

Visual Literacy: Understanding the Images We Encounter
Dr. Frank Serafini
www.frankserafini.com

Expanding Perspectives on Comprehension

Focus on Text

Cognitive Perspectives: The “Magnificent 7” Reading Strategies
Literary Theories: Archetypal, Psychoanalytical, Feminist
Textual Analysis: Systemic Functional Linguistics

Focus on Image

Art Criticism: Psychology of Perception, Iconography
Visual Literacies: Visual Grammar & Semiotic Theories
Picturebook Design & Format: Paratexts, Borders, Orientation, Fonts

Focus on Image: Art History & Criticism

Arnheim & Dondis - Psychological Perspectives on Perception, Basic Elements of Design
Gombrich, Mukarovsky, Feldman, & Panofsky - Art History, Iconology, Iconography
Valleau - Incorporating Art in Picturebooks

Focus on Image: Visual Grammar & Semiotics

Ferdinand De Saussure & Charles Sanders Pierce - Semiotic Theories
Kress & Van Leeuwen - Grammars of Visual Design
Roland Barthes - Denotation & Connotation
David Lewis & Len Unsworth - Visual Grammar and Picturebooks

Focus on Image: Picturebook Design & Theories

Perry Nodelman - How Picturebooks Work
Larry Sipe & Sylvia Pantaleo - Postmodern Influences in Design & Format
Gerard Genette - Peritextual and Epitextual Resources
Nikolajeva & Scott - Interplay
Doonan & Kiefer - Fonts, Borders, Orientation
Eliza Dresang - Radical Change

Interpretive Processes

Perceptual - Noticing, Navigating, Naming Elements of Multimodal Texts
Analytical - Constructing Meanings from Images, Text and Design
Ideological - Analysis of an Image, Text and Context, Meaning Systems

Perceptual Focus

Focus on what is there, what is presented in the image itself

Perceived through the Sense of Sight

Inventory of Observations / Contents

What is Noticed?

Naming Visual Elements

Attention to Literal Elements

Close Observation - Subtle Details

Analytical Focus

Analysis of Textual Elements

Interpreting what has been Noticed

Use Experience to Understand Image

What Emotions are Brought Forth?

Analysis of Image as Itself

Forms and Structures in Image

Looking for Meanings, Themes, Messages

Ideological Focus

Considering the Context, Culture and History of an Image

Social Meanings of the actors and events portrayed

Connotations, Cultural Messages

What are the Implications of the Image?

What Social Statements are Made with the work?

Comprehending Picturebooks: Image, Text, Design

Picturebooks Defined: A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; an art form; a social, cultural and historical document; and foremost, an experience for the child. It hinges on the interplay of illustrations and written text, the simultaneous display of two facing pages and the drama of the turning page (Bader, 1976).

Why Picturebooks?

Micro-Texts - able to read and discuss complete text in a single session

Wide variety of genres, topics, themes, authors, illustrators, formats, literary devices

Range from simple stories to complex narratives

Provide opportunities for discussion of significant topics

Picturebooks draw upon several systems of meaning simultaneously (text, image, design)

Teachers need a theoretical foundation and vocabulary to talk about Image.

Picturebooks offer a connection between School-Based Literacies and Multiliteracies.

Image & Text

An Illustrated Text is different from a Picturebook

Interplay varies among images, design elements and written text

Visual (Image) and textual (Writing) draw upon different semiotic resources

Text is sequential, temporal (order)

Image is simultaneous (composition)

Considering Art in Picturebooks: Basic Elements of Design

Line

Vertical Lines: indicates stability, height, separates elements in image

Horizontal Lines: bring elements together, calming

Diagonal lines: suggest motion and movement

Thin Lines: suggest frailty, an elegant quality

Thick Lines: suggest strength or provide emphasis

Shapes / Patterns

Repeated shapes are patterns

Shapes can be open or closed, angular or round

Basic shapes:

Circle - comfort, protection, endlessness

Square - stability, honesty, conformity

Triangle - dynamic tension, action, conflict

Color

Red: power, warmth, anger, energy or passion, active

Green: associated with nature, calming, cool

Blue: restful, calm, sense of detachment, serenity or melancholy, passive

Yellow: happiness or caution, warmth

Orange: associated with fall, seasonal

Black: dark moods, scary, depressing

Drawing on Art Movements

Realism / Folk Art / Modern Art / Surrealism

3 Uses of Art in Illustration

Reproduction - artworks transferred into book and used as pieces of art

Incorporation - art transformed into illustrations - remains recognizable as piece of art

Stylization - artistic style is translated into the illustrations, but no single work of art is referenced

Visual Grammar: Understanding Images Through a Semiotic Lens

Composition & Perspective

Placement of Elements - Scale
Information Values - Image Zones
Perspective – Power & the Gaze

Motif & Symbolism

Recurring Symbols

Salience (Signification)

Salience – Color / Position / Anomaly

Framing (Connect - Separate)

Framing – Sequence / Dramatic Effect

Modality

Reality Value - Level of Abstraction

Design & Meaning

Deliberate choices by artists, graphic designers, publishers
Images are NOT simply illustrating the text, nor Decorations, They are Their own
System of Meaning
Image + Text + Design = Picturebook

Design Elements

Paratextual Information
Orientation
Fonts
Borders
Negative (White) Space

Paratextual Information

Peri-Textual = inside book, outside actual story
dedications, author blurbs, jacket, title page, covers, end pages
Epi-Textual = outside book
book reviews, advertisements, critical articles, websites, fan fiction

Orientation

Horizontal - Landscape, binocular plane, soothing, familiar
Vertical - Portrait, dynamic, unstable
Square - Stable, solid, comforting
Inverted - changing opening of a text, call attention to particular features

Fonts: Visual Aspects of Written Language

Bold vs. Timid

Modern vs. Classic

Playful vs. Serious

Borders

Windows into Illustrations

Boundary between Reality and Imagination

Thick Borders or Faded Edges

Breaking Borders “Call for Interaction”

Set Images Apart from Text

Frame Images - Composition

Negative Space

Commonly Referred to as “White Space”

Creates Setting, Spatial Relations

Can serve a Frame or Focus on Subject of the Image

Ethereal Sense

Works with Perspective

Final Considerations for Picturebooks

Deliberate choices by artists, graphic designers, publishers

Images are NOT simply Illustrating the text, nor Decorations, They are Their own System of Meaning

We need to Read Images as well as Text

Images require different comprehension strategies than text

Deconstructing Advertisements: Making the Familiar, Strange

Questions to Ask an Ad

What catches your eye first?

Are the actors looking at you (gaze)?

Where are components located in the advertisement (top/bottom)?

Who is portrayed, not portrayed?

How are text and images connected?

Who is the intended audience?

What is the “catch or hook”?

Issues in Advertisement

Gender & Advertisement

Fear and Advertisement

Text and Image Connections

Art and Advertisement

Deconstructing the News

Gender & Advertisement

How are Males and Females portrayed?

Who is doing what?

Are any stereotypes reinforced?

Are any stereotypes rejected?

Bringing the Literacies of Life into the School

Album / CD Covers / Graphic Novels / Comics

YouTube.com / MySpace.com

Political Cartoons / Movie Trailers

Concluding Remarks

Refresher Courses in Children's Literature and Art History?

The Images We Encounter are as Important as the Words We Read

The Texts Children Encounter in School must begin to Resemble the Texts they Encounter in the World.

Images and Written Text are BOTH Meaning Systems

Picture Book Analysis Guide

- Pick up the picturebook, attending to the size, format (horizontal or vertical), materials used in construction of book (papers, graphics).
- Consider the author of the text and the artist. What media is used in the illustrations? What fonts are selected? Where is the text located on the page? Borders etc.
- Look at the cover, title and illustrations. What expectations are set up for you as you approach the picture book? What does the cover, title and illustrations suggest?
- What is included in the peritext? The dedication, title page, author's note, summary statement etc..
- Skim through the book, reading quickly to see where the story goes. What is the overall structure of the book? Home-Away-Home ? Repetitive structures or language? Cumulative? The Hero Cycle? Circular, chronological, or other?

Read through the picture book more deliberately, coding / marking important aspects you want to consider. After your second reading, consider the following questions:

- What were your initial reactions to the text and illustrations?
- What is the overall structure of the text?
- How does the opening of the story compare with the closing of the story?
- How do the illustrations relate to the text?
- Words propel the reader forward and images slow us down. How did this tension between reading and viewing affect your experience?
- What kind of gaps does the author / illustrator leave for the reader to fill in? Are details purposefully left out to create tension?
- How does the story flow from page to page? Are there borders that separate things or does it cross over in language and image from page to page?
- Consider each opening separately. What emotional connotations came to mind?
- Whose background knowledge is privileged in reading this text?
- Is there a relationship between form and content? Does the design of the book add to the content being presented? How?
- What themes were constructed as you read?

Analyzing Visual Images and Design in Picturebooks

- Begin by considering the format of the images and their placement in the picturebook

- Where is the text located? Within the image? Separated by borders or white space, Why?
- Are the illustrations double page spreads, single page images, collages, overlapping images, or portraits?
- Consider the series of images in the picturebook. Do the images change over the course of the book? Do they get bigger, smaller, change?
- Select particular images to consider. Ask the following:
 - What is fore-grounded and in the background?
 - Consider the “path” your eyes follow as you approach the image. What catches your eye first? Why is that element salient?
 - What colors dominate the image? What effect does this have on you as reader?
 - Consider the use of white (negative) space. Are the illustrations framed or full bleed? How does this position you as a viewer?
 - What is the “reality value” or level of abstraction? Are the images life-like or stick figures?
 - Are there any recurring patterns in the images?
 - Are there any anomalous elements? Things that stick out, or seem out of place? Are these important to consider?
 - What is the artist trying to get you to look at through leading lines, colors, contrast, gestures, lighting?
 - Are there any recurring symbols or motifs in the images?
 - Consider the style or artistic choices? Are they appropriate, and how do they add to the meanings of the picturebook?
 - How are the images framed? Are there thick borders or faded edges?
 - Consider the setting of the story. How is this realized in the images? Realistically? Metaphorically?
 - Consider size and scale. What is large? Why are certain elements larger than others? Does this add to meanings of power, control?
 - Consider the viewer's point of view. Do characters directly gaze or address the viewer? Are the characters close up or distanced? How does point of view add to relationships with the characters?

Advertising Images Analysis Guide

Consider the context of the advertisement.

- Who might buy (ie magazine), see (ie billboard), care about (targeted audience) this ad?
- Why is the ad located where it is?
- Why are you looking at the images in this context? Info? Purchase?
- How does the context effect your impressions?
- What background knowledge might be necessary to understand the ad?
- Who is the ad directed at? Who is the intended audience?
- How is the ad distributed? Targeted audiences or general public?

Look at the ad in its entirety.

- What are your initial impressions?
- What do you notice first? What seems to stand out for you?
- What are the contents of the ad (image, text)?
- Where is the “product” positioned in the ad?
- What is the catch or hook for this ad? What aspect of the targeted audience does the ad appeal to (fear, vanity, needs)?
- What intertextual connections are you reminded of?

Analyzing the Contents and Composition of the Advertisement

Media

- What materials are used to create the ad? Paintings, photos, collage?
- What artistic styles are used to create ad? Pop art? Folk art? Surrealism?
- What fonts are used in the text? Different fonts? What does this suggest?
- Is the ad single or multi-media? How is text and image related? Sound?

Portrayal

- Who is portrayed in the ad? Who is not portrayed?
- What are the various actors doing?
- Who is doing what to whom?
- Where are the actors located in the ad?
- Are the actors looking at each other, away from the audience or at the audience? What does this suggest? (Demand or Offer)
- Consider the viewers point of view. Are the characters close up or distanced? How does point of view add to relationships with the characters?
- Are there borders separating actors and text, actors and product?

Basic Elements of Design

- Consider the colors used. What impressions do you get from the dominant colors? What might these suggest? Are colors intense or subdued? Is the image black & white? If so, why might that be used?
- Are vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines used? What might these suggest?
- Are there any shapes that dominate the image?
- Consider size and scale. What is large? Why are certain elements larger than others? Does this add to meanings of position, power, or control?

Framing / Composition

- Are the text or images bordered or framed? What does the framing do, separate or connect? Do the frames suggest anything on their own? Are there thick borders or faded edges?
- How is text and image combined? Where is the text located? Images located? Which dominates?
- Are the images contextualized or in an abstract space? How is negative or white space used?

Visual Grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen)

- Contact, Distance, Point of View, Information Value, Saliency, Modality
- What is located on the left, right or center? (old and new) What is on the top or bottom of the ad? (real & ideal)
- Are there any recurring patterns, symbols or motifs in the images?
- What is the “reality value” or level of abstraction? Are the images life-like or stick figures?
- Consider narrative structures (action, reaction, transaction) or conceptual structures (analyze, classify).

Saliency

- Consider the “path” your eyes follow as you approach the image. What catches your eye first? Why is that element salient?
- What is the ad trying to get you to look at through leading lines, colors, contrast, gestures, lighting?
- What is in focus or out of focus? How does effect what you notice and consider significant?
- Are there any anomalous elements? Things that stick out, or seem out of place? Are these important to consider?