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.

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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