



Descriptive Teaching: What, Why, and How

What is descriptive teaching?

Descriptive teaching encourages the use of core vocabulary that is programmed and readily available in robust AAC language systems to demonstrate learning and comprehension of language and concepts.

Why use descriptive teaching?

Descriptive teaching breaks down content specific vocabulary into frequently used core vocabulary. This allows individuals who use AAC to actively engage in a variety of communication exchanges and academic lessons, while simultaneously developing knowledge of robust core vocabulary words that are generalizable and applicable to all contexts.

Descriptive teaching ensures that the individual understands concepts behind fringe vocabulary on a deep level by encouraging the use of a variety of high-frequency reusable core words to discuss the concept.

Descriptive teaching also decreases the demand on the individual's AAC team to continually program new vocabulary into the AAC device and the need to create pages for each topic and subject area. This, in turn, decreases the amount of vocabulary the individual who uses AAC needs to learn how to functionally use.

How to implement descriptive teaching?

Core vocabulary and open-ended questions are the two essential components of descriptive teaching. Facilitators pose open-ended questions that allow the individual who uses AAC to use several different core words to respond to such questions and discuss a variety of concepts.

Referential style questions are commonly used inside and outside of academia to discuss concepts. These questions require specific words to answer questions and discuss concepts.

continued

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Below are example transformations of referential style questions into descriptive style questions to make them accessible and relevant to everyone.

A family or friends talking about a movie they watched:

Referential Style	Descriptive Style
Q. What kind of fish is Finding Nemo? A. clownfish	Q. What can you tell me about clownfish? A. white, orange, black, many colors, different colors, more colors, live in warm water, live in big water, live in plants

A science class learning about habitats:

Referential Style	Descriptive Style
Q. In where do animals live? A. habitat	Q. Describe animals' habitats. A. different places, cold, hot, wet, dry, land, water, live, home

A math class learning about angles:

Referential Style	Descriptive Style
Q. Name three types of angles. A. acute, obtuse, right	Q. What does an obtuse angle look like? A. big, wide, open