



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2014 Volume I: Picture Writing

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## **A Picture is Worth . . . A Thousand Different Stories: Using Visual Media to Engage the Imagination and Enhance Skills for Analyzing and Synthesizing Information**

Curriculum Unit 14.01.01  
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### **Introduction**

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How do I get my students to see more than just the written word? How do I help them understand that what they see is as important as what they read? How do I foster the connection between words and images that will aid in their understanding? If I can get my students to see the relationship between words and pictures, the skills that they use for understanding a text will increase. As a fourth-grade teacher in an urban district, I have seen the difference in comprehension between those students who utilize these skills and those who do not. My goal for this unit is to encourage my students to look beyond the written word and utilize the visual to aid their understanding of a text as this is a skill that they will employ for the rest of their lives.

With the implementation of the new Common Core Standards, the way our students are being asked to think about information is changing. They are being asked not only to grasp the content but also to dig more deeply in their understanding of content. With this comes a change in the way teachers, as well as students, are approaching information. One area that I feel my students have been lacking is using pictures to aid in their comprehension of written texts. I fear that my students do not know the value of using images and this unit will help teach students how to use pictures or images to enhance their understanding and comprehension.

In this day and age when children as well as adults are saturated with images all around them, very often words do not stand a chance. How many times do you look at a picture in a magazine or an image on television and decide that is all you need to know what is being said? Many times we do not even read the caption or notice that one is there when looking at an image that is familiar to us. Paradoxically, I believe in the classroom, students are so focused on reading text closely that when there are images alongside the text, the images do not stand a chance. When there are words or someone speaking, the students do not look as deeply at the image.

In order to enhance their understanding, students need to use close looking at images in connection with close reading of the text. According to Kurzweil Educational Systems, "close reading is defined as careful and purposeful reading used to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension." <sup>1</sup> In the same way that students are taught to close read text, students can be taught to close look at images. In some

circumstances, close looking may aid the reading, while in others it may actually change the story. One medium to begin sharing with students is wordless picture books. Their "benefits include development of visual literacy and oral to written expression, promoting creative writing and higher-order thinking skills, and enhancing the enjoyment of the writing process. Based on the data collection and observation [of the research project conducted at St. Xavier University], the researchers highly endorse the use of Wordless Picture Books to improve student writing." <sup>2</sup> By asking questions while students are viewing picture books, teachers can model the process that we expect our students to get better at: digging deeply to find evidence that will improve not only their writing skills but also their reading comprehension.

## Rationale

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Targeted to students in Grade 4, but able to be modified to accommodate students in Grades 2, 3, and 5, "A Picture is Worth . . . A Thousand Different Stories" will help young learners examine the importance of visual media in aiding their understanding of what they are reading. By thinking of pictures or images as a support to be used to better understand what is being read, I will encourage my students' development of the strategies and skills that will allow them to increase their understanding of the symbiotic nature of words and images. This curriculum unit will examine the different types of picture books available and delve into why one picture book type may be preferable to another type depending on the skill a teacher is trying to teach. This unit will also aim to give teachers an understanding of how different types of media can be useful in developing reading skills for students.

This unit will help teachers make informed choices not only in regards to subject matter but also on the basis of how the pictures or images and text or lack of text interact. By choosing an effective book, teachers will enable their students to enhance their reading skills in areas such as foreshadowing, predicting, inferencing, sequencing, and determining the theme. This unit will equip teachers with model lessons for each of these skills and a list of books that teachers can choose from to integrate into their curriculum not only in their language arts instruction but also in science and social studies.

In order to engage my students with visual stimuli, one effective strategy that I have used in the past has been bringing them to an art museum. At first students start naming just what they see in a painting, but little by little while listening to each other and building off what others say, a story begins to emerge. When my students were at the Yale Center for British Art, they were asked to look at a painting. "What do you see?" is what they were asked. First the students listed each item and figure they saw in the painting. "I see a woman." "I see a boy." "I see water." The question "what do you see?" was asked over and over. After there were no more things or objects to name, the students started "seeing a story." "I think the lady that the boy is talking to is his mom." "Maybe he's telling her about what he saw when he was by the water." It was such an interesting transformation that I was seeing happen. When given some background about the painting, the story that they "saw" changed somewhat to make more sense in the context. It was then that I began to wonder how I could develop this skill for my students so that they could deepen their comprehension. At first look, I was overwhelmed with the sheer number of picture books; and although I tried to choose carefully, I really looked only at the subject matter when choosing a book to include in my lessons. After research on the topic of picture books, I realized that it is important that teachers make more informed and thoughtful decisions about the books they use as supplements to their curriculum.

"There is a growing body of evidence pointing to the positive effect of visual arts on reading and writing performance." <sup>3</sup> I believe the unit that I have developed will enable teachers to engage their students so that they will continue to use the acquired skills in years to come in all disciplines in order to extend and deepen their understanding. By bringing picture books back to the classroom, I look to create excitement for the students as well as the educators.

## Background

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By fourth grade, picture walks -- when you have a child flip through a book and tell a story using just the pictures -- are usually no longer worked on, but it is still a skill that is very useful. For an action research project at Saint Xavier University, the authors of "Improving Student Writing Skills Using Wordless Picture Books" designed a study in which they encouraged teachers to use wordless picture books to help develop students' writing skills using second through fifth grade students in the suburbs of Chicago. Peter Smagorinsky, a distinguished researcher supports this view, arguing "that all writers and readers regardless of developmental stage can benefit from using a visual image." <sup>4</sup> Note that Smagorinsky does not refer to a particular age or grade of student, but instead references all writers and readers; we should make this point to our students: even adults in our reading and writing continue to rely heavily on images to aid in our understanding.

I also wonder if teachers in the upper grades know the value of using picture books in order to help their students. Working as an elementary school teacher in an urban school, I often have students who come to me lacking the skills of telling a story when looking at pictures. I believe this stems from the fact that many of my students have not had the exposure to many books in their early childhood and did not necessarily learn to tell a story from the pictures before learning to start reading the words. Many times, instead of telling a story with the pictures, students will just list what is in each of the pictures in the book. Often I hear something such as "I see a boy on this page. On the next page I see a boy and a lady. Now I see a boy and the lady and the lady is holding a ball." My students are just telling what they see, but they do not make a story out of the pictures. The response that I hope to get them to say is something like "The boy looks sad. Now his mom is coming to see what is wrong. It looks like she found the ball that he had lost and is giving it back to him, and that is why he is happy now." The story they tell may not be exactly the one told by the words in the book, but it is helpful in developing understanding if those pictures tell some sort of story to the student. By telling a story based on the pictures, students use prior knowledge and prediction skills and give themselves a good basis for understanding the story before they start to read it. The ability to view an image and describe in-depth what is seen is valuable especially when a student uses descriptive words. This skill is an important good start, and we want to build on that skill and bring students to the next level where they use those descriptions to make a story come alive.

## Wordless Picture Books

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Wordless picture books are a wonderful resource that teachers can use, not only to engage early learners but to expand the skills of students who have already begun to master reading. By wordless picture books I refer both to books with no words and to books with minimal words, for example just one word or phrase. Some wordless picture books are the point-and-say variety that are used often to teach words to toddlers; however, there are wordless picture books that are much more detailed. Some of these books may use themes that children are familiar with so that they can bring what they know to the book they are reading. Still other books are much more elaborate and complex. These more elaborate wordless books require that students put a lot of thought into what they believe the story is when asked what is happening because, even without a single word, a whole story is being told in the pictures. "By including a narrative which has not been made verbally explicit, wordless picture books entail the reader's more active cooperation in the process of engendering meaning." <sup>5</sup> Books without words require readers to work harder to figure out the meaning. Sometimes the meaning is quite clear; however, other times the reader may need to make meaning of somewhat cryptic images.

When an author chooses to write a book without words, he or she relies on the reader to construct a story based on the illustrations. Students who are readers have experience with narrative and draw from their own experiences and what they have learned to make sense of this mute tale. As Ana Margarida Ramos (Professor of Literature and Children's Literature at Aveiro University and a member of the Research Centre for Child Studies) explains,

The reader's participation derives from a productive dialogue with the pictures, read both in isolation and in sequence, one after another, building up expectations and activating semantic inferences that will either be confirmed or readjusted in due course, as required by the subsequent pictures. The reader is also asked to discover the underlying relationship between pictures, the events occurring in the passage from one page to another, and the meaning implied in the selection of colour, perspective, frame and composition. <sup>6</sup>

When a book has no words, it becomes patently clear how much thought has gone into not only the images themselves, but also the placement of those images as well as the use of color. So many areas can be touched upon or delved deeply into using wordless picture books. Grasping sequence, identifying details, determining theme, making inferences and drawing conclusions are all skills that can be introduced or strengthened through the use of wordless picture books. In order to ensure that students are moving past what the pictures show them in isolation and to what story they tell, teachers may need to prompt students by

asking questions such as "What are the characters doing?" "Why are they doing that?" Giving sentence starters such as "I notice" and "I wonder" may help students develop a story also.

## Picture Story Books

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When one thinks of a picture book, many times books with little to no text are what come to mind; however many picture books are full of text as well. For purposes of this unit, the term picture story book will be used as described by Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot (well-known and respected authors of *Children and Books*) , as a book with a "structured, if minimal plot" that "really tells a story." . . . with "the illustrations in picture story books [being] just as important as the text." <sup>7</sup> We will be using books that clearly tell a story to the reader.

Picture book choices should be made carefully. Teachers who use picture books to enhance their lessons sometimes choose according to subject alone. Picture books can be used in every curriculum area. Yet because a book touches on the subject matter being introduced, a teacher should not assume that all picture books bring the same substance to the lesson.

## Looking at Images

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In looking at research, I found that one of the most interesting areas for me was learning about the connection of words and images through the years. In his book *Understanding Comics* , Scott McCloud, using the comic book format, "leads readers through an insightful study of the nature of sequential art by tracing the history of the relationship between words and images." <sup>8</sup> McCloud emphasizes how much a reader brings to what they are seeing: for instance, he informs the reader that closure which is sometimes used intentionally in order to create suspense is the process of "observing the parts but perceiving the whole." <sup>9</sup> This is something we as the audience do subconsciously.

McCloud also believes that "words and pictures have great powers to tell stories when creators fully exploit them both." <sup>10</sup> McCloud has theories on how he believes words and images interact with each other and work together. Although his work deals with comics, many of these combinations can be seen in the story books that we ask our students to read. If we are aware of the different combinations that are used when words and images coincide, we can purposefully choose books that use the combination that will aid in the skill we are asking our students to strengthen. McCloud creates an image for each of these combinations. I will offer my own examples after his definitions. The categories that McCloud has come up with are the following:

### Word Specific Combinations

Pictures in this category "illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text." An example would be an author writing that the boy closed his eyes as he made a wish with the illustration showing a close-up of

the boy with his eyes closed.

### **Picture Specific Combinations**

Words in this category "do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence." An example would be a series of pictures of a baseball player hitting a ball and then running the bases and the crowd cheering as the player reaches home plate with words being shown in the form of the cheers with a brief caption.

### **Duo-Specific Combinations**

In this category "both words and pictures send essentially the same message." An example would be an author writing that the girl climbed the stairs with a look of determination and the accompanying illustration showing both the girl climbing and a look on her face that a reader could conclude is determination.

### **Additive Combinations**

In this category "words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa." With additive combinations, a reader would see text or an image that by itself may convey a meaning, but when put together, the words and images really hit home the point and give the reader deeper meaning. An example would be a girl with a pained expression and the text that says the girl was not expecting a test today. We now know from the text that she has a test, and along with the image we know she probably is not ready for it.

### **Parallel Combinations**

In this category "words and pictures seem to follow very different courses – without intersecting." In this category words and images do not seem to go together. You may have two children walking through a park tossing a ball, but in the text the conversation is about the test they took in school earlier in the day.

### **Montage**

In this category, "words are treated as integral parts of the picture." Images in these examples may actually be part of the words or vice versa. If you have words written in such a way that they depict a flower, for example, this demonstrates montage. Another example of montage would be an image of a frazzled teacher with words such as "correct papers," "lesson plans," "parent conferences" splattered all around the image.

### **Inter-dependent Combinations**

McCloud calls these "perhaps the most common type of word/picture combination . . . where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone." If an author wants to make a point about someone not being happy about something without other characters knowing, there may be an image of a student smiling at a teacher holding a test while thinking (with text showing) that he is not prepared to take the test.

With all of these combinations to choose from, authors have a lot to think about in terms of what they want their audience to know and how hard they want their audience to have to work in order to gain that knowledge. When teachers choose picture books, they should think about the work they want their students to do. Certain books lend themselves nicely to certain skills (examples can be found in the classroom activities section of this unit). Other books do not have as clear a purpose when it comes to using them for developing specific language-arts skills.

## Strategies

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This unit is comprised of two parts. We will begin by asking students to look at images that do not have text in order to spark their imagination. Books or sections of books that are picture specific compel students to explain what they think is happening and why. It is important to let students know that any answer will be accepted as long as the student can tell why using evidence from the image. We will then move to text with images and investigate how the images aid the words and vice versa. My unit will aim to provide my students with the strategies that will help them use this knowledge to strengthen their reading and writing. I look forward to exploring the relation between what the students see and how those "pictures" are turned into writing. I eagerly anticipate finding a variety of formats and media that my students will use in order to improve their skills of critically analyzing and synthesizing information.

### Classroom Activities

The following lesson plans introduce skills that may be new for students or that may be a review of a skill they have been taught previously. Using picture books is an engaging method to use with students and one that students tend to feel less intimidated by, and so they are willing to take risks. For each of these lessons, multiple days may be spent on the skill being worked on. Some skills may take more modeling or practice than others. Assessment should be given when students feel confident in using the strategy. Once a skill has been mastered, teacher may move on to next lesson plan.

#### Lesson Plan One

Objective: Students will use images in a picture book to foreshadow or predict what will happen in the story.

The teacher will ask what it means to predict that something is going to happen. Teacher will then introduce the term *foreshadowing* and make sure students understand the meaning. The teacher will model making a prediction or foreshadowing an event based on the front of a book. The teacher will then walk students through a book asking them to notice what is going on in the pictures and make predictions based on what they are noticing. For each prediction, students will need to show evidence of what led them to make such a prediction.

Assessment: Students will independently read a picture book and use the images and text to make predictions about what they think will happen. Students will be required to note evidence that led them to make predictions or foreshadow events.

Suggested books that may be used: *Ruby the Copycat* by Margaret Rathmann; *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen; *The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney

#### Lesson Plan Two

Objective: Students will use images in a picture book to sequence events in the story.

The teacher will review what sequencing is and ask students to make a list of clue words that are used when we sequence events (first, next, then, after that, etc.). The teacher will model sequencing events with pictures. The teacher will then walk students through the pages of a simple book that have been copied and are out of order. Students will work together to put the pages in the correct order and tell the story. Students

will need to use key words show the sequence of the events.

Assessment: Students will independently sequence a group of pages of a story and write the story using clue words. This skill is one which lends itself nicely to using wordless picture books with a good picture sequence.

Suggested books that may be used: *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina; *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* by Simms Taback; *The Mitten* by Jan Brett; *There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* by Pam Adams

### **Lesson Plan Three**

Objective: Students will use what they know (their schema) along with the images in a picture book to make inferences about what the author is implying but not actually saying in the story.

The teacher will introduce what it means to infer using everyday situations such as: if a boy walks in carrying a wet umbrella what inference can you make about the weather without even looking outside? Once the students understand what is meant by inferring, the teacher will model by thinking aloud how to look at a picture and use what we know to make an inference. The teacher will then walk students through a book, asking students to notice what is going on in the pictures and make an inference based on the pictures and what they know. For each inference, students will fill in a worksheet with three columns – one that lists what they see in the story, one that lists what they know, and the last column in which they make an inference based on what they see and know.

Assessment: Students will independently make inferences based on images in a picture book and fill out the worksheet showing their thinking about how or why they made the inference that they did.

Suggested books that may be used: *Fireflies* by Julie Brinckloe; *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold; *Two Bad Ants* by Chris Van Allsburg; *Tuesday* by David Weisner

### **Lesson Plan Four**

Objective: Students will use images and text in a picture book to determine the theme of a story.

The teacher will review with students that the theme of a story many times is not explicit; the author gives clues and the reader must determine the theme based on the evidence given with those clues. The teacher will model finding clues with thinking aloud while reading a story and then taking those clues and determining the theme based on those clues. The teacher will then walk students through a book, asking students to find clues that will help to figure out the theme.

Assessment: Students will independently read a story and use clues to determine the theme of the story. The students will be required to back up their answer with evidence from what they noticed while reading the story and looking at the pictures.

Suggested books that may be used: *Brave Irene* by William Steig; *A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting; *Fables* by Arnold Lobel

### **Lesson Plan Five**

Objective: Students will use images to create a narrative that corresponds to the pictures by using story elements and incorporating the skills of foreshadowing/predicting, sequencing, inferencing, and determining



theme.

The teacher will remind the students of the work that has been done previously with picture books by reviewing foreshadowing/predicting, sequencing, inferencing, and determining theme. Using a picture book, students will view the images and create a story to go along with the pictures. Students will be expected to incorporate the skills worked on during the unit in order to create a narrative that is more complex than the ones that they have created previously. Remind students of the kinds of questions they should ask themselves. Teacher may model how to think out loud about the images by examining details that might add interest to the story.

Assessment: Students will submit a story that is creative and corresponds with the images in the picture book they are working with. Students will be required to include story elements such as characters, setting, plot, and problem/solution.

Suggested books that may be used: *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg; *Flotsam* by David Wiesner

### **Extension Activities**

In addition to using picture books, other media can also help students attain the desired skills of this unit. District-wide third-grade students in New Haven have the opportunity to embark on two field trips to the Yale Center for British Art where they work with docents viewing various pieces of art. To build upon the experience that students previously had, teachers could arrange field trips to the museum in fourth grade. These subsequent trips would allow students to further study artwork as a medium to increase students' skills of using the visual to aid comprehension. One angle a teacher may take is to focus on one particular point in history and choose a painting to go along with the time period. Any teacher interested in arranging a field trip need only contact the Yale Center for British Art and speak with the staff at the Education Department regarding your ideas and they will be happy to help.

Another extension activity that would be useful and engaging for students is the use of silent film. Disney and Pixar have released a number of short silent films. Two suggestions are Disney's *Paperman* and Pixar's *The Blue Umbrella*. Both of these short silent films tell a very clear story. Teachers can use these films to elicit discussion about how one knows what is happening when there is no dialogue or words. It would be interesting to have students watch the film and write down the story they see happening and then have them share that with a partner or group. Afterwards students could go back to the film and decide what happened at different parts in the film to make them determine that was the story taking place.

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## Student Reading List

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## Appendix: Implementing District Standards

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Having completed this unit, students will have worked to achieve many of the Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals for Language Arts. For purposes of this unit, I will focus on a few of the most pertinent of the standards that are addressed but will also reference the other standards that may be addressed in completing this unit with your students.

### Common Core Standards – Literacy/Reading

CCSS ELA – RL. 4.1 – Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and drawing inferences from the text.

Students will need to look closely at the details in the images and text in order to draw inferences from the - text. With the use of picture books, students will be required to build their inference skills in order to support and make sense of what they see happening in a story.

### Common Core Standards – Literacy/Writing

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

- Students will be required to write narratives from the picture books they are reading. This will entail close inspection of details and sequence of events.

Common Core Standards – Literacy/Speaking and Listening

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1 - Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 4 topics and texts* , building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- Students will be working with partners as well as in small groups and whole group setting. This will require that students work on their skills of speaking and listening in order to collaborate effectively with their peers.

The following Common Core Standards may also be addressed in this unit:

Literacy/Reading, RL 3.2 and 4.3

Literacy/Writing, W. 4.3a-4.3e

Literacy/Speaking and Listening, L.4.3, L4.3a

## Notes

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1. "About Kurzweil Educational Systems."
2. Patricia Carter, "Improving Student Writing Skills Using Wordless Picture Books."
3. Nancy Andrzejczak, "From Image to Text: Using Images in the Writing Process" 2.
4. Ibid.
5. Ana Margarida Ramos, "Ecoliteracy Through Imagery" 326 - 327.
6. Ibid, 327.
7. Quoted by Owens and Nowell, "More Than Just Pictures: Using Picture Story Books to Broaden Young Learners' Social Consciousness."
8. McQuade and McQuade, headnote to excerpt by McCloud.
9. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* , 63.
10. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, 152.

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