHARACTER CHARADES

This game is a brilliant way of encouraging children to think about different character traits and how these traits might affect how they describe a particular character. It can be played individually, in pairs or in small groups.

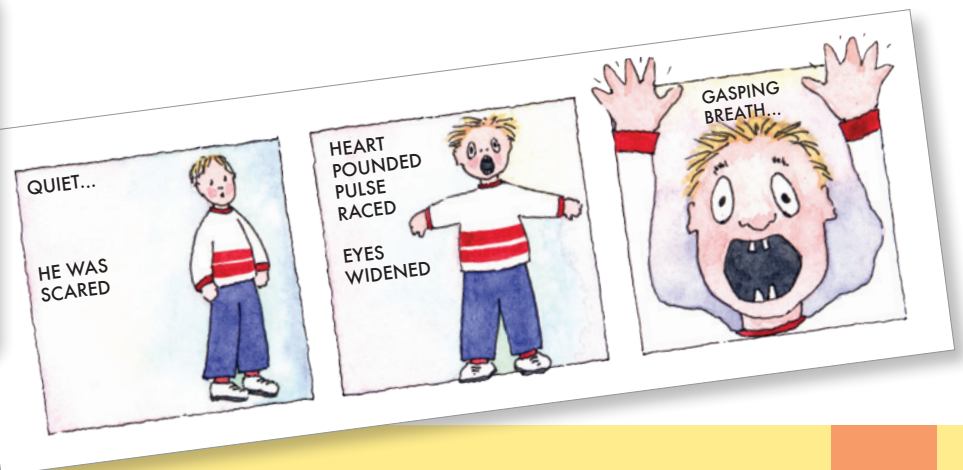
- Give the child/group a card from the appropriate level and give them time to work out how they are going to act out their character trait. To reveal their character they will need to use
 - Speech and tone of voice
 - Expressions, eyes and mouth
 - Arms, hands and fingers
 - Movement around the room
- Encourage the rest of the group/class to guess the word on the card. After a suitable number of guesses, the children can give clues or be asked questions. For example:
 - Explain what they are doing
 - expressions and movement
 - Describe what type of things the character does
 - Give a synonym
 - Reveal the first letter of the word

DON'T MOVE!

In this game the children's task is to say the words "Don't move" in the style of a character trait. By using just these two simple words, children have to really think about how some characters react in certain situations, and use these situations to develop the ability to 'show, not tell' when developing characters in their writing. For example, a shy character may try to hide behind a peer so that they can't be seen. An extrovert may move a peer to the side so that they can be seen.

- Give the child/group a card from the appropriate level.
- Give them time to work out how they are going to say the words (they can add more dialogue if necessary)
 - they will soon discover that they will need to use not only tone of voice but expressions and movement to reveal the character trait.
- Encourage the rest of the group/class to guess the word on the card. After a suitable number of guesses the children can give clues or be asked questions (as above).

He was as broad as a bull, and burly like a rugby forward.



Internalising the ingredients of descriptive writing

It is important to support children to internalise the ingredients of effective descriptive language. Here are a few ideas for activities that can build on the warm up games outlined in a previous section. The product of some of these activities could act as a prompt or stimulus for the *Descriptosaurus Writing Challenge* competition task.

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

Films

This is a great opportunity to develop children's visual literacy skills, using the moving image to improve creative writing. Watch an opening to a film which contains no dialogue and examine:

- How atmosphere and suspense are achieved, using aspects such as weather, light/dark and sound.
- How body language and tone of a character is used to express their emotions.

The opening sequences of some of the Harry Potter films lend themselves well to this activity, as well as some war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*. There's also a brilliant scene about halfway through animated film *Monster House* in which a haunted house comes to life...

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.

The posters could include:

- A-Z lists for nouns, adjectives and verbs. The work children produced when playing the "I CAN..." game outlined in the previous section could be used to create these posters.
- A senses mind map (sight, sounds, smells, touch).

Travel brochures

Collect (or ask the children to collect) photos, postcards, leaflets, cuttings from newspapers, magazines and brochure. The children can then use these as inspiration for making a travel brochure or advertising pamphlet for:

- A holiday or excursion: for example an exciting adventure holiday, a relaxing beach holiday or a ghost-hunting expedition
- A particular place or part of the world

Wanted posters

- Task the children with producing either a Missing Persons poster for a missing hero/heroine, or 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:** Get the children to imagine that the characters are in disguise. They now need to think of distinguishing features, voice, movements and gestures in their description.

Advert for a hero/heroine

- This task requires the children to produce a job advert for a hero and heroine. Challenge them 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.
- This task could be linked to an historical topic. For example, joining 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 and abilities of the hero/heroine in the legend and use this information to develop their advert.
- Extension: Write a Curriculum Vitae and an accompanying letter asking to be considered for the expedition, task or job.

The competition task

The best laid plans...

Now that the children are ready to write their competition entries, they of course need to start by organising their ideas and planning their work. They could use planning sheets (see **Appendix 2** for examples) and mind maps to collate words and phrases to answer the following questions:

- **Who?** Appearance, personality, and emotions – expressions, voice, body language
- **Where?** The senses – sights, sounds, smell, touch
- **When?** Atmosphere – time of year or day, weather

You might also like to make, or get your children to make, prompt cards like the examples in Appendix 3. These prompt cards contain a sentence prompt alongside several related questions which can scaffold the structure and description in a piece of writing (and can also be used as a quick-fire planning burst!)

Prompt cards are designed to stimulate children's imagination by getting them to consider a number of different settings and atmosphere, using their senses to build a detailed picture of the setting and creating different scenarios and characters that could apply to the sentence prompt.

The task itself...

The competition task has deliberately been made very flexible. Your children's entries can be either a piece of creative writing or a non-fiction description of an event or place, and there are no restrictions on topic, so it's easy for you to integrate it into a current unit that your class are working through.

Alternatively you might wish to give your pupils free reign to choose what they want to write about, which might be the route to take if you are running the competition with a creative writing club for instance.

However you decide to run the *Descriptosaurus Writing Challenge* in your school, we hope that you and your pupils enjoy taking part and that the competition, as well as the activity ideas outlined in this resource, supports you to open up your pupils' minds to the power of effective descriptive writing.

Good Luck!