PART II

Investigating Texts and Images
Illustrations in Picture Books

The Art of Reading Images

Cyndi Giorgis, University of Texas at El Paso

The most difficult part for me is that stage between writing/thinking/sketching and beginning the final art. I am always fearful that I won't be able to execute the idea to its full potential. Because the art style is, for me, determined by the text, I am often experimenting with a new style designed specifically for each book. This is at once exciting and frightening!

—Seeger (as quoted in Danielson, 2012, para. 33)

Picture books appeal to readers of all ages because they offer a compelling interplay between text and illustrations. Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007) state, “In a picturebook, words and pictures never tell exactly the same story. It is this dissonance that catches the reader’s attention” (p. 274). Scholars agree that reading pictures is indeed a multifaceted act (Pantaleo, 2005). In addition, children often look at illustrations more closely and see details in the pictures (Keifer, 1995) that are missed by “skipping and scanning” adults (Meek, 1988, p. 19). Therefore, children are generally more proficient and skilled at reading images, such as those in picture books, as they attend to the illustrations to interpret the perceived meaning of the story.

A picture book has been defined as an aesthetic object, an art form (Bader, 1976). It is one in which text and illustration work in concert to create meaning (Serafini & Giorgis, 2003). How this meaning is generated is dependent on the relationship of the illustrations to the text. This relationship has been viewed by scholars in five unique ways (Agosto, 1999; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000):

1. Symmetry. The illustrations closely correlate with the text rather than adding varied interpretations or nuances. Robert McCloskey’s (1941, ...
1948) books, such as *Make Way for Ducklings* and *Blueberries for Sal*, demonstrate this category in that the illustrations reflect what has been stated in the text.

2. **Complementary.** Words and illustrations provide different but complementary information. *Oh, No!* by Candace Fleming (2012) provides a bouncy rhyme coupled with Eric Rohmann’s relief prints that follow the plight of various animals as they fall into a hole (Oh, no!) while a salivating tiger lurks nearby.

3. **Enhancement.** The illustrations enhance or extend the text while providing opportunities for multiple interpretations. Mo Willems’s (2003, 2008) pigeon books, *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* and *The Pigeon Wants a Puppy*, depict a hilarious and unflinching character who pleads, wheelies, and begs in an attempt to get what he thinks he wants, but is sometimes surprised by the outcome.

4. **Counterpoint.** Words and illustrations tell different stories. In *Wolves* by Emily Gravett (2006), Rabbit borrows *Wolves* (by E Grrrabbit!) from the West Bucks Public Borrowing Library and is totally unaware that the information he is reading becomes a suspenseful tale for the reader. Gravett (2009, 2010) also uses this device in many of her other books, such as *Spells* and *The Rabbit Problem*.

5. **Contradiction.** Illustrations seem to be contrary to the text. In *Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters From Obedience School*, Mark Teague (2002) employs a split spread to illustrate Ike’s imaginative letter writing contrasted to the reality of his obedience school experience. Mem Fox’s (1994) classic *Tough Boris* tells of the tough, scary, and greedy pirate, but the illustrations convey a much different character who is kind and compassionate.

In discussing picture books, children may not know the terms indicated in this list, but they often demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between text and illustrations by the comments and connections that they share through oral or written means. Students who live in states adopting the Common Core State Standards are being asked to explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story, particularly in relation to mood, character, and setting (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Picture books that teachers and parents might share with students are those receiving a Caldecott Medal or Honor Book award. Each year, the Caldecott Award Selection Committee is charged with the task of reading, analyzing, and discussing
the illustrations in picture books that have been published during the preceding year. The committee members consider the visual elements while also deliberating over the physical aspects, such as the book cover, dust jacket, endpapers, title page, and front matter, that might contain storytelling components. Although not consciously tasked with discussing the categories highlighted in the previous list, given that the award is to be given “to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children” (Association for Library Service to Children, 2008, para. 1), the members delve into reflecting and pondering the relationship between text and illustration. They recognize that unless it is a wordless picture book, there needs to be interplay between the two given that every aspect of the book is meaningful.

According to Sipe (2008b), “the literary understanding of picturebooks includes learning to read the visual text of the illustrational sequence” (p. 18). Picture books provide a source for readers to develop their visual aesthetic understanding (Sipe, 2008a) and an appreciation for the role of visual images in a book’s narrative, the art elements, and the principles of design. Each aspect of a picture book is carefully choreographed to create a unified whole.

**Elements of Picture Book Design**

To assist readers with recognizing how the various aspects of a picture book work together to create meaning, it is beneficial to provide them with an understanding of the elements of book design. The layout and design of a picture book involve a very conscious decision-making process engaged in by the illustrator, art designer, and often the editor. The book’s features become an integral part of the total reading experience. It is important to view a picture book as a whole, which begins and ends with the cover of the book, while the endpapers and typography also contribute to the potential for enabling readers to build and interpret story meaning.

**Book Covers**

The cover of a picture book sets the tone and mood for the story contained inside. It also serves as an invitation to readers, so it’s important that the initial illustration displayed on the cover be eye-catching. A removable dust jacket often encases the outside of a book and offers a summary, along with author and illustrator information. An illustration on the dust jacket is often identical to that found on the cover, but sometimes there is a treasure on the hardcover of a book that’s discovered after the dust jacket is removed. This treasure may be a different illustration, an embossed image, or a single color. In addition, the illustration found on the cover and/or the dust jacket may or may not be replicated within the book. Decisions about the book cover and dust jacket are often the last to be made and may be influenced by the input of the marketing staff at the publishing company.
Overall, the cover and dust jacket provide the first look for readers who may base their decision on selecting a book merely on this one component.

The cover art of *Grandpa Green* by Lane Smith (2011) presents a fanciful, giant, green elephant topiary and supplies a glimpse into this touching story of family history and the sense of legacy. This attention-grabbing illustration also complements the engaging story inside. Jerry Pinkney’s (2009) Caldecott Medal-winning book, *The Lion & the Mouse*, is a wordless adaptation of the classic Aesop fable. The dust jacket features the king of the jungle with a sideways glance that compels the reader to turn the book over, only to discover the mouse gazing back. The book cover underneath the jacket shows two panels—one of the lion and the other of the mouse—while the back cover displays the various animals of the African Serengeti, where the story is set. *All the World* by Liz Garton Scanlon (2009), a story that presents a celebration of the world and humankind, displays a charming watercolor illustration on the cover of the two main characters. However, this particular illustration is not found within the story itself. When readers remove the dust jacket from *The Pilot and the Little Prince: The Life of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* by Peter Sís (2014), they discover a textured, deep blue cover with the image of a small plane embossed on the front.

**Endpapers**

When a hardcover picture book is opened, the endpapers are the first and last pages that the reader views. Endpapers serve a practical purpose of holding the pages to the cover, but they also represent a conscious design decision. Endpapers may display a solitary color, a decorative pattern or design, or the beginning of the story. The front endpapers may differ from those at the conclusion of the story and may depict a change that occurs within the book.

In the delightful wordless picture book *Daisy Gets Lost* by Chris Raschka (2013), Daisy the dog loses her way after merrily chasing a squirrel into the woods. The dark, forest green endpapers provide a sense of how Daisy felt surrounded by vegetation while unable to find her owner. The endpapers of Giles Andreae’s (1999) *Giraffes Can’t Dance* contain three horizontal rows of eight pictures showing gangly giraffe Gerald engaged in a variety of poses. When readers move their eyes across each row, they will insist that Gerald is indeed dancing. Paul Zelinsky’s (1997) *Rapunzel* is a stunning interpretation of the classic tale that mimics the masters of the Italian Renaissance. The front endpapers show a villager with his donkey facing to the right, inviting the reader to turn the page and enter the story. On the back endpapers, the reversed image of the Italian Renaissance–style painting depicts the villager looking left, toward the final pages. The front endpapers of *The Zoo* by Suzy Lee (2007) show a gorilla escaping through a break in his cage on the far left side of the spread, while on the far right side, readers will spy a small monkey looking at the gorilla along with the
trunk of an elephant peeking out. On the back endpapers, the far right side now has the monkey pictured with his hands on the gorilla’s behind as he pushes him back through the break in the cage. The scene on the endpapers of The Zoo isn’t contained within the pages of the book, as none of the animals are actually depicted inside cages or fences.

**Typography**
The typography, also referred to as the font or typeface, plays a significant role in the overall design of a picture book. The size and style of the typeface may match the content of the text or the stylistic features of the illustrations. The typeface should complement the illustrations while being readable for the intended audience. The font also offers clues as to how the word or phrase should be read given its size, shape, or color.

*Polar Bear Night* by Lauren Thompson (2004) contains bold black type that complements the feel of Stephen Savage’s linoleum block illustrations. The art director for this retro-style book wanted the type to feel definite and confident, the same way the bear cub feels as she ventures out to explore the world (Marcus, 2012). David Macaulay’s (1990) Caldecott Medal winner, *Black and White*, employs four different fonts—one for each seemingly unrelated story about a boy sitting on a train, parents acting silly, a convict’s escape, and a tardy commuter train. The font becomes a storytelling device along with the nonlinear plots. Another Caldecott Medal winner, *The House in the Night* by Susan Marie Swanson (2008), imparts a cumulative story featuring a golden key and contains spectacular scratchboard illustrations by Beth Krommes that are splashed with gold. The striking gold color is also used for the font on pages with a black background. Hand-lettered text provides a playful mood in *A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever* by Marla Frazee (2008). Eamon’s grandparents plan a week of nature camp for him and his friend, James, but the two boys seem to prefer watching television, eating snacks, and avoiding the great outdoors. However, even the most reluctant of campers can discover something exciting when the adventure is shown onscreen.

**Borders and Frames**
Borders and frames can envelop text or illustration and be composed of a simple line or contain intricate details. At times, borders are used to add to the overall tone and mood of a picture book. Other times, there are no borders or frames at all, and the illustrations extend beyond the boundaries of the page. Illustrators may also imply the illusion of a border by surrounding the image(s) with white space, which gives the impression of a framed picture.

*Illustrations in Picture Books*
Allen Say (1993) is known for his portrait-like illustrations in books such as Grandfather’s Journey, which exhibits large, formally composed paintings in sepia tones to convey Say’s family history. Each exquisite watercolor painting is framed with a thin, black line that sets it apart from the text by the use of white space. A bear experiences his first autumn in Leaves by David Ezra Stein (2007). The joyously colored illustrations framed in a thin, uneven, black line hang on the pages like paintings, while other times Stein uses white space to convey the expansiveness and excitement of frolicking in the leaves. In Swamp Angel, Anne Isaacs’s (1994) witty tale about Angelica Longrider, who became the greatest woodwoman of Tennessee, the feisty (and gigantic) protagonist breaks the frame in several illustrations, as if she’s too large to fit inside the book. Mélanie Watt (2006–2013) uses borders and frames extensively in her series of books about Scaredy Squirrel. Watt’s boxes and borders are used to visually separate the illustrations that appear somewhat as a list divided into a grid of nine boxes, all of which illustrate the squirrel’s preparedness for potential danger.

Examining the Art Elements in Books
by Laura Vaccaro Seeger

In addition to exploring the components of picture book design, it’s also advantageous to inform readers about how elements of art are used by illustrators. A way to do this effectively would be to examine the work of one illustrator, such as Laura Vaccaro Seeger. Her picture books are colorful, imaginative, and innovative. First the Egg (Seeger, 2007b) and Green (Seeger, 2012) have both received a Caldecott Honor Award, and her many other titles have been lauded for various state and organization awards as well. An initial glimpse at Seeger’s (2003, 2004, 2008b) The Hidden Alphabet, Lemons Are Not Red, or One Boy might warrant the idea that these are concept books. However, on closer examination, readers will discover that most of her titles contain a narrative storyline along with an ingenious use of artistic and design elements. In addition, the relationships of text and illustration exhibit many of the categories, such as complementary, enhancement, and counterpoint, that were described earlier in the chapter.

Use of Color

Illustrators such as Seeger use color to portray characters, convey mood or emotion, or present a concept. Color is one of the most expressive elements
and can range from a full spectrum to black and white. Conscious color choices are made regarding hue, tone, and saturation. Subdued colors can suggest boredom or serenity, whereas intense colors may evoke a sense of excitement or energy.

_Lemons Are Not Red_ presents 12 colors and images by telling what they are _not_ in this interactive book. The reader gains a multidimensional definition and view of each object changing colors, such as on the opening pages: “Lemons are not RED. Lemons are YELLOW. Apples are RED” (n.p.). Seeger cleverly uses a die-cut that initially shows the lemon as red, but then it changes to yellow once the page is turned. In _Green_, various shades of the color are presented through lush acrylic paintings and skillfully positioned die-cuts. This stunning picture book doesn’t focus only on the hues of green but also presents the notion of appreciating nature and the environment.

**Use of Line**

Line is the most commonly found element of design in picture books (Kiefer, 1995). Each mark on a page begins with a dot that grows into a line that may be slow and rolling, sleek and fast, or quiet and steady. Artists create lines to prompt the reader’s eye to move in a particular direction. The use of thin lines creates an elegant or fragile quality, whereas thick or bold lines show strength or provide emphasis.

A stuffed bear and an ebullient dachshund, the best of friends, are featured in a beginning reader series by this author-illustrator. In _Dog and Bear: Two Friends, Three Stories, Dog and Bear: Two’s Company_, and _Dog and Bear: Three to Get Ready_, Seeger (2007a, 2008a, 2009) uses bold, black lines to outline Dog and Bear, which allows them to stand out against the white background. Lines show movement and are also used to express emotions as the two interact and sometimes disagree. Even the font encompasses lines that appear to be childlike writing.

**Use of Perspective**

Perspective is an element that artists use to provide another layer of meaning or interpretation of a story. Readers might be given a bird’s-eye view by looking down on a scene or a worm’s-eye view that gazes up. Illustrators also use the placement of objects or characters on a page to provide perspective. The bottom third of a page is considered the foreground, and items placed in that location draw more attention. The center portion of the page is the middle ground and prompts the reader’s eyes to move up or down to view the illustration. Items pictured in the background are smaller in size because they’re farther away.
Seeger (2010) uses perspective as both an art element and a storytelling device in *What If?:*

**WHAT IF a boy found a beach ball and kicked it into the ocean?**
**WHAT IF two seals found it and began to play?**
**WHAT IF a third seal appeared on the beach looking for a friend?** (front flap)

Seeger uses the same story with three different outcomes. The two seals are often pictured in the foreground, while the woeful-looking third seal is in the background. Perspective is created through the illustrations as well as the story possibilities that are generated by readers.

**Use of Texture**

Texture is an element that is found in many of Seeger’s picture books. Texture tenders the illusion that an object feels hard or soft, smooth or rough. Readers often have the urge to touch the illustration in an attempt to feel the diversity of textures.

*First the Egg* contemplates the age-old question, Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Each full-color illustration invites readers to feel the texture of the brushstrokes as well as the well-positioned die-cuts. *Green* also offers texture, from the raised title on the book jacket to the various hues and shades of green on the double-page spreads.

**Perusing Bully**

To understand how the various art elements and design features create an effective picture book, it is beneficial to take a “walk” through Seeger’s (2013) *Bully.* In this deceptively simple-looking story, Bully the bull doesn’t have anything nice to say to any of his friends. When the other animals ask him to play, he responds in the way he’s been taught: “Chicken!” “Slow poke!” or, “You stink!” (n.p.). Seeger’s bold, graphic artwork and spare, powerful words provide a tender and thoughtful story.

The dust jacket and book cover display an eye-catching, stop-sign red background that emphasizes the brown bull’s surly, if not angry, expression as he stands atop the large title. The title itself is featured in a textured, light brown color. Both the bull and the title are outlined with thick, black lines that provide emphasis against the solid red background. Inside, the endpapers exhibit the same texture as the book title and have a handmade paper quality with a barnyard hay–like appearance. This same paper provides the background on each page throughout *Bully.* Turning to the page after the front endpapers, Seeger provides a context for the story prior to the title page. On this page, she has illustrated a large and very angry, gray bull who roars, “GO AWAY!” to the story’s protagonist, making him appear to look small and expressing a look of dejection.
This utterance also sets the story in motion before the title page and launches the angry, little bull on his tirade.

Seeger uses a palette of crisp, flat colors that includes red, brown, gray, pink, yellow, green, and white. Except for the title, which is featured in a bold, red font on the title page, the remaining text consists primarily of insults that are hurled by the little bull to his animal friends. These words are written in black font contained within speech bubbles with a white background.

The space on the pages is uncluttered and focuses on the text and the characters. When the bull shouts, “CHICKEN!” “BUZZ OFF!” or “BUTT OUT!” the font is in large, uppercase letters. As the bull utters each unkind remark, he appears more aggressive and powerful; both his body and the text get larger and larger. But when the feisty goat calls it like it is—“Bully!”—it sends the bull into a physical tailspin and represents his emotional upheaval. The now-deflated bull utters one small word, “Sorry,” as a tear rolls down his cheek. His next words to the animals are “Wanna play?”

The final spread of Bully shows an opening in the fence, which was previously an unbroken fence line crossing every double-page spread that served as a measure of size, both actual and emotional, as well as a barrier to friendship. This fence opening is more than a casual design element, as it is the gate through which the bull and his newfound friends walk into an altered reality. The 18 words (22 if you count words uttered more than once) present a complicated topic through utter simplicity. The book design of Bully is key to the interplay of text and illustration.

What’s significant about Bully is that the little bull is a sympathetic character throughout the story. Having shown us the reason for his anger, Seeger offers readers a way to root for him. She also provides a way out for the emotionally charged creature. Goat demonstrates that he doesn’t need to act like a victim, and the other animals give the bull another chance.

The Art of Reading Images

Creating an awareness of the art and design elements of picture books allows readers to linger longer over illustrations and to appreciate and interpret stories on a deeper level. These elements are all a part of the storytelling process in creating meaning for the reader. Also, if children are to attend to both illustration and text as they make meaning, it is imperative for an adult to model awareness by stopping to discuss how line or color is used or to point out features such as the book cover or endpapers. To further generate understanding, students can be asked the following questions:

- How does the illustrator use line/color/textures/perspective?
- What’s depicted on the dust jacket? Is the same illustration on the book cover? Is the illustration(s) found in the story?

Illustrations in Picture Books * 79
Who do you see in the illustration(s)? Describe them.

- What medium do you think the illustrator used to create the picture?
- What type of font is used? Are words or phrases emphasized using a different font?
- What feelings are evoked by the use of inventive font, type size, color, and word spacing?
- Did the illustrations display exactly what was in the text? If not, how did they differ?
- How have the text and illustration worked together to create meaning?

An illustrator study also provides an opportunity to view an individual’s books, such as Seeger’s, in further depth and detail. Invite students to select a favorite illustrator and read multiple books illustrated by that individual, taking time to linger over the book covers, endpapers, title pages, and illustrations. Share information with students about the illustrator, the medium that he or she uses, and the individual’s process for creating art. Next, start a discussion, with examples drawn from individual books, about how elements of the books’ design enhance the mood or theme of the stories. Have students create a visual response to the illustrator’s work, using the same medium, if possible.

It’s important for readers to recognize and understand the ways in which text and illustration work together. Art and text together create a relationship that allows them to reflect and expand on each other and hence create greater meaning than either can convey independently.

REFERENCES


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Illustrations in Picture Books * 81


**OTHER RECOMMENDED CHILDREN’S BOOKS**


Klassen, J. (2012). *This is not my hat.* Somerville, MA: Candlewick.


**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Caldecott Medal (www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottmedal): The Association for Library Service to Children provides information about the current and previous winners, as well as information about and descriptions of the illustrations that received this prestigious award.

Laura Vaccaro Seeger (www.studiolvs.com): In-depth information is provided about her books, along with interviews and links to book trailers.

Picturing Books (www.picturingbooks.com): This website provides information about illustration techniques and media used, as well as links to other websites containing additional resources about picture book illustration and design.

Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (www.scbwi.org): The website contains information about the authors and illustrators who belong to the organization and provides links to their websites and blogs.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Cyndi Giorgis is a professor of children’s and young adult literature and the dean of the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso, USA. She has served on the American Library Association’s Caldecott Medal, Newbery Medal, and Geisel Award committees and is now serving as the chair of the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children Committee. Cyndi has published extensively in journals such as *The Reading Teacher, Language Arts,* and the *Journal of Children’s Literature* and is a regular contributor to *Book Links* magazine. She has also created numerous curriculum guides for picture books and novels for use by teachers. Her presentations at the state, national, and international levels focus on the authentic sharing of children’s literature in ways that evoke meaningful responses from readers. Cyndi can be contacted at cgiorgis@utep.edu.
CHAPTER 6

Reading Text and Image

Building Skills for Deep Understanding

Lauren Aimonette Liang, University of Utah

Lee Galda, University of Minnesota

Word-processing programs do not like the word *picturebook*. At every instance, they suggest a mistake, a misspelling, and clamor to break it into two separate words. But the complexity of this unique genre is in fact implied by the structure of its name: picturebook. Picturebooks are not illustrated books. They are built on the idea of synergy; the words of a picturebook tell us things that are not in the pictures, and the pictures tell us what the words do not (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014; Sipe, 1998). To understand the story captured in a picturebook, readers must read both the words and the text. The compelling details, the humor, and the essence of the story are captured in the unique interaction of the words and the pictures.

Children who encounter outstanding picturebooks learn how to read the interaction and thus begin to notice and discuss the craft of the author and illustrator, to recognize and discuss theme, and to understand and discuss other complex literary concepts, such as foreshadowing, mood, and subplot. Helping students to better comprehend and discuss how picturebooks work prepares them for doing this in the future with text-only reading. To understand, and explain what is understood, requires close reading of the word–picture interaction and the use of textual evidence, both skills essential to deep comprehension (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Thus, teaching students to understand picturebook format and giving them the words with which to discuss it can be an early important step in the development of complex literary understanding.

In this chapter, we discuss what it means to teach elementary students about picturebooks as a format and what that might look like in your classroom. We begin with ways to help students notice and discuss illustrative details and styles, and then focus on deepening students’ discussions of picturebook synergy (the interaction of text and pictures). We encourage teaching these concepts for
multiple reasons. As seen in the classroom examples that we share in this chapter, students gain deeper understanding of both the picturebook at hand and how picturebooks work through discussions that focus on synergy, format and design, and illustrative style and technique (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Kiefer, 1995; Pantaleo, 2008, 2014; Sipe, 2008). In these discussions, vocabulary increases, as does understanding of craft. Close reading, using textual evidence, and learning about literary elements through discussion of picturebook interaction is an essential and joyful part of picturebook discussion.

Teaching Picturebook Format

Teaching students to understand and interpret picturebook format involves two basic parts: (1) noticing and discussing illustrations and (2) examining and discussing the interaction of text and pictures. These steps help students understand how the synergy, or the interaction, creates meaning, deepens understanding, and highlights genre.

Noticing and Discussing Illustrations: Visual Elements and Beyond

A great way to begin helping students notice how picturebooks work is to discuss the visual elements in a picturebook’s illustrations. Learning just a little about how illustrators use elements such as line (a mark on paper, used by illustrators to both pull the eye of the reader in a certain direction and to express particular meanings through its angle, width, and length), shape (the area or forms used to suggest feelings and ideas, direct the eye, and contribute to three-dimensional quality), texture (used to convey a sense of reality), and color (used most often to signify and intensify mood and emotion) helps students learn to pay attention to craft and leads them also to thinking more deeply about mood and main ideas. This is a particularly good starting place for discussions with preschool and early primary-grade students. At this age, they’re already very attuned to visual elements and are mainly listening to teachers read picturebooks aloud. These young children are often closely attending to the illustrations while listening to the words. Knowing a little about these elements of art begins to get them paying attention to craft and leads them also to looking at mood. Talking about these elements also helps students acquire the vocabulary they need to discuss how picturebooks work. See Table 6.1 for a list of common elements of art and their definitions.

Deepening Awareness of Visual Elements: Classroom Examples

For example, after Ms. Lopez shared Bone Dog by Eric Rohmann (2011) with her kindergarten class, she discussed the dark, strong, thick lines that outline each
Table 6.1. Common Picturebook Terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>The equal weight of lines, shapes, textures, and colors in an illustration or picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-hatching</td>
<td>Fine parallel lines, usually black, that are crossed with another set of parallel lines to produce the effect of shading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dust jacket</td>
<td>The thick paper wrapper around the outside of a book, folded inside at the front and back to keep it in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endpages or endpapers</td>
<td>The inside of the front and back cover, consisting of two parts: a pastedown (affixed to the inside of the front and back covers) and the flyleaf (the part of the endpage that is not pasted down)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flap</td>
<td>The part of the dust jacket that is folded inside the front and back covers (the case) of a book. Often, the front flap has a summary of the story, and the back flap has short biographies of the author and/or illustrator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gutter</td>
<td>When the book is opened, the middle of the spread where the pages are bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line</td>
<td>A mark on paper or a place where different colors meet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>The material used to produce an illustration. The plural form is media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition and variety</td>
<td>Repetition in art is used to achieve visual harmony and balance. Variety creates a paradox or progression to lead the reader's eyes from one point to another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape</td>
<td>An area or form with a definite outline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technique</td>
<td>The method artists use to create art within the chosen medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texture</td>
<td>In an illustration, the appearance of having a smooth or rough surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trim size</td>
<td>The overall size and proportion of a book</td>
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character. She explained to the students that these lines were a deliberate choice by Rohmann. Several students noticed that the dark outlines made the characters “look like cartoons.” Ms. Lopez commented that even though the scenes in Bone Dog are a little scary, they’re also rather funny. When students gave examples of the times they were laughing, she pointed to the heavily outlined characters and explained that illustrators often use dark outlines to exaggerate situations and help evoke humor in an absurd situation. Sharing Wolves by Emily Gravett (2006) with her class at a later date, Ms. Lopez found that her students kept reaching out to pet the pages, commenting that the fur on the wolf looked real. Again she taught her
students a bit about craft, explaining that the hatched pencil lines created texture and that a strong sense of texture makes things seem real even in a fantasy world.

With just a few simple conversations around read-alouds, Ms. Lopez’s students already are building appreciation for the decisions that authors/illustrators make and understanding that these choices are deliberate. The students are also learning the vocabulary that allows them to discuss these decisions with authority and sophistication.

**Considering Illustration Color and Mood: Classroom Examples**

Children, and adults, also pay close attention to the visual element of color, instinctively reacting to colors when determining the mood of a book. “These are the happy books!” exclaimed one young preschooler with a pile of Lois Ehlert’s books on her lap. The intensely hued, brightly colored illustrations clearly indicated to the nonreader that the mood of these books would be joyful. Similarly, without even reading a phrase, a seventh grader glancing through a stack of adolescent picturebooks quickly pushed away an opened copy of *Woolus in the Stiee* by Margaret Wild and Anne Spudvilas (2007). Obviously reacting to the dark and foreboding blacks and sick yellows, the girl said, “Oh, no—look at that. That is much too creepy for me.” Mood, a concept that’s often challenging for students, is frequently easier to understand in a picturebook. Illustrators are well aware of color associations and carefully select their palettes for each book to help send subtle messages about mood. Discussing colors in a picturebook is often one of the easiest ways to begin children’s understanding of mood and the deliberate choices that picturebook creators make.

Mr. Peterson, for example, noticed one of his third-grade students kindly putting an arm around her kindergarten reading buddy during a shared reading session. When he asked if everything was OK, the student explained that she was reassuring the younger child that everything would turn out fine for the two dogs in the book she was reading, *Boot & Shoe* by Marla Frazee (2012). Knowing that she hadn’t read the book previously, Mr. Peterson asked how she knew this. “Because even though the dogs are crying, the colors were very dark, but now there is a little pink and yellow, and the background is all white again here. So, things are starting to feel more cheerful.” An accomplished picturebook reader, the older student knew that a return of warmer, brighter colors usually meant a turn to a happier mood.

**Discussing the Effect of Media and Technique: Classroom Examples**

Discussing the choice of media and technique used in a picturebook furthers young readers’ understanding of craft by highlighting how an illustrator’s choice of artistic style for a book matches the mood and often the theme as well. Ms. Ford,
for example, noticed a group of her second graders closely examining the woodblock prints with muted color pencil overlays in *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* by Philip Stead (2010). She explained to the children the careful, time-consuming process of woodblock prints and added that the choice of this illustrative style seemed to match the time-intensive, intricate friendships between Amos and his zoo friends. The children, used to these types of comments, noted that the soft colors matched “the quiet feel” of the book as well. Sharing Stian Hole’s (2006) *Garmann’s Summer* with a group of fourth-grade students, Ms. Ozburn highlighted Hole’s ability to capture the literal understandings of a young boy by using the mixed media of real photographs and illustrations. As students exclaimed over an image of a superimposed X-ray on the pencil sketch of a small boy, she pointed out how Hole uses his craft to make a small instance in the story—Garmann hearing the phrase *butterflies in your stomach*—help the reader better understand the character’s frequently confused point of view and the overarching mood of the book.

One simple way to help students better understand how the choice of illustrative style matches and extends the mood of a book is to use folklore. In her third-grade classroom, Ms. Garrett used multiple versions of Goldilocks and the Three Bears to highlight this. After first having the students work together to retell a basic outline of the well-known tale, she asked them to close their eyes and imagine what the story would look like if it was illustrated with photographs of real bears and real people. Ms. Garrett asked the students if the mood of this version would be happy, scary, sad, or some other emotion. She then had them close their eyes again to imagine a version illustrated with cartoon bears and people. Again, she led them in a simple discussion of the mood that these types of illustrations might create. With that, Ms. Garret passed around multiple versions of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, including Jan Brett’s (1987) version, with intricate details and borders; James Marshall’s (1988), with his strong colors and shapes; and the more unusual use of mixed media in Lauren Child’s (2008) version. After exploration of the books and discussions with peers, Ms. Garrett led her class in seeing how each version uses its illustrations, as well as certain textual effects, to create a slightly different tone and offer slightly different interpretations of the well-known tale.

**Noticing Illustrations: Attention to the Small Details**

In recent years, the creation of a picturebook has spread beyond the story pages (do Rozario, 2012). The dust jacket (the thick, folded paper wrapped around the hard cover), endpages (the paper adhered to the inside of the front and back covers), inner flaps (the folded inner parts of the dust jacket that typically provide a brief description of the book and information about the author and illustrator), title page (the page containing the title, author, publisher, and sometimes the date published), and more are now decisions made by authors and illustrators, not just
editors. These elements often contain additional illustrations and text, or colors and designs that hint at the mood or plot of the book, all of which may even extend the story. Books like Emily Gravett’s (2013) _Again!,_ for example, are only fully understood when the entire book is examined—including removing the dust jacket! Young readers are often better observers of these important details than adults (Kiefer, 1995; Meek, 1988) and can also handily discuss effects of choices in font, layouts across the gutter (the middle of the spread between two pages where the pages are bound), trim size (the overall size and proportion of a book), and other elements. The teacher’s role here is to present and explain the correct vocabulary terms for these phenomena and encourage discussions about them. Conversations about these points help students understand the importance and benefits of attending to small details, another skill essential to later comprehension of text-only books.

### Understanding Visual Elements as Textual Evidence

Classroom conversations about these visual elements of illustrations, such as the many discussed previously, not only begin the teaching of craft but also introduce the use of textual evidence. Young students reading picturebooks frequently make predictions about what will happen next in the story, using the illustrations as the basis for their educated guesses. Primary-grade teachers can build on this by asking students to identify what in the pictures made them think X was going to happen. Sophisticated ideas, such as deliberate use of composition and design, are easily introduced when students are already noticing it in a well-crafted picturebook. Following up on students’ predictions by asking questions such as “How did you know that ___ was going to happen? What were the clues?” begins to get students paying attention to foreshadowing and the use of textual and illustrative evidence. Adding brief explanations of commonly used techniques, such as balance (the equal weight of lines, shapes, textures, and colors in a picture) or repetition (used to achieve visual harmony) and variety (creates a paradox or progression to lead the reader’s eyes from point to point), alerts students to look for these techniques in other picturebooks, reminds them of their deliberate use by authors/illustrators, and prepares them in the future to better understand common, deliberately used writing techniques.

### Visual Element Choices and Prediction: Classroom Examples

For example, when Ms. Chen read aloud _Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse_ by Kevin Henkes (1996) to her first-grade class, she pointed out his wonderful use of...
repetition and variety to help the reader’s eyes move from point to point. Calling
children up to the front of room, she asked them to use a pointer to trace where
their eyes went when they were viewing the page. Students commented on the
similarity of the paths on so many pages and noticed how some very important
pages changed from a series of three pictures to one very large one, particularly
when young Lilly the mouse snuck her mean drawing into her teacher’s bag.
Together with Ms. Chen, the students discussed how Henkes “must have done
that because it is such an important part! He wants us to really know that!” They
noticed how pictures of Lilly in the bottom right corners of pages led them to want
to turn the page to see what happened next. One student announced to Ms. Chen
that the text of the story was also an example of repetition, explaining that there
were often three reasons, three statements, or three details in three sentences,
“just like there are three small pictures on so many pages.” Classroom discussions
like these help students better understand both the complex craft of picturebooks
and the story itself.

**Examining and Discussing the Interaction of Text and Pictures**

Although discussing illustrations inherently means considering the way the text
and pictures work together, explicit teaching about the type of synergy in any
picturebook can be useful for helping students recognize how the pictures influence
the reader’s interpretation of the text and how the text influences the reader’s
interpretation of the pictures. Synergy exists in many forms in picturebooks,
and academics describe these forms with several terms, such as parallel and
interdependent storytelling (Agosto, 1999), congruency, amplification, extension
(Doonan, 1993; Schwartz, 1982), and interdependence of word and image
(Lewis, 2001). In this section, we introduce three of the common ways that
picture–text interaction works in picturebooks using the terms complementary,
contradictory, and stories within a story. Understanding these common synergic
relationships promotes students’ growth of important complex literary skills, such
as understanding point of view and reliable (and unreliable) narration. See Table 6.2
for a concise summary of some common picture–text interactions.

**Discussing Complementary Picturebooks in the Classroom**

Complementary, or enhancing, picturebooks represent perhaps the most common
type of relationship between words and pictures. In these picturebooks, the words
and pictures support each other and work together to both extend the emotional
impact and deepen understanding. Sometimes this enhancement is subtle, but it
can also be quite extensive. Most frequently, the visual narrative tells the same story
as the verbal narrative but adds significant details. These details can, for example,
heighten the mood of the book or add deeper characterization to the protagonist.
Table 6.2. Common Types of Interactions of Text and Pictures in Picturebooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synergy</td>
<td>Reference to the fact that the illustrations and the verbal text of a picturebook combine to produce an effect that is greater than the sum of either part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementary</td>
<td>An interaction of text and pictures where the illustrations enhance the story told in the text, providing rich details, context, and/or emotional impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictory</td>
<td>An interaction of text and pictures where the story told in the illustrations contradicts or subverts the story told in the text, often providing much humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story within a story</td>
<td>An interaction of text and pictures where the illustrations reflect and extend the main story but also offer one or more side stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading aloud Kevin Henkes’s (2007) A Good Day to her kindergartners, Ms. Dewing stopped on a two-page spread after reading the text “Little orange fox turned around, and there was his mother” (n.p.). She asked her students how the little fox was feeling. One student exclaimed, “He’s so happy and not worried anymore, and his mom is happy, too, and telling him it is OK!” Ms. Dewing asked the student if it said this in the text that she had just read. When the student said no, Ms. Dewing reread the exact text and then discussed with the class how Henkes’s illustration of the very happy fox and his reassuring mother adds the feeling to that part of the book. She then took one of the class’s favorite picturebooks, Sylvester and the Magic Pebble by William Steig (1969), off the shelf and said that this book does something similar to Henkes’s A Good Day. Ms. Dewing turned to the page where Sylvester’s parents speak to the police and read the text: “They went to the police. The police could not find their child” (n.p.). She pointed to the illustration and told the students that although the text doesn’t say it, the illustration shows us that the police are very sad that they can’t find Sylvester; the interaction of the text and pictures adds the emotion, or feeling, to the story. Prepping her students for future writing and reading, she explained that in chapter books, authors sometimes try to show how a character feels by describing his or her actions “like a picture” instead of just telling the reader how he feels.

**Thinking About Contradictory Picturebooks in the Classroom**

Unlike complementary picturebooks, in contradictory ones, the words and pictures work against each other and send contradictory messages. This is often called...

90 * Liang & Gaída
the counterpoint. These books, or pages within an otherwise complementary picturebook, often offer a good deal of fun and excitement for the reader. Students must grasp the contradictions in the two narratives to decide what’s really happening in the story. Frequently, the humor of a picturebook is captured in this contradiction between what the text says about a character or incident and the corresponding image portrayed.

Discussing the humor of a picturebook is a natural way to help students better understand the concept of contradictory synergy. Ms. Dewing, for example, stopped her read-aloud of Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale by Mo Willems (2004) when her class erupted with laughter after the two-page spread showing young protagonist Trixie running around with a pair of jeans on her head and a sock and underwear on her hands. The text reads, “Trixie helped her daddy put the laundry into the machine” (n.p.). When Ms. Dewing asked the class what was so funny about this page, the students quickly explained that Trixie wasn’t helping at all! Ms. Dewing praised the students for being so attentive to detail and then reminded her students about this example before several subsequent read-alouds, asking them to notice the relationship of the pictures to the text.

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**Students must grasp the contradictions in the two narratives to decide what’s really happening in the story.**

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**Considering Multiple Stories Within a Story With Your Class**

A third type of picturebook offers one or more additional stories within a story. The pictures enhance the story told in the text, much like a complementary picturebook, but also offer side stories. Readers are often tempted to revisit the book multiple times to follow the subplots offered. Liz Garton Scanlon’s (2009) All the World is an excellent example where many individual stories can be found throughout the book; these stories even intersect to add greater meaning to the ending. Watching her class share books, Ms. Johnson noticed three children huddled around All the World, flipping pages quickly back and forth. As she walked closer, she could hear the students:

*MAYA:* Look, now look. See, here’s the kids again in the back corner! And that’s the same car as this page!

*ALEXA:* They’re all together here at the end, see! They are all part of a big family. That’s why it says, “Nanas and papas.”

The students were following the various characters who appear from time to time on double-page spreads and noting how they come together in the last pages to illustrate the connectedness of the world. Clearly, these students had grasped the theme of the book by following the synergy of a story within the story.

*Reading Text and Image * 91
Using Synergy Discussions to Highlight Specific Literary Elements

Once students begin to notice and comment on the different ways that the text and pictures interact, it is an easy step to discussing how these interactions help develop specific literary elements. How does the interaction develop the setting, the characters, the plot, and the mood? Students attuned to the interactions of text and pictures already understand this fundamentally, but adding the language of literary elements prepares them well for future discussions of literature. For example, in many picturebooks, students will recognize that the text is only telling them the what of the story and that it takes the pictures to explain the how.

Discussing this with students as plot development helps plant seeds about the importance of rich details in writing a plot.

Character details also appear in illustrations; whereas the text might state one or two more obvious facts about the protagonist, the illustrations often add a much more complex picture through the tilt of the head, the small details of clothing, facial expressions, and so on. For example, popular children’s character David, the star of No, David! David Goes to School, and more by David Shannon (1998, 1999), is never described, nor do we read about his feelings in the text. Young readers follow his emotional journeys through the careful details found in each picture and understand that although he is very active, he is generally kindhearted and wants to please. Ms. Hower laughed when one of her preschool students walked straight from a little time in the cookdown area to bring her a book to read from the book nook. When he asked her to read David Goes to School (a very popular book in her pre-K classroom) again, she asked him why: “I like it. David is funny, and he doesn’t mean to be bad sometimes. See, his teachers really like him, and he gets to make up for everything in the end.” Ms. Hower’s young student had clearly understood the text–pictures interaction that characterizes David and, perhaps, recognized David as a kindred spirit!

Conversations about text–picture interactions quickly build students’ understanding of both craft and literary elements, strengthen their practice of close reading, and highlight the importance of using textual and pictorial evidence.

Conclusion

Why is this so important? School is much more than a place to learn an unrelated assortment of facts and skills. When we teachers do our jobs well, we help our students learn how to think, develop skills that they can apply to other situations,
and build knowledge that allows them access to increasingly challenging content. Helping them notice and learn to articulate their understandings about how picturebooks work is not only relevant and necessary to their early literary education but also a relevant and rich source of knowledge and skills to rely on as they increasingly encounter text-only literature. Knowing, for example, that a character’s intention can be implied in pictures, as in the David books, forms a foundation for understanding that character intention can be and is often implied. In picturebooks, it’s frequently shown in the illustrations, but in chapter books and novels, it’s through words. Understanding that authors and illustrators make intentional choices in picturebooks allows students to think about both how and why authors do the same in chapter books and novels. Seeking to understand why a book is the way it is, rather than criticizing it for not being otherwise, is foundational for literary appreciation. Finally, teaching children the vocabulary of the picturebook format allows them to explore and discuss books in increasingly insightful ways, coming to progressively more sophisticated literary understandings with their peers and, in our experience, often offering wonderful insights to the adults fortunate enough to be reading picturebooks with them.

NOTE
All names are pseudonyms. Classroom examples are fictional, based on teacher-reported classroom conversations from 2004–2014.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lauren Aimonette Liang is an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, USA. Her research and teaching focus on children’s and adolescent literature. Lauren’s work has been published in journals such as Reading Research Quarterly, the Journal of Children’s Literature, and Reading Psychology, as well as in both professional and practitioner books. She is also a coauthor of the widely used children’s literature textbook Literature and the Child (8th ed., Wadsworth/Cengage, 2014). Lauren serves on editorial boards for several journals and committees for the International Literacy Association (ILA), National Council of Teachers of English, American Library Association, Literacy Research Association, and United States Board on Books for Young People. She was a long-time reviewer for The Horn Book Guide and other review publications and served as chair of ILA’s Children’s and Young Adults’ Book Awards Committee for 2012–2015. Lauren can be contacted at lauren.liang@utah.edu.

Lee Galda was the first Marguerite Henry Professor of Children’s and Young Adult Literature at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA, where she taught courses in transactional theory and various aspects of children’s and adolescent literature after moving from the University of Georgia in 1998. She has received several awards for teaching from both institutions. Her research focused on response to literature, effective practice in the teaching of literature, and the nature of contemporary children’s literature. Lee has published many refereed articles, book chapters, and books, as well as many invited articles and book reviews, and was the children’s books editor for The Reading Teacher. Her research was funded by several grants and honored by several research awards. Lee received her PhD from New York University in 1980 and retired from the University of Minnesota in 2013. She can be contacted at galda001@umn.edu.
CHAPTER 7

Graphic Novels in Education

Comics, Comprehension, and the Content Areas

Stergios Botzakis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Historically, comic books have been taboo in classrooms, hidden between the pages of a textbook and read when the teacher wasn't paying attention. More recently, these types of texts have been expanded and called graphic novels. They've lost some of the stigma of being contraband, and some have come to be merited. Art Spiegelman's (1986) *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I. My Father Bleeds History* began this trend when it won the Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992, and it was continued when Gene Luen Yang's (2006) *American Born Chinese* was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award in the category of young people's literature. Librarians have been advocating for the inclusion of graphic novels in school libraries (National Coalition Against Censorship, American Library Association, & Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2006; Weiner, 2003), and some researchers are finding that they are effective texts in reinforcing comprehension and memory (Short, Randolph-Seng, & McKenny, 2013). No longer relegated to the trash heap, graphic texts have come to prominence in educational settings.

Graphic novels have also come into more prominence in bookstores and in the buying habits of young readers. Manga, Japanese comics translated into English, have become particularly popular with young readers, especially girls (Glazer, 2005). As might be noticed by their prominence in bookstores, the sales numbers for graphic novels in general and manga in particular have been steadily growing in the United States (Goodnow, 2007). Past research has shown that students' reading preferences are typically not included in the curriculum (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999), and other research (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Norton, 2003) suggests that students could become more motivated and successful when their interests are included in instruction.

Because graphic novels have become a popular reading choice of many young readers, it makes sense to look at how they might fit into an educational setting. With this growing attention to graphic novels, the point of this chapter is to report information about what they can do in general, to demonstrate some uses of...
particular examples, and also to provide information about where appropriate and appealing graphic novels might be found for students.

**Why Should You Use Graphic Novels in the Classroom?**

Popularity alone is not reason enough to include graphic novels in a curriculum, but there are a number of features unique to the medium that lend themselves well to instruction. Three of these text features are transitions, contextual information, and visual permanence, and I describe each in this section.

Reading graphic novels, like reading comics in general, requires the reader to make connections between images set apart by panels and gutters (the empty spaces between panels; McCloud, 1994). Such reading requires constant inference making, as readers have to assume that actions are occurring between the panels. When students assume action takes place in the time it takes them to move from one panel to another, they’re engaged in higher level thinking skills, often without even knowing it, which is why comics are sometimes called “the invisible art” (Heath & Bhagat, 1997, p. 586). Making inferences from images is typically easier for students, and that skill can be introduced and taught using graphic novels (Frey & Fisher, 2004) and later revisited for more traditional text reading. What can be difficult for students to do with simple text can be more easily accomplished via reading more visually oriented materials.

Along with transitions that foster inference making, the illustrations in graphic novels also provide contextual information that can assist or enhance readers’ ability to engage with text. This contextual information has been used successfully to engage with second-language learners (Cary, 2004) and struggling readers (Yang, 2008) because the use of images along with words provides clues for comprehension. Such learning need not be limited to concrete facts but can also be applied to more abstract learning. For example, the images in graphic novels can be used much in the same way that more print-based text features are discussed in language arts classes. Examining how an author draws a particular scene or character can extend the discussion to symbolism that authors create in poems and prose. The way Art Spiegelman uses imagery to convey character traits in *Maus* offers an avenue for teachers to speak about how Herman Melville (1851/2003) does the same thing in *Moby-Dick* or any of his other works. Exploring the interactions between text and image can open doors to further academic discussions.

One other feature of graphic novels that makes them useful to readers of varying ability is their “visual permanence” (Yang, 2008, p. 188). The words and pictures contained in graphic novels don’t move and are fixed on a page, allowing
the reader to choose how fast or slow to read it and also the degree to which to attend to the words and pictures. Graphic novels give the illusion of time passing, but they leave the rate of change up to the reader. Yang likens this feature of the graphic novels to being able to rewind and revisit information (or conversely, to keep on going), which is not unrelated to the rereading that students can do with more traditional print-based texts. The major difference lies in the presence of images, which can be more attention getting and unthreatening to more visually oriented youths. In short, he argues that graphic novels make it easier for students to read at a rate appropriate to them.

A note of caution: Just as putting a student in front of a computer doesn’t guarantee that learning is taking place, having students read graphic novels doesn’t necessarily mean that they are reading and understanding them. The ease associated with reading graphic novels and comic strips can be deceiving. Just because graphic novels are popular doesn’t mean that students know how to read, produce, or even talk about them. Also not guaranteed is that all students will automatically love them. Taste and preference can be malleable, mercurial things, but the payoffs in discovering texts that students connect with and enjoy are many.

Reading graphic novels for some, however, may lead to a passion in reading that leads to wide reading and increased reading volume, both associated with many positive learning outcomes, including increased reading fluency and more developed vocabulary awareness (Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004). So, it’s in students’ best interests to include many different types of interesting texts, including graphic novels, in the course of schooling. In the next section, I describe four different graphic novels and ways teachers can use them with their elementary-grade students.

**Poseidon: Earth Shaker**

Author/illustrator George O’Connor’s (2013) *Poseidon: Earth Shaker* is the fifth in an ongoing series of books about the Greek Olympians (see O’Connor, 2014). He retells myths and legends in interesting ways by focusing on individual deities and tales associated with them. Here he details Poseidon and his complex personality as a father, brother, ally, and potentially destructive force of nature. This book is as much about relationships as it is about the main character. In the course of the book, many myths relating to Poseidon are recounted, including Odysseus’s ordeal with the Cyclops, Theseus, and the Minotaur and the contest between Athena and Poseidon to be the patron god of Athens. This book is a clever retelling of all of these tales, which are exciting in their own right but also useful later in school when analyzing literature and recognizing classical symbols. What’s more, the
artwork is reminiscent of U.S. superhero comics, so this book is attractive and awe inspiring, as well as informative and educational.

Close Reading
One area that’s being emphasized more with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) is the activity of close reading. This type of reading requires students to pay more attention to parsing texts, analyzing language in various formats to see symbolism, allusions, and other features. The ability to examine authors’ words and find various meanings can be a difficult proposition for some students, but graphic novels use the sequential format, a combination of words and pictures. Sequential art lends itself to a more immediate kind of inference and meaning making that can be used as an analog for the kinds of close reading done with text that’s solely composed of words. Put differently, graphic novels provide opportunities to read and interpret that accomplished readers do more intuitively. Being able to read and speak about how artists use images to convey meaning can be a springboard to how authors use words to convey meaning with the tools at their disposal.

Of course, being able to do such analyses requires using a text that has adequate quality and nuance to warrant them. After all, there are some traditional texts that are more prone to such academic work used in schools as a matter of course. O’Connor’s book is populated with mindful and rich imagery that can be used to analyze how the words and pictures combine to convey meaning.

For example, on page 13 of this graphic novel, O’Connor uses cinematic techniques, beginning with a long shot of the ocean in the first panel. He begins to tighten up on the vague object in the second, and the reader can see it’s a human. The third panel brings the figure into sharper focus, combined with the narrative boxes, which contain Poseidon’s words and context for what the reader is viewing. The fourth panel differs from the other three vastly, with a series of figures battling in front of a red background that sharply contrasts with the deep aqua of the ocean. Not only can the teacher and students speak about the author’s choice of words and how they relate to the images on the page, one type of analysis, but there’s also the opportunity to simply look at the images and see how a story is told without the words.

Mythology
Along with the story, this book would be an excellent addition to a unit on mythology or heroes because it touches on many classical stories. It could be used as a companion to a great number of other texts that students read, a source of many stories that become the background knowledge needed to make textual
analyses where allusion becomes important. Additionally, this book appears to be more a collection of adventure or action tales, but it subtly contains much information about a number of historical figures, civilizations, and religions. Such a book makes many cross-curricular connections possible.

**Character Maps/Webs**

Ostensibly about Poseidon, this book provides an excellent opportunity for character mapping in a number of senses. First, this story is about a Greek god of the oceans, and like those waters, he is of many moods and dispositions. He can be calm, violent, welcoming, or vengeful, depending on the context and his relation to a character. Reading this book creates an opportunity for teachers to teach about character mapping with a figure with complex emotions. Looking at Poseidon would be a great way to look at motivations and relationships to speak about a character who exhibits many characteristics. Teachers can use different graphic organizers to organize how he relates to various characters and what those relationships say about him. One such manner is shown in Figure 7.1.

Another way that characters could be mapped is displayed in the book's inside cover, which features a family tree of the Olympians. This book is full of many

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**Figure 7.1. A Sample Character Web**

![Character Map Diagram]

- How does Poseidon feel about this character?
- How does Poseidon act on these feelings?
- How does Poseidon feel about this character?
- How does Poseidon act on these feelings?
- How does Poseidon feel about this character?
- How does Poseidon act on these feelings?
characters who are related, and mapping out their family relations is another way to organize information and also analyze these stories. What does it mean that Poseidon has sons that include Theseus and the Cyclops? How is Athena related to Poseidon, and how does that relationship color their contest? These are some of the many questions that can arise from reading, thinking about, and discussing these tales, and answering them provides a chance to explore multiple useful ways of displaying and sorting information.

**Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean**

Sarah Stewart Taylor and Ben Towle’s (2010) *Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean* tells two parallel stories, one fictional and one historical. The former follows Grace Goodland, a young woman who lives in Newfoundland and writes a town newspaper. The latter focuses on Amelia Earhart, the aviator who’s there planning the first solo transatlantic airplane crossing by a woman. Both stories allow for a variety of viewpoints, from the mundane happenings of the day and typical details of the 1930s to the historic and monumental achievements of early aviators and their attempts to push the boundaries of human possibility using new technology and devices. The book is very human in its characters and situations, and with its combination of black, white, and blue colors throughout, it brings the past to life. Certainly, it is a book that has much merit for its truths and fictions.

**Historical Connections**

Probably the most apparent positive feature of this book is how it depicts the past with an eye to detail, scope, and facts. It shows what daily life was like in the 1930s, when telegrams were still commonly sent, news services were local and run by male reporters, women were relegated to more service-oriented careers, and flying in airplanes was a dangerous and volatile undertaking. But this book is also well researched and full of other information that situates it in history and opens a space for inquiry and curiosity.

For example, the story references the various other women who attempted the same feats as Earhart. She may be the only name mentioned today when discussing female aviation pioneers in schools, but there were others who challenged and came before her. Putting her actions in historical context doesn’t detract from her actions, but it gives much more information about the setting and conditions for her exploits. This book provides just enough information to portray this environment but also spark curiosity about others’ roles in the early days of air travel as well. There are many secondary figures who might be interesting for ancillary research projects for students.

Additionally, Earhart’s travels took her many places, providing opportunities to insert some additional social studies content into the elementary curriculum.
Certainly, teachers and students could use maps and geography to chart her travels, explore the places she visited, and even conjecture about what her final fate might have been.

**News Writing**

Grace’s occupation of reporter models activity that can lead to writing opportunities. Her broadsheets are posted at the local meeting places and post office, and students could replicate this activity with their own news of the day that could be obtained by interviewing teachers, family members, community figures, or classmates. Such authentic publication activities provide a touch of relevance and real-world application to the practice of student writing. Having a definite audience and a format that allows for easy sharing would be very motivational for students and may even get reluctant writers to participate.

**Problem Solving**

Another aspect that this book touches on is one of increasing focus in elementary schools, the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. One of the primary problems in the book that delays Earhart is calculating how much fuel is needed to make the journey in relation to how heavy the airplane and its contents are. This concern leads to much hand-wringing and anxiety about whether she would be successful. Another very real concern was having adequate supplies of food, water, and fuel while also making sure that the airplane wasn’t weighted down so much as to make it inefficient or incapable of crossing that long distance.

Teachers could use this scenario as an opportunity to craft engineering problems for students to solve either on paper or in doing their own experiments with toy planes or other simulations. With such an emphasis on literacy and mathematics in today’s classrooms, the curriculum often becomes narrow (Meier & Wood, 2004), and students don’t get chances to do science or think in ways that will become more the focus of later schooling. Reading *Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean* opens up more opportunities for many cross-curricular projects and thinking.

**Understanding Photosynthesis With Max Axiom, Super Scientist**

Science is an area often given short shrift in the elementary school classroom, but there are a growing number of excellent science resources available for
younger readers, and one of them is the Max Axiom, Super Scientist series by Liam O’Donnell and various other authors (2007–2015). The 24 books in this series follow the super scientist Max Axiom on his exploration of the universe and everything in it. His books cover a wide array of scientific fields, including physics, biology, chemistry, the scientific method, and ecology. Axiom possesses amazing abilities to shrink and grow as well as devices that allow him to travel through time and space. His stories are not so narratively driven, but he acts like the superhero curator of a Magic School Bus–like ride who isn’t quite so silly.

These books are a great entryway into reading nonfiction texts, a particular focus of the Common Core. This book in particular explores photosynthesis in a number of capacities. It explores the biology of plants and plant cells, the chemistry involved in creating glucose, and the ecological concerns of plants in the water cycle and maintaining the environment. Understanding Photosynthesis: With Max Axiom, Super Scientist by O’Donnell (2007) covers much ground in short order, but the graphic novel format allows such coverage in a direct and readable manner.

**Charts and Content Area Textbooks**

Of particular usefulness in these books is their format. The sequential art features break the text up into small chunks of dialogue that students can read, but these go a step beyond and also combine text with images in ways that tell stories and also convey information in the same ways that textbooks do. For instance, multiple images show close-ups of the inside of plant cells, detailing the cell parts and also their functions. These illustrations prefigure the diagrams that will be in secondary school textbooks, providing a nonthreatening but informative introduction to such informational text features.

**Drawing Diagrams**

Max Axiom is able to shrink and grow to examine plants at various levels, and his actions provide an excellent model for an activity in which students could research and depict other life forms or objects in a similar manner. Students could research various types of animals, either large or microscopic, and then draw them at various scales. They could label such drawings and show how they work on the cellular level as well in their environments. This project would touch on many aspects of biology and ecology, providing rich opportunities for students to engage their curiosity about the natural world. Students would also have opportunities to practice academic skills in researching, recording, and displaying their knowledge.
in visual and written manners. These graphic novels provide excellent models for scientific inquiry and also effective communication.

**The Secret Ghost: A Mystery With Distance and Measurement**

Probably the content area least well represented in graphic novels is mathematics. Most of the ones that I am aware of deal with more complex thinkers such as Richard Feynman in areas such as calculus and physics. However, there's a series by Melinda Thielbar (2010–2011) called Manga Math Mysteries that is of interest for elementary school readers, and in particular the third entry in the series, *The Secret Ghost: A Mystery With Distance and Measurement* (Thielbar, 2010), is exceptional. This book, like the others in the series, follows the lives of several students. Here the main characters are Michelle and her older brother, Sam. The siblings have moved into a new house, and there's a strange noise coming from the walls in Michelle's room. Instead of attributing it to superstition, she and her friends figure out a way to get to the source of the issue, and they end up using geometry to determine the solution.

This book is not simply a dry account of mathematical problem solving, though. It contains bright and energetic illustrations and also portrays realistic relationships between friends, sibling rivals, and estranged parents who are dealing with the fallout of divorce. The characters and situations are fleshed out and well realized, making this more than a simple exercise in making a narrative of mathematical reasoning, although the way such reasoning is depicted makes this book well suited for academic use.

**Mathematical Reasoning**

Perhaps the most complicated and contentious aspect of the Common Core's adoption is in the area of explaining the thought processes behind mathematical solutions (e.g., Garelick, 2012). This book portrays the process not once but twice. The first time deals with the instructor at a karate school who needs to calculate the perimeter of a room to put in shelving. This type of mundane problem solving is demonstrated, and calculations are even provided to show the complete process.

Later on in the book, the siblings once again use simple geometry to measure the perimeter of Michelle's bedroom to determine its dimensions. They use this information to figure out that her room is short and that there's a space not accounted for behind her wall. The graphic novel format is used to good effect in detailing the thought process and steps in solving this problem. The explanation here is longer than the typical written response expected.
of students, but it can still serve as a clear and effective model for other explanations of mathematical reasoning. The dialogue and reasoning could also be broken down into steps that can contribute to a formula of sorts for expressing mathematical thinking.

**Developing Problems**

Mathematical writing need not simply be explanatory but can also be creative in its own right. *The Secret Ghost* is inventive in depicting a problem that can be solved using mathematics, and its narrative could also be used as a template for creative writing in mathematics. Students can come up with their own problems or scenarios in which mathematics would be used to come up with a solution. So much time and energy is put into reading and deciphering word problems, but it seems that having students write their own would demonstrate as much, if not more, understanding of mathematical concepts and mechanics. In the end, students could swap their writing, work on the problems, and check the work of their classmates. They could even draw pictures, diagrams, or a comic narrative to go along with the problem. This book opens up a number of possibilities for thinking about and depicting mathematics work that can be more inviting and attractive to students.

**Concluding Thoughts and Further Resources**

There is much about graphic novels that makes them appealing to both students and teachers. Both groups may be surprised to find that the characters they enjoy reading about in the stories also provide them with content information that ties in with what they learn/teach in their classes. Teachers might be surprised to find material that can be used to drive, bolster, or supplement their instruction. Many graphic novel authors have taken time and care to include many accuracies and details in their work through historical or scientific research. From the small sample of books here, it should be apparent that graphic novels can be used to make many cross-curricular connections (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014), as there’s often much more to a graphic novel than comical scenes and one-liners.

In recent years, the increased attention on graphic novels from both consumers and producers is leading to a surge in titles, series, and the amount of remarkable literature becoming available. The amount of graphic novels, however great, should also lend one pause. Although there’s much that graphic novels offer in terms of attractiveness and academic usefulness, I’m not advocating here that...
every graphic novel is a treasure trove or should be used in school. Just as not every novel or textbook is appropriate for every class, so it is with graphic novels. Teachers should be informed about the content of graphic novels and also about where to find further information that may help them find appropriate resources. To that end, I have here included a few titles that can give a small start to a teacher interested in the possibilities of graphic novels. But there are also more elaborate resources, starting with Stephen Wetner’s (2005) *The 101 Best Graphic Novels: A Guide to This Exciting New Medium* and also these websites that contain many links for an inquisitive teacher or student:

- My own blog, *Graphic Novel Resources*, where I review graphic novels that cover many different content areas and age groups: graphicnovelresources.blogspot.com
- Comics in the Classroom: comicsintheclassroom.net
- The University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center: www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/graphicnovels.asp

Graphic novels offer students and teachers an invitation to engaging, educational reading.

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**LITERATURE CITED**


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**OTHER RECOMMENDED GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS**


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stergios Botzakis is an associate professor in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA. He received his doctorate from the University of Georgia in 2006, and prior to that, he spent five years teaching middle school reading, English, and study skills in Baltimore and the Boston area. He was an editorial assistant for *Reading Research Quarterly* and also one of the founding editors of the *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, an open-access, online-only journal.

Currently, Stergios teaches classes on content area reading, middle school education, working with struggling adolescent readers, and new literacies. His research interests include middle and secondary education, adolescent literacies, popular culture, and media literacy. His work has been published in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, English Journal, Language Arts, The ALAN Review*, and *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Stergios can be contacted at sbotzaki@utk.edu.