

The Whole Book Approach to Evaluating and Using the Picture Book as an Art Form

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The Whole Book Approach is a critical framework and pedagogical method aimed at evaluating and using the picture book as an art form. Developed by The Carle's Instructor of Children's Literature Programs and used in outreach and Museum-based programs and classes for children and adults, The Whole Book Approach first gives educators the tools to evaluate the picture book as the sum of its parts in order to understand how text, art and design work together to form an artistic whole. This critical engagement with the picture book as an art form establishes a foundation for educators to then create interactive picture book reading experiences with students of all ages that emerge as facilitated discussions rather than traditional read aloud times. Ultimately, a Whole Book Approach storytime emerges as an experience of reading *with* children rather than reading *to* children as the group engages in a collaborative interpretive process of the picture book while its text is read aloud.

The Whole Book Approach: Reading *with* Children

The idea that it's never too early to read to a child and that shared reading should be a regular part of every child's life is easily taken for granted. It seems almost silly to ask: why? What is the point of reading aloud? But by thinking intentionally about *how, what and why we read aloud* to children, parents, teachers, librarians, and other educators and caregivers can help them to access and enjoy the world of books in rich and rewarding ways. *The Whole Book Approach* acknowledges that while the adult reads text aloud children are reading pictures and design, and it gives children the time, space and vocabulary needed to articulate their visual readings and bring them into dialog with the oral text.

Because talking about the book while it is being read aloud is a cornerstone of WBA practice, this approach shares common ground with Dialogic Reading as it invites children to actively participate in making meaning during picture book readings through facilitated discussion. However, where Dialogic Reading is premised on adult initiated prompts, The Whole Book Approach uses the picture book form itself as the provocation for children to talk about art, design, and story. Therefore, whereas Dialogic Reading is called "Hear and Say Reading," **The Whole Book Approach might be described as "See, Hear and Say Reading."**



This distinction emerges because The Whole Book Approach also draws inspiration from **The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)**, an elementary school curriculum developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine that uses a learner-centered method to examine and find meaning in visual art



Field tested and refined for over ten years, and used in gallery programs at The Carle, VTS was strongly influenced by the work of psychologists and educational theorists Rudolf Arnheim, Jerome Bruner, and Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's research on the relationship of language to thought, and his findings about growth that occurs from interaction with others were particularly influential in the development of Visual Thinking Strategies. Initially designed to study the aesthetic thinking patterns of viewers and how they changed given time and exposure to art, VTS uses a sequence of carefully selected fine art images to engage students in facilitated discussions through the use of open-ended questions beginning with:

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

In their role as facilitators, teachers paraphrase student responses, actively listening, validating individual views, demonstrating language use, and reinforcing a range of ideas.

How to Lead a Whole Book Approach Storytime:

Although The Whole Book Approach does not use VTS questions to examine every illustration in a book, the idea of the reader acting as a facilitator of discussion about a picture book as it is being read (rather than as a storyteller) corresponds well with the VTS discussion facilitator's role as distinct from the traditional docent giving a gallery talk. Whole Book Approach storytimes do use many VTS discussion facilitation techniques including:

- *Asking VTS questions* and other open-ended questions to support an inquiry-based engagement with art, design and text
- *Paraphrasing responses* to check for clarity, to demonstrate active listening, and to embed art, design and literature-related vocabulary into the reading
- *Pointing* to parts of the picture and book that are referenced in responses
- Working to create an environment in which *everyone is welcome to speak*

The typical VTS session with one image or art object lasts about 20 minutes. Because The Whole Book Approach is not centered on one image, but on the whole book, the reader must work to strike a balance between moving through the reading of the text and stopping and starting to facilitate the group's discussion. Here are some strategies to employ:

- **Do Your Homework:** Familiarize yourself with the picture book that you plan to share with children. Consider how all of the parts of the picture book work together to create an artistic whole by using the guiding question **How do I make meaning out of the artistic and design choices present in each element?** as you attend to:
 - **Jacket**—Think of the jacket as a poster for the book and employ VTS questions.
 - **Spine**—Does the jacket image wrap around the spine? Consider the spine's lettering.
 - **Cover**—Cloth bound? Embossed art? Color choices?

- **Format**—Portrait? Landscape? Square? Shaped? Why?
- **Endpapers**—How are these the visual overture for the art in the picture book?
- **Front Matter**—How do these pages ease you into the book proper?
- **Gutter**—How does the artist accommodate or use the gutter between the recto and verso pages?
- **Typography**—How are all elements of the book proper arranged on the facing pages? Consider the absence or presence of frames, the use and pacing of doublespreads and single spreads, font choices, placement of text and pictures, etc.
- **Medium and Style**—How does the artist’s choice and use of medium(s) suit the story? How does the medium influence and generate particular attention to art elements (color, line, shape, etc.) and principles?

During your WBA evaluation process, you will probably find certain elements of each book that stand out as particularly successful or problematic. You might then anticipate that a group sharing a particular book will be drawn to similar observations, but **your primary role is not to lead participants to a specific idea but to simply open up the potential for making meaning as they consider a picture book’s art and design while you read the text out loud to them.** The following isolated artistic and design elements in the picture books illustrated by various contemporary artists are particularly noteworthy, and you might anticipate a group’s engagement with them during a Whole Book Approach storytime. How could you phrase questions or encourage attention to the picture book as an art form when using these picture books with a group?

Jacket, Cover, Spine: *Grandfather’s Journey* by Allan Say

Landscape Format: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle
The Polar Express by Chris VanAllsburg
The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak
The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown, illus. by Clement Hurd

Portrait Format: *Wings* by Christopher Myers
Olivia by Ian Falconer
John Henry by Jerry Pinkney

Square Format: *The Question Song* by Kaethe Zemach
The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher by Molly Bang

Shaped books/ Die-cut Format: *Max Drives Away* by Rosemary Wells

Endpapers: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr., illus. Eric Carle

Front Matter: *Hush Little Baby: A Folksong with Pictures* by Marla Frazee

Gutter: *Yo! Yes?* by Chris Raschka
Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See? by Bill Martin Jr., illus. Eric Carle

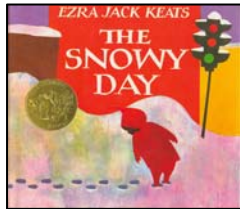
Typography:

Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne;
Frederick by Leo Lionni;
The Stinky Cheese Man & Other Fairly Stupid Tales by Jon Scieszka, illus. Lane Smith
The Three Pigs by David Wiesner;
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

Medium and Style:

The Three Pigs by David Wiesner
The Hello Goodbye Window by Norton Juster, illustrated by Chris Raschka
Swimmy by Leo Lionni (1964 Honor Book)
Blueberries for Sal and *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey

- **Use your words:** Intentionally attend to the different parts of the book, embedding design, production, and art vocabulary into the reading in order to give children the verbal tools to talk about what they see. For example:



“Let’s read *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. Take a look at the wrap-around jacket.”

- **Listen up:** As you note the different parts of the picture book, pay attention to children’s spontaneous reactions to art, design and story and weave them into the shared reading experience that you are creating with the group. For example, after looking at the jacket art above a child said, “He sure did walk a long way.”

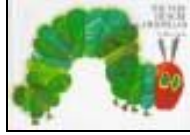
I pointed to the child in the picture, and paraphrased the response: “So you notice that this child is taking a long walk.” I then used the second VTS question, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

“All those footprints,” he responded. Then, without prompting, another child added:

“Because he’s outside walking around, not inside,” bringing the group into an introductory discussion about character, action and setting in a few short sentences.

Another thing that I could have picked up on but didn’t in that particular exchange is how the child’s response to Peter walking “a long way” relates to the landscape format of the book.

When I pointed out the landscape format during a reading of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* a child said, “The book goes that way because the caterpillar has to go through all that food.”

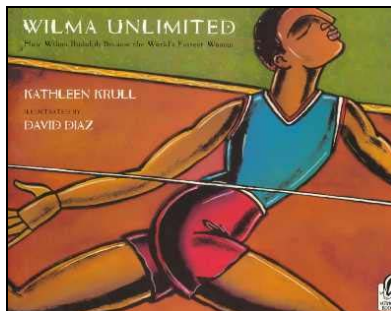


Indeed, a landscape format graphically implies movement through time and space, so most picture books that are about journeys use this format.

- **Pay Attention I:**

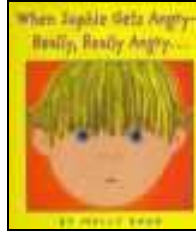
While listening for and making use of children’s spontaneous responses to art, design and text, remember that while children may verbalize their responses as questions, exclamations, or statements, others may be non-verbal in nature. For example, I once saw a young toddler look at *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and start shrugging his shoulders up and down. I didn’t see this as a generic toddler wiggle, but as this child’s way of saying with his body, “Look. That caterpillar is wiggly and I am too” so, I reflected this back to him saying, “Your body is moving up and down, just like this caterpillar’s body is moving up and down” and I pointed to the arched body on the jacket art. Here was an example of a very young child perceiving movement in a static image.

A preschool teacher told me that after learning about The Whole Book Approach and considering these non-verbal engagements with art and story she has become more attuned to how children learning English as a second language use their bodies to communicate what they notice about books. She said that a little girl whose first language is Japanese and who rarely speaks in the classroom pointed to a picture and started tapping her feet on the floor to mimic a character who was running in an illustration. “She couldn’t say the word “running”, but she told me what she saw with her body” her teacher explained.”



- **Pay Attention II:**

Children also often mimic facial expressions that they see in illustrations, especially when they depict strong emotions. Taking the time to point out this physical manifestation of engagement with the art can lead to discussion within a group.



For example, I once saw many angry faces looking back at me when I showed a group the jacket art from Molly Bang's *When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry*. I commented on this saying, "Why are you making such angry faces?" Rapid fire responses ensued:

"Because she is angry."

("What do you see that makes you say that?")

"Her eyebrows are all down."

"And her mouth is scrunched up."

- **Ask Away:**

If you are reading with a particularly quiet group or child ask open-ended questions to prompt discussion about the art, design and story. Dialogic Reading questions, Visual Thinking Strategies questions, and questions grounded in drawing attention to particular design and art elements are all good possibilities. Or, reassess your goals for the shared reading. There's nothing wrong with switching gears to a storytelling mode if that's what children need and want. That said, The Whole Book Approach can be a great way for aural learners to stretch a bit. These are the children who are very good at sitting still and listening to a book. I've heard many of them say "Can't you just *read* the book?" in the middle of a discussion about art and design, to which my response is something along the lines of:

"We *are* reading the book. We're reading the pictures."

And then all of the visual learners in the group say, "Yes! We're reading the pictures!"

And the kinesthetic learners in the group who are moving their bodies to express their understandings of the art say, "Yes! We are reading the picture!"

The success that this approach has had in reaching diverse learners (many of whom have felt excluded or unsuccessful in traditional storytelling formats) is very exciting. This is an approach that fits in with differentiated instruction models as it provides children with multiple entry-points to reading, which is good for those who've felt shut out, and good for those who might just coast through learning as "good listeners" without needing to do much stretching. The goals of a Whole Book Approach reading experience might be:

- To create interactive shared reading experiences in which the group plays an active role in creating the storytime experience
- To support children as they make meaning of art and language through facilitated discussion
- To provide vocabulary about art, design, and literature story
- To facilitate conversations about art and story as a way of fostering oral language skills, reading comprehension, aesthetic development, and pleasure in reading and art viewing experiences.

The Carle is committed to helping adults and children alike engage with the tremendous potential of the picture book form to foster connections between verbal and visual literacy and to open up the worlds of books, art, and literature to all children. The Whole Book Approach is one of many ways to carry out this work, and further critical reading can support your ongoing learning about the picture book as an art form:

- *Picture This: How Pictures Work* by Molly Bang 1587170299
- *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books* by Jane Doonan 090335540X
- *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books* by K.T. Horning
- *The Potential of Picture Books: From Visual Literacy to Aesthetic Understanding* by Barbara Kiefer 0023635355
- *Picturing Text: The Contemporary Children's Picturebook* by David Lewis 0415208874
- *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* by Perry Nodelman 0820312711
- *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer
- *Writing with Pictures* by Uri Shulevitz 0823059359

In keeping with our mission to inspire an understanding and appreciation of picture book art, the Education Department at The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art has created many materials and programs that are interactive, engaging and educational. We are delighted that you have read this introduction to The Carle's *Whole Book Approach*. We hope that you will find ways to use what you have learned in support of your own professional and personal goals and to promote the Museum's efforts to provide viewers of all ages with ways to appreciate art of every kind while supporting and nurturing a multi-faceted approach to literacy. In all written and presented material we would appreciate being credited in your use of the approaches shared today and hope that you will feel free to provide us with feedback and anecdotes based upon your experiences with The Carle's *Whole Book Approach*. Thank you.