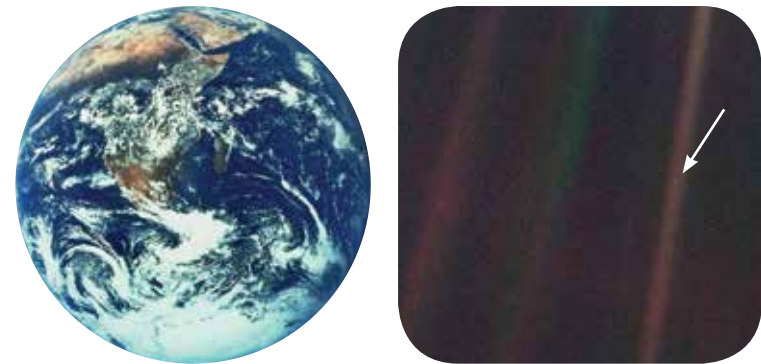


3 Describing nature by using comparisons

Learning objective

- Understand how writers and presenters use simile and metaphor to describe the natural world



Activity 1

- Look at the photographs of Earth from space and read the astronauts' descriptions on the right.
 - Which description paints the best picture for you? Explain your choice.
 - Using either of the photographs to help you, invent two or three comparisons of your own to describe Earth as seen from space.

Some things in nature are so incredible that they're difficult to imagine, let alone describe. Writers and presenters 'paint pictures' for us by using comparisons. For example, the astronomer Carl Sagan describes how tiny the Earth looks from space by comparing it to a dot or pixel – the smallest element that makes up a larger picture.

A ... the size of a marble, the most beautiful you can imagine. That beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. (James Irwin)

B ... a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. (Edgar Mitchell)

Activity 2

- Read these descriptions of sea creatures and for each one decide:
 - Which creature is being described? Match the correct letters and numbers.
 - What features of the creature are described and what are they compared to? Be as precise as possible.
 - Is it a good comparison? Explain your answer.

A ... a long, torpedo-shaped body. At one end, surrounding a beak-like mouth strong enough to cut through steel cable, are five pairs of arms.

B ... a few metres away was a pointed nose, and a mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth, coming at him.

C ... the tail breaks the surface and rears up into the air, dripping with water. It is as wide as the wings of a small aircraft.

1 A great white shark

2 A blue whale

3 A giant squid

What do better writers do?

Better writers:

- use similes and metaphors to surprise or shock us: unusual comparisons can make us see the natural world in a new way.



Activity 3

- Read the text below, adapted from *Things that go chomp in the night* by John Downer. The writer is describing creatures that live in our beds and come out every night to feed on our dead skin cells!
 - What are dustmites compared to? Can you find at least three different comparisons?
 - Explain which comparison you think is the most surprising or unusual.
- Look at the photograph of a dustmite, magnified so that it's much larger than life.
 - Decide which feature of the dustmite to describe and what you can compare it to.
 - Write your own simile or metaphor describing this feature of the dustmite.

It isn't a pleasant thought, but you're never alone in bed. As you snuggle up among the sheets and blankets, an army of tiny refuse-collectors sifts and chews its way through your dreams.

Beneath the sheets of even the cleanest bed lurk thousands of eight-legged **scavengers**. We never notice our uninvited guests because each one is smaller than a speck of dust. They are only able to survive in this seemingly barren landscape because, each night, cells flake from our skin surface and shower down on them like **manna** from heaven. **Sustained** by this nutritious snowstorm, up to two million dustmites are able to survive in the average mattress ... they graze the vast **savannah** of our sheets, like herds of miniature **wildebeest**.

Glossary

scavengers: creatures that live off dead meat or rubbish
manna: in the Bible, the food provided for the Israelites in the wilderness
sustained: kept alive
savannah: plains in southern Africa
wildebeest: African animals, between an ox and an antelope

WRITER'S WORKSHOP: Using similes and metaphors to make comparisons

How can I use similes and metaphors to describe the natural world?

Good writers use **similes** and **metaphors** to draw attention to something special or unusual about a natural feature or creature. Look at this example:

*... the explosion produced an immense wave in the sea. As it travelled towards the coast of Java, it became a wall of water as high as a four-storey house. It picked up a naval gunboat, carried it bodily nearly two kilometres inland and dumped it on top of a hill. (from *The Power of Krakatau* by David Attenborough)*

Most people have never seen a tsunami so would find it difficult to picture one. Why does David Attenborough compare the tidal wave to a tall building? What picture does this give you?

For similes and metaphors to work, the objects being compared need to be connected in some way. The wave is the same *height* as a four-storey house, but it's also as *solid and dense* as a brick wall. What will happen when it crashes onto the shore? Can you make any connection with the destruction caused by a falling house?