When thinking back to childhood, most people have fond memories of picture books like *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Love You Forever* or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. We often associate picture books with a child cozying up with a loved one. Picture books have a special appeal and importance for young children in the years before and while they learn to read, but many picture books are also suited for older or even adult readers (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). The best picture books appeal across age groups, providing a compelling interplay between the text and illustrations and allowing readers of all ages to enjoy and gain meaning from both. “In a picturebook, words and pictures never tell exactly the same story. It is this dissonance that catches the reader’s attention. . .Satisfying picturebooks create a playing field where the reader explores and experiments with relationships between words and the pictures” (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007, p. 274)

Attention to illustrations wanes as children become more proficient readers. In approaching picture books, pre-readers will often pay attention to the pictures without attending to the text as it is read to them. On the other hand, more advanced readers, including adults, will often read the text without attending to the illustrations (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). In a carefully crafted picture book, both the text and illustrations play an important role in perceiving the book’s full meaning. As Agosto (1999) states, a story told in words and pictures “is not merely the sum of the meanings of the two media forms, but it is a story more complex in some way than the simple summation of the two partial stories” (p. 278).

The relationship of illustrations to the text in a picture book can be described in three basic ways, as distilled from the work of Nikolajeva & Scott (2000) and Agosto (1999). Below are three major categories along with examples. Through read-alouds, we can help students to notice when text and illustration interplay in these ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMMETRY</th>
<th>Blueberries for Sal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations closely correlate with the text</td>
<td>The illustrations simply reflect what is told in the text rather than adding any new meanings or nuances.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUGMENTATION</th>
<th>Officer Buckle and Gloria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations enhance or extend the text, or give a new meaning not expressed in the text</td>
<td>Through the illustrations, the reader discovers that Gloria, the police dog, is spicing up Officer Buckle’s safety talks with her zany tricks. Only the illustrations provide this critical information, lending meaning to the story as a whole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTRADICTION</th>
<th>Tough Boris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations present a meaning contrary to the text</td>
<td>Although the text conveys that Boris is tough, scary, and greedy, the illustrations show a gentle man who acts with kindness and compassion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “reading” of illustrations has become even more prominent in popular culture with the advent of graphic novels and hybrid novels like *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, where illustrations are essential to understanding the story and may even tell the story entirely alone, as with wordless books. Such books turn the
tables on predominantly verbal narratives like Bible stories, fairy tales, and folk tales, where illustrations, if provided, tend to be of little importance in communicating meaning (Agosto, 1999).

Picture books are enjoyed by our youngest readers, but as Wolfenbarger & Sipe (2007) note, “Unfortunately, many readers leave primary grades with the idea that picturebooks are only for the very young…. Teachers who incorporate picturebooks/illustrated books/books in picturebook format in the instruction and have these books available in the classroom can diminish the reluctance of older readers to return to the pleasure of reading books with many illustrations” (p. 278). It’s time to appreciate picture books for the way their carefully crafted text and illustrations can engage readers of all ages.

References:


Bibliography


This fractured fairy tale turns the princess stereotype on its head. Pursued by dozens of princes, Princess Smartypants puts them to the test removing the slugs from her garden (which the illustrations show to be about 50 feet long) or feeding her pets (which we see are actually cranky, fire-breathing dragons). Finally, a suitor appears who can do everything Princess Smartypants requires. Will theirs be the kiss of true love?


A Mem Fox book with sparse text, *Sophie* explores the circle of life. As Sophie grows up, Grandpa grows old. As he moves on, new life begins. Much of the meaning is inferred through the illustrations and through the reader’s own related experiences. The representational art illustrates the warmth and pain inherent in a family’s love.


A nearly wordless book, the few words per page speak to the usual stereotypes of pirates. The illustrations weave their own tale of a young boy who stows away on Boris’ ship and the surprising kindness shown him by the captain and crew. They provide a beautiful counterpoint to the text, and young readers will pore over the many details in the illustrations.


While the text tells of a hen’s typical walk around the farm and home again, the illustrations in Rosie’s Walk tell an entirely different story. The cunning fox lurks at every turn, and in each attempt to catch Rosie, he is foiled in some humorous way. This is an excellent book for students to make predictions based on the illustrations.

Pinkerton is just plain trouble at obedience school, not only failing to learn the commands he is taught, but managing to help the other dogs to “unlearn” their own tricks. The illustrations tell much of the story and communicate Pinkerton’s humorous antics. It’s especially funny as the illustrations show Pinkerton doing the opposite of what he is commanded to do in the book’s text. Expelled in disgrace from obedience school, will Pinkerton be able to protect his family from an intruder?


While Lily takes her usual walk home, her dog Nicky sees danger at every turn. The illustrations show an oblivious Lily followed by a terrified Nicky, who sees growling garbage cans and mysterious faces in the passing cityscape. His attempts to communicate his alarm go unheeded by Lily and her family. It is an interesting twist to devote the illustrations to the dog’s experience on the walk, and children can discuss the possibility that Nicky has an overactive imagination.


Something seems odd when our young narrator arrives to visit her grandpa. Scanning the illustrations, we see plenty that is odd, from a giraffe in the yard to a necktie hanging out of the mailbox. Grandpa’s house is truly unusual, and children will love finding the many things that are wrong in each intricately detailed illustration. Not until the end of a delightful day with Grandpa does the girl realize what is out of place, leaving the reader with a surprising and amusing conclusion to the story.


Officer Buckle decides to take his canine companion, Gloria, on his school visits to teach safety. His young audiences, who used to be bored to tears, become fully engaged when Gloria comes along. Little does Officer Buckle know, Gloria is entertaining the crowd with her own repertoire of tricks while he gives his usual lecture. The text does not provide the whole story. The illustrations are necessary to understanding what Gloria is doing and why the young audiences are suddenly such enthusiastic listeners.


Though the text on each page is very similar, the illustrations show the many funny ways that David gets into trouble in a day. The whimsical artwork provides many humorous details, and children will relate to the experience of being told “no” again and again by the adults around them, adults who love them after all.


While “imprisoned” in obedience school, Ike writes letters to his beloved owner, begging her to rescue him. On each spread, in black and white drawings we see the cruel picture he hopes to paint for Mrs. LaRue through his letters. In color, we see the reality of the posh, resort-like school. The illustrations provide a contrast with each other and an opportunity to talk about how words can be used to paint mental pictures and to persuade. Will Ike ever find his way home?

Book cover art was obtained from [www.tempe.gov/library](http://www.tempe.gov/library) and [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com).
Classroom Applications

Give Kids Access to Illustrations for Read-Alouds
If we want children to attend to both pictures and text as they make meaning while reading, we must show them how. Teacher read-alouds are a terrific way to demonstrate, and it is important for students to have access to the pictures during picture-book read-alouds. Some ideas include bringing the class together on a cozy rug so they will be in close proximity with the book, using computer image projections, obtaining multiple copies of books for students to look at close up, and using "big books", which come in large format (about 1 ½' x 2').

Demonstrate & Value Different Ways to “Read” a Book
Depending on developmental level, there are three ways for children to “read” a book:
1. They may “pretend read,” telling a story based on what they see in the illustrations.
2. They may “memory read,” retelling the text as best they can from memory after hearing it. Patterned and rhyming books (called "predictable" books) are especially good for this.
3. They may engage in “mature reading” as they read the text and attend to illustrations in making meaning.

Legitimize Picture Books for All Ages
By treating picture books as a distinct genre with unique possibilities for interpretation, we make it more acceptable for readers of all ages to enjoy them. In classroom libraries across grade levels, a wide variety of picture books should be available.

Show Kids How to Use Post-It Notes for Discussion
From a young age, children can learn to note spots where they see something interesting in a book’s illustrations. Using post-its to mark interesting spots can as a springboard for conversations about books, leading to more rich discussions in literature circles or book clubs in the classroom.

Reading like a Writer...

Author and Illustrator Studies
Picture books serve as wonderful mentor texts, showing children how authors and illustrators craft language and illustrations. “Author studies” are units where the class is immersed in reading and examining the work of a particular author (or illustrator), finding patterns across books and looking at changes in the author’s work over time. Students can be encouraged to experiment with similar techniques in their own writing.

Drawing as a Springboard for Writing
Often when we approach writing, we tell students to write first and then to draw an accompanying picture if time allows. For our youngest writers, it can be very difficult to get going with text first; it is much more natural for them to write about what they have already drawn. Even older elementary students can benefit from drawing before writing, which allows ideas and details to emerge. When students talk with others about their drawings, it serves as an opportunity to tell a story orally in preparation for committing it to paper.

Create Picture Books in Writing Workshop
Children love creating their own picture books in writing workshop and sharing them with others. You can also create several “class books” throughout the year, where students contribute a page in a patterned or themed book. Experiment with different artistic media through these projects. There are even publishing houses that will reproduce a class book in hard or soft cover, and families can order copies as keepsakes. The teacher gets a free copy for the classroom library. One such company is Nationwide Learning, www.studenttreasures.com.