

# SHERLOCK HOLMES

## The Game is Afoot!

**Post-Exhibit Field Trip: Grades 6-8**  
**Extensions for Grades 9-12**

*In “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle uses precise, vivid language to bring the characters, settings, and action of the story to life. In this activity, students learn to recognize descriptive language, analyze its function in a narrative, and employ it in their own writing.*

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Utilize observation and descriptive language skills in a short writing prompt and a creative writing assignment
- Recognize the myriad functions of descriptive language in “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League”
- Cite evidence from the text to support analysis

### TIME REQUIRED

**Pre-Lesson:**  
  
**Reading Assignment**

**Lesson Plan:**  
  
**~60 minutes**

**Post-Lesson:**  
  
**Writing Assignment**

### PROGRAM FORMAT

**Segment**

Introduction  
 The Game is Afoot!  
 Functions of Description

**Format**

Writing Prompt Instructions  
 Individual Writing Activity  
 Group Activity and Discussion

**Time**

5 min  
 20 min  
 35 min

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

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- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.5 Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1 Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

## SUPPLIES

Supplies	Amount	Notes
"The Adventure of the Red-Headed League" short story	1 per student	See the Resources section.
Shoes of various sizes and styles (or other comparable personal items or pieces of clothing)	1 per group; ~10 total	For best results, the shoes should be of varying sizes and styles.
"On the Trail of a Mystery" Resource (optional)	1 per student	See the Resources section.

## ADVANCE PREPARATION

### Previous Class:

- ❑ Students should read "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League" or, if time permits, the students may read it in class.
- ❑ The instructor may distribute and discuss the "On the Trail of a Mystery" resource to give the students a sense of the typical structure of a mystery story. If students have completed the "On the Trail of a Mystery" Pre-Exhibit Lesson Plan, they will already be familiar with mystery structure and vocabulary.

### Notes and Hints:

- ❑ If you do not have access to a variety of shoes, you can have the students bring in one of their shoes or the shoes of a parent or sibling. The exercise can be done with any piece of clothing or personal object, but shoes are great because they can effectively convey age, gender, and personality. Sherlock Holmes is often preoccupied with feet: tracking footprints, identifying a specific kind of mud on a shoe, etc.

## SETUP

- ❑ Place the shoes on various student desks throughout the room before class begins. There should be 3-4 students per shoe. Keep groups relatively small so each student has time to examine the shoe.

## INTRODUCTION

5 minutes

### Notes

Suggested script is shaded.  
**Important points or questions are in bold.**  
*Suggested answers are in italics.*

In “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League,” Sherlock Holmes is able to deduce an astonishing amount of information by carefully observing Jabez Wilson’s appearance.

This is a good time to have the students pull out their copies of the story. Have a student read the section in which Wilson’s clothes are described and Sherlock reveals what he has deduced about Wilson from his appearance.

## INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

### The Game is Afoot!

20 minutes

Imagine you are Sherlock Holmes. Your group’s shoe is an important clue - consider it carefully! Look at it, touch it; you can even smell it, if you dare! Make a detailed list of your observations about the shoe. Be as specific as possible!

1. Let the students pass the shoe around, then place it in a central location so all the group members can see it.
2. Ask the students to write for five minutes in a notebook or writing journal, describing the shoe in as much detail as they possibly can. Though the students will be grouped around a shoe, they will be writing individually.

Now that we have noted our observations about the shoes, I would like you to imagine who the shoe might belong to. Is it a woman’s shoe? A child’s shoe? What is the owner like? Give the person a name and a history. What do they look like? How do they behave? What kind of work do they do? And why did they leave the shoe behind? Be as detailed as possible.

3. The students will write for 10 minutes about the owner of the shoe.

Ask the class to keep in mind:

- What conclusions are they drawing from the physical evidence?
- What characteristics do they only have a hunch about?
- What characteristics are drawn from their imagination?

### GROUP ACTIVITY

### What Can Description Do?

When we examine something carefully, using all five senses, the way you did when you wrote about your shoe, we can use those observations to make our writing much more dynamic.

1. Ask the students to share some examples of the descriptive language from their writing. Have them hold up their shoe as they read.

A great description makes a subject come alive, even something boring, like an old shoe. And we can apply the same observational skills to characters, settings, and actions. Writers use descriptive language to make their stories feel “real,” but descriptive language can do much more than that.

2. Ask the students to consider what functions description can perform in a story. Give a relevant example from “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League.” The section they have read previously, in which Jabez Wilson is described, is a good place to start:

“Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy gray shepherd’s check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top-hat and a faded brown

overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features.”

**What is Doyle implying in his initial description of Wilson? What does he want us to think about the character?** *Wilson is a ridiculous or absurd character; Wilson isn't very rich or sophisticated; Watson, who is narrating the story, perceives Wilson as lower-class.*

A description can tell us what the author wants us to know, but also what the author wants us to know about the narrator. For example, Wilson is described derisively by Watson.

**How does Watson describe Holmes? What does it tell us?** *Holmes is described as “hawk-like” and “relentless, keen-witted, ready-handed.” Watson admires Holmes.*

Descriptive language is not limited to concrete details. A character's statements can also tell us a great deal about that character.

**What are some examples of dialogue that also acts as descriptive language?** *“I beg that you will not touch me with your filthy hands” –John Clay. Clay is a snob who thinks he is above the law; “My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so.” – Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is bored, brilliant and perhaps a bit arrogant, dismissing this complicated case as “a little problem”.*

Descriptive language can be a “clue,” too. For example, Jabez Wilson describes his assistant as particularly keen to get him through the crowd to apply to join the Red-Headed League: “How he did it I could not imagine, but he pushed and pulled and butted until he got me through the crowd, and right up to the steps which led to the office.” At this point, we (and Holmes) might note the assistant must have a good reason for being so pushy.

3. As the students read examples of descriptive language from the story, create a running list of

descriptive functions on the board. These may include:

- Creating a vivid and realistic setting
- Building tension or creating a “mood”
- Reinforcing a theme
- Illuminating a character, through description or dialogue
- Making action more exciting
- Acting as a “clue;” foreshadowing
- Telling us what the narrator thinks about other characters

## FOLLOW-UP ASSIGNMENT

### Step into a Mystery!

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Ask the students to incorporate the shoe and the character it inspired into their own short mystery story. Encourage students to utilize rich descriptive language throughout. For a revising exercise, have the students work in groups to read, solve, and improve each other’s mysteries.

## OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

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### EXPLORING TONE

#### Comparing Stories

Have the students read a Sherlock Holmes story that has a different tone than “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League” (for example, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band”). Have the students compare the tone of this relatively lighthearted story with a more serious one. How does Conan Doyle establish the different tones?

### ANALYZING LANGUAGE

#### Word Clouds

Have the students create “word clouds” for each character in the story. Have the students create their word clouds for other famous characters or figures and see if the other students can guess who they are based on.

## **EXPERIMENT WITH PERSPECTIVE**

### **A New Narrator**

Have students rewrite “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League” from the perspective of Jabez Wilson or John Clay.

## **WRITING RICH DESCRIPTION**

### **Writing with Senses**

Have the students write descriptions of an object without describing its physical appearance. Have the students focus on texture, smell, sound, function, connotation, etc.



### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*This background information is for teachers. Modify and communicate this information to the students as necessary.*

Aspiring writers are often told to “write what they know” and indeed, students may find that their most effective, resonant description is inspired by familiar subjects -people they know, local settings, frequently used objects, etc.. Students are able to draw on their sensory memory and, in some cases, their emotional connection to the subject. Memory and connection make for vivid, authentic writing.

In the quest to create an indelible character, sometimes inspiration is close to home. The character of Sherlock Holmes was inspired by Dr. Joseph Bell, a professor of medicine at Edinburgh University, where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle studied. Bell was a fervent believer in the power of observation—like Holmes, he was able to deduce a great deal of information about a person by simply observing them. Bell believed that perception was a critical part of practicing medicine and he insisted that his students develop the skill. Conan Doyle also borrowed some of Bell’s physical characteristics - piercing eyes, a hawkish nose - for his iconic detective and perhaps some of his own awe of the great man for the character of Watson.

Conan Doyle drew from his own world in many ways. His medical experience gave him an intimate knowledge of poisons, wounds, and maladies. He encountered patients from all walks of life, helping him populate Sherlock Holmes’ London with a rich tapestry of characters. Writing a mystery can seem like a daunting concept, but students may be reminded that their own lives can be rich sources of inspiration.

### RESOURCES

#### **“The Adventure of the Red-Headed League”**

*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the collection that this story appears in, is in the public domain and is available in a variety of formats via Project Gutenberg, Google Books, and many other websites.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/>

<http://books.google.com/books>

Audio recordings of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* are available via LibriVox.

<http://librivox.org/>

### **Writing Powerful Descriptions**

Lit Reactor article with a great guide to writing descriptive language.

<http://litreactor.com/columns/writing-powerful-descriptions>

### **Description and the Brain**

*New York Times* article about how the brain interprets certain words and descriptions. For example, reading the word “lavender” excites the part of the brain that deals with smells!

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?\\_r=4&src=me&ref=general&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?_r=4&src=me&ref=general&)