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The Thesaurus—A Writer’s “Best Friend”

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The *thesaurus* (thi-SOR-us) is one of the oldest and most widely used reference books, next to the dictionary. A thesaurus is a collection of phrases, concepts, and related words usually alphabetized like a simple dictionary. When you know what a certain word means, but you’re looking for a different word to convey that same meaning, a thesaurus is the book you need.



The thesaurus is a writer’s best friend. It helps authors avoid using the same terminology over and over again by providing words with similar meanings and/or grammatical function. Most thesauruses closely resemble the layout of a dictionary; therefore, if a student is familiar and comfortable with using a dictionary, the thesaurus will be easy. The entry words (the words you are looking for) are in alphabetical order, the guide words (the “tag” words at the top of the left and right pages that the target word falls in between alphabetically) are at the top of the page, and the list of synonyms (words that mean the same) and antonyms (words that mean the opposite) follow the entry word.

An Example of Using a Thesaurus

When might a student use a thesaurus? Let’s suppose a young author pens the following example...

*Today’s sunrise was simply **beautiful**. I watched the **beautiful** colors of the morning bathe the sky with **beautiful** shades of red, yellow, and orange. It was **beautiful**! The **beautiful** morning sun raised the curtains of the night above the horizon and welcomed the beginning of a **beautiful** new day.*

YIKES! Did you want to scream before you read the word *beautiful* for the *sixth* time? This example is great for illustrating the need for a writer to vary his/her word usage.



Teaching students to use the thesaurus helps them find a variety of synonyms that will transform their sentences, like the ones above, into a more vivid piece of writing. When a reader tries to envision this author’s view of the sunrise, as is written above, he/she loses focus quickly. Overusing the word “beautiful” has ruined the flow and simplicity of the writing. Replacing all but one “beautiful” with a variety of appropriate synonyms allows the reader to experience the sunrise with a more detailed and pleasant description.

Let’s try those sentences again replacing all but one *beautiful* with appropriate synonyms for the context...

*Today’s sunrise was simply **beautiful**. I watched the **splendid** colors of the morning bathe the sky with **exquisite** shades of red, yellow, and orange. It was **delightful**! The **pretty** morning sun raised the curtains of the night above the horizon and welcomed the beginning of a **lovely** new day.*

Ah! A little better, don’t you think?

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