



Bringing Visual Literacy to Writing

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Hornet's Nest Elementary and Statesville Road Elementary

This curriculum unit is recommended for:
4th Grade Literacy

Keywords: inference, visual thinking skills, descriptive writing

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix A](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: In this four-week unit, students will learn visual thinking strategies to look at pictures in a deeper way. They will then use those strategies that they have learned for visual literacy and apply them to their writing. This will improve the students' quality of writing, including adding details and visualization.

I plan to teach this unit to fourth grade students.

I give permission for the Charlotte Teachers Institute to publish my curriculum unit and synopsis in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.

Introduction

“Show, don’t tell.” I feel as if this is a phrase I have repeated over and over again to my students. I have tried many different methods to get students to add more description, inferences, and imagery in their writing. It is easy to say, “Tim is mad.” It takes some more thought to say, “Tim scrunched his face and tightened his lips. He threw his hands down and stomped his feet. His face was red as if he were holding his breath, until he let out a loud scream!” I want students to really create a picture in their mind as they are developing a writing piece and describe what they see, versus just writing what is literally occurring.

Through this unit, we are going to explore pictures and use images to help the students develop visual literacy skills. As students explore various forms of media, they will work on identifying information and thinking deeper utilizing the visual thinking strategies. We will then take these skills that we have learned and the students will incorporate it into their writing.

I have written this unit for fourth grade students, but could easily be adapted a grade or two lower and a grade above. I plan to use this entire unit with a fourth grade Talent Development (TD) pull out group.

Rationale

Visual literacy is not something emphasized in elementary school, mainly because it is not one of the core subject areas of literacy, math, science, and social studies, where teachers tend to keep their focus. However, something that is not widely talked about in education is that the skills developed through visual literacy can transfer over into other academic areas. There is not much curriculum available for elementary school teachers to utilize when developing visual thinking skills, so I wanted to create a unit that would focus on developing those skills.

After developing visual literacy skills in the beginning of the unit, we will then use those skills developed to transfer into rich writing skills. Using descriptive language, inferencing, and details, students will compose quality writing pieces.

Demographics

Because I work with a variety of grade levels, I had to choose one to focus on for this unit. I had a chance to look over the grade level standards and reflect upon the struggles of students in general across grade levels. My students currently have struggled with inferencing and pulling out information that is not literal. Therefore, in reviewing the fourth grade standards, I pulled out some ideas of finding themes in text and inferencing from the text as the basis of my unit.

I am currently in my seventh year of teaching in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. I split my time between two schools: Hornet's Nest Elementary School and Statesville Road Elementary School. This is my first year that I am not a traditional classroom teacher and first year at both of these schools. My role is a Talent Development (TD) catalyst teacher. In this position, I work with students and teachers to provide accelerated, rigorous instruction to gifted students. I do this in a variety of ways, which include pushing into classrooms to co-teach lessons, pulling students out in a small group, going to grade level planning meetings, and recommending resources to teachers to help differentiate in their classroom, as well as create resources for students to work on independently if they need something extra in a particular unit. I typically work with second through fifth grade students, as we screen and most students "certify" as academically gifted in second grade. I have flexibility in my position, however, in that I work with the students and teachers in the building who need my assistance, which can include first grade or kindergarten as well.

My home school is Hornet's Nest Elementary school, which is located on the Northwest side of Charlotte, NC. It is a title 1 school with 640 students total in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. As far as the demographics, 61% is African-American, 24% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 3% White, 3% Mixed, and less than 1% American Indian and Pacific Islander. Students with disabilities make up 7.7% of the student body, 10.3% are English Language Learners (ELL), and .5% are certified as Academically Gifted (AIG).

My other school, where I work two days a week, is Statesville Road Elementary School. This school is also located in the Northwest side of Charlotte, NC. It is a title 1 school with 561 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. As far as the demographics of this school, 75% are African-American, 17% are Hispanic, 3% is Asian, and the remainder of the students are White, Mixed, and Pacific Islander. 99 % of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. 9% of students have disabilities, .5% are certified as Academically Gifted (AIG), and 11% are English Language Learners (ELL). Statesville Road Elementary School (SRES) is unique for a couple of reasons. One is that it is part of the Project Left community of schools, which is an initiative to improve school performance in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. This reform strategy seeks to advance student outcomes through investments in Talent, Technology, Time and Community/Parent Support. Another important feature of Statesville Road Elementary is that it is an International Baccalaureate (IB) partial magnet school as well. As an International Baccalaureate school, the goal is to "challenge our students to think globally about the world around them. The scholars are given a curriculum framework of essential elements -- the knowledge, concepts, skills, attitudes, and actions that young students need to equip them for successful lives, both now and in the future."

Content Research

"What's going on in this picture?" This one question along with a work of art or picture can help teachers start their students down a path toward deeper learning and other skills, which are now encouraged by the Common Core State Standards. The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) encourages teachers to question students as they are viewing visual images as a way to provoke conversation about those images. This teaching method has been successfully implemented in many classrooms, because it provides for open-ended yet highly structured discussions of visual art. These rich conversations allow for students to really be a part of the process, while increasing their critical thinking, language skills, and literacy skills.

Visual Thinking Strategies has been written about and studied by Philip Yenawine. His approach is to introduce visual thinking skills as a means to get to a deeper conversation. He states that, "this theory dovetails with the observation of my own that most engaging and expansive discussions result from... structured interactions among children who think differently and have different experience and information to share" (Yenawine 6). During VTS, the teacher asks open-ended questions of the students about the art they are viewing, then adds more directed and probing questions later on. The teacher allows students to engage in conversation, acting only as a facilitator.

Integrating art and visual thinking skills into the classroom can have profound effects. Students are encouraged to think deeper and go beyond an initial look. They provide details and inferences about an image, which they may have not done prior without a process to really examine the art. These skills of details and inferences can transfer over into the other subject areas, but mostly language arts. These skills are so important to reading, writing, and speaking.

Unit Goals

The focus for my unit will be utilizing visual thinking strategies to interpret pictures and then in turn use those same strategies to add details, imagery, and inferences into their writing. Throughout my unit, I want to explore pictures, movies, poems, and books and see the different language and imagery that authors, directors, artists, photographers, and writers utilize. The goals of my unit will be for students to:

1. Increase students' visual thinking skills by incorporating strategies to begin to think deeper in understanding and inferring what is happening in an image.
2. Increase students writing skills by incorporating inferences, imagery, and details into their writing pieces.

Teaching Strategies

Text to text connections

Text-to-text connections are personal connections that the reader makes between something that has happened in their life and something that has happened in the text.

Text to Picture/Movie Connections

Text to picture or text to movie connections are connections that the reader/viewer can find between something that they view in the picture or in a movie.

Conferring

Teacher will meet with students one on one to discuss their writing and make suggestions to improve it.

Visual Thinking Skills

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a specific approach to whole-class viewing and talking about art that primarily uses these questions:

- What's going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

VTS encourages students to think beyond the literal by discussing multiple meanings, metaphors and symbols. Implementation is simple and easy to start. This can be used to interpret historical photographs in a high school social studies course, as well as to interpret visuals in a picture book in elementary school. A video demonstrating visual thinking strategies in an elementary can be found at <https://vimeo.com/9827533>.

Five Card Flickr Stories:

This is an activity used to foster creativity in student writing and integrate visual arts. It is designed to be a digital activity, but can be adapted to project and use with the whole class. The website <http://5card.cogdogblog.com/index.php> generates five random images from Flickr or it lets you to choose your five pictures and then asks you to write a story about these five pictures by putting them together. When you choose your pictures, you can start writing your story by making a connection among the five pictures. When you are done you can tweet or e-mail your story. If you are using it as a whole class, the images can be projected onto the board and the class could all write about the same pictures.

Think-Pair-Share (also known as turn and talk)

This strategy utilizes peer buddies. Students will first think about their response, then turn to their buddy and share with them. Students will exchange ideas with each other, often before sharing with their own class. This gives all students an opportunity to share and also helps shy students share in a less intimidating environment.

Read Aloud

A read aloud is where the teacher reads a book out loud to the class, often also asking questions, picking out tricky words, and making predictions.

Gallery Walk

Students leave their work on their desk. This may be a project, picture, or writing. Students silently move around the room, looking/reading other students' work.

Instructional Implementation

Before the unit begins, the teacher will assign pre-assessment writing to gauge their ability to create imagery, pull out details, and use inferences. The teacher will show a picture on the board:



This picture can also be accessed on the internet at: <https://pixabay.com/en/picture-man-dancing-design-2693324/>. The students will view the picture and be asked to create a story about it. The teacher will then collect it and use it as a comparison for the students' writing before and after this unit.

To begin this unit, the first lesson should include introducing visual thinking strategies. On the projector, Smart Board, or Promethyan Board, show a picture from New York Times' What's Going on Here. Click on the link below to access it.
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/learning/whats-going-on-in-this-picture-sept-18-2017.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Flearning-whats-going-on-in-this-picture&action=click&contentCollection=learning®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection Give the students some time to view the picture and reflect on it. Then have them record answers to the following questions on a sheet of paper or a copy of Appendix A:

- What is going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Once students have recorded their answers, they will then think-pair-share with their classmate about what they found. Last, we will share answers as a class regarding different things that the students have seen and inferred from the picture. *The New York Times* website has hundreds of images, which can be used daily to practice this skill.

Once students have had experience with the basic three questions, they can also use the second worksheet in Appendix A for in order to extend their thinking to include artists' purpose and text or life connections.

The next activity that students can practice is visual thinking strategies within children's books. The teacher will do a read aloud from the picture book, Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak. After reading the book through once, the class will go back to a page of their choice to focus on. The class will think-pair-share:

What is going on in the picture?

What metaphors or symbols do you see?

The teacher can help to guide the students to some conclusions if necessary. Some things to potentially think about: *Do the characters look happy or sad? What colors are used? What do you notice in the background?*

The following lesson will include "reading" the story *Journey* by Aaron Becker. This is a story that consists only of pictures without words. The teacher could show the actual book or use a document camera if one is available. For viewing ease, it may be better to use Youtube on a projector at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRsmuveKWuk>. I suggest showing it two times, so students can really think about the journey of the little girl in this story. Then the teacher will ask:

What is going on in this story?

What metaphors or symbols do you see?

What other video or story does this remind me of?

What do you think of the illustrator's color choices in this book?

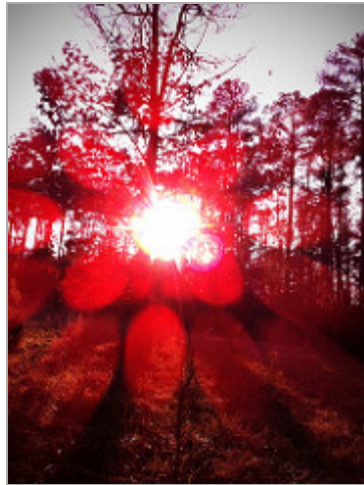
The students will think/pair/share their responses. Then the teacher then show the picture below from the story and ask students to create a story about what is happening.



The students will use their knowledge about what happens in the story and the conversations that the class had about it to create words to correspond to this picture. The students will then leave their stories on their desk and have a “gallery walk” where they move around the classroom, and read each other’s writing. The students will then go back to their seats and have a class discussion about the different ideas and interpretations that they saw around the room. They should also comment on examples of imagery and inferences that they read in others’ passages.

In the next lesson, students will use their visual thinking skills to help them come up with their own stories. They will be given a series of five random images, which can be found at this website: <http://5card.cogdogblog.com/index.php>. It is called “five card flicker stories.” These five images could be shown on a front board for the entire class to see, or the website could be sent to each student for them to find their own five pictures for them to use. An example would be:





Students will find a way to use each picture in their story, thinking about how they may connect. They are encouraged to really look at the pictures to think about what they are seeing and how it would tie in. This website has many different pictures, so it may be used as a writing exercise several times.

Once students have had some practice with five card flicker stories, they will use their writing skills to help other students identify their pictures. They will exchange their writing with someone else in the class. Then each student will leave the images called up on their laptop/chromebook. The students will read the passage in front of them, then do a gallery-style walk around the classroom. They will look for images that seem to match the writing in the piece they have read. Students will then reflect on the key words, phrases, and imagery that helped guide them to the pictures they chose. This reflection will then be returned to the students along with their writing for them to be able to read over and reflect upon for future writing. We will then share as a class any ideas that were sparked when reading each other's writing.

Students will now try writing on their own, using visual thinking strategies they have learned to influence how they will write. They will picture an image in their head of their favorite place. It could be a vacation location, a spot in the house, a local place they visit often, etc. They will then begin pre-writing by answering the three questions on the visual thinking strategies worksheet in appendix 1. The students will use the information they have written to write a paragraph describing the spot as well as what they are doing there. Next, they will exchange their paragraphs with other students. That student will then try to sketch the scene, based on their partner's writing. Finally, the students will partner back up and compare the sketches to the images in their head to see how accurate they were at describing it.

At the end of the unit, the teacher will show the following picture again:



The students will once again be asked to write a story about what is happening in the picture. The teacher will then be able to compare writing samples from before the unit started and after.

List of Material for Classroom Use

Smart Board/Projector

The projector will be used several times throughout the unit to display images onto the screen.

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

This book will be read to students in a read aloud. If you do not have this story available to use, you can pull it up on Youtube: <http://5card.cogdogblog.com/index.php> . This e-book both shows the pictures and reads out loud to the students.

Journey by Aaron Becker. This book will be shown to students. It can be found at

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRsmuveKWuk>. It may be better to use it with a projector so that the pictures can be blown up a little larger.

Resources for Students

"Find free-to-use images." Google Search Help. Accessed October 03, 2017.

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/29508?hl=en>.

This website shows students how to utilize Google to find images that are “free to use” or not copyright protected. It is a great resource for students to utilize images without worrying about copyright infringement.

"3 Tips When Using Imagery in Your Writing." The Write Practice. April 22, 2016.

Accessed October 03, 2017. <http://thewritepractice.com/three-imagery-tips/>.

This website gives students tips on ways to add imagery into their writing.

Resources for Teachers

"3 Tips When Using Imagery in Your Writing." The Write Practice. April 22, 2016.

Accessed October 03, 2017. <http://thewritepractice.com/three-imagery-tips/>.

This website gives three tips which students can utilize to add imagery into their writing.

"What's Going on in the Picture?" The New York Times. September 19, 2016. Accessed

October 03, 2017. [https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/?s=what%2Bis%](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/?s=what%2Bis%2Bgoing%2Bon%2Bin%2Bthis%2Bpicture)

[2Bgoing%2Bon%2Bin%2Bthis%2Bpicture](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/?s=what%2Bis%2Bgoing%2Bon%2Bin%2Bthis%2Bpicture).

This **New York Times** blog has pictures and guiding questions, which you can use to begin to implement visual thinking strategies. It could be easily implemented into a literacy block, writing block, or even social studies.

Gonchar, Michael. "10 Intriguing Photographs to Teach Close Reading and Visual

Thinking Skills." **The New York Times**. February 27, 2015. Accessed October 03,

2017. [https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/10-intriguing-photographs](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/10-intriguing-photographs-to-teach-close-reading-and-visual-thinking-skills/?_r=0)

[-to-teach-close-reading-and-visual-thinking-skills/?_r=0](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/10-intriguing-photographs-to-teach-close-reading-and-visual-thinking-skills/?_r=0).

This **New York Times** article details how to begin close reading and visual thinking skills in your classroom. In the article, there are ten steps to follow when beginning to implement.

"Visual Thinking Strategies for Improved Comprehension." Visual Thinking

Strategies for Improved Comprehension | Colorín Colorado. Accessed October

03, 2017. [http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/visual-thinking-](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/visual-thinking-strategies-improved-comprehension)

[strategies-improved-comprehension](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/visual-thinking-strategies-improved-comprehension).

This article discusses visual thinking strategies and how they improve comprehension in the classroom.

Judy. "Integrating Technology and Literacy." Five Card Flickr Stories. January 01, 1970.

Accessed October 03, 2017. [http://education584.blogspot.com/2013/02/five-card-](http://education584.blogspot.com/2013/02/five-card-flickr-stories.html)

[flickr-stories.html](http://education584.blogspot.com/2013/02/five-card-flickr-stories.html).

This website gives access to five card flickr stories, which can be utilized during a writing block. Students are given five random cards, with which they should make a story about. The pictures on this website are all not copyrighted, meaning they can be legally reproduced for classroom purposes.

Appendix A: Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.9

Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3

Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

Appendix B

Name: _____

Date: _____

Visual Thinking Strategies

Question	Answer
What's going on in this picture?	
What do you see that makes you say that?	
What more can we find?	

Name: _____

Date: _____

Visual Thinking Strategies

Question	Answer
What's going on in this picture?	
What do you see that makes you say that?	
What more can we find?	

Name: _____

Date: _____

Questions	Answers
What do I see? (What do you observe? What else)	
What does it remind me of? (Another image? A personal experience?)	
What's the artist or photographer's purpose? (To analyse? Persuade? Document? Entertain?)	
So what? (Why does this picture/art matter? What is the significance)	

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Horne, Brian. "On the Representation of Evil in Modern Literature." *New Blackfriars* 84, no. 983 (2003): 30-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43250679>.

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Yenawine, Philip. "Visual Art and Student ~~Centered Discussions~~." *Centered Discussions*. 37, no. 4 (November 5, 2009): 314-21. Accessed October 15, 2017. doi:10.1080/00405849809543821.