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## 'Reading' Illustrations in Picture Books

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Do you read aloud picture books to your students? If so, you would have noticed the fascinating interaction between text and illustrations in them.

Given the limited space in picture books, illustrations serve a critical role – they help readers immediately to enter the world created by the book. And beyond this, “the unique combination of literature and visual art is worthy of serious attention” (Sipe, 2001, p.24). For many children, picture books are their first exposure to high quality art. And like reading words, children need to learn to “read” images – to understand what they portray, to reflect on the effect of different elements of art and design, and to appreciate how text and images come together to create meaning(s). *This ability to understand, appreciate and use images is called **visual literacy*** (Matulka, 2008).

You could easily adapt your classroom activities to discuss illustrations. During your regular read aloud sessions, for example, ensure that you show and talk about the pictures as you read. Show them how you connect pictures with the text and encourage students to talk about the responses illustrations evoke in them.

In this handout, we will present key aspects of illustrations and design that you can encourage your students to appreciate in picture books<sup>1</sup>. Over time, students will participate actively in making meaning of the books they’re reading and be more aware of “how the combination of words and art enhances not only what they *see*, but how they *feel*” (Wolf, 2004, p.252).

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<sup>1</sup> We focus only on *picture books* in this handout, distinguishing them from other books for children that have illustrations, like illustrated storybooks. We broadly define picture books as those where illustrations are as important as words, and might even dominate them. Different aspects of text (storyline, concept, theme etc.) and illustrations (art and design) come together as *one unit* to offer a complete experience and meaning to the reader (adapted from Sipe, 2001).

## Narrative Sequence in Illustrations

Perhaps the foremost thing in discussing illustrations with your students is to help them “realize that the illustrations in children’s books are a *serial* art form” (Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991, as cited in Sipe, 2001, p.35). They have to be seen in connection to each other as part of the sequence in the story.

This is different from ‘picture reading’ activity in which you ask students to talk about either a single scene or a series of unrelated scenes. Picture reading may be an interesting way to encourage classroom talk, but it does not help sensitise children to the *sequence* in illustrations in picture books. Menon et al. (2017) found that children do not make these connections automatically. Without relevant learning experiences, they tend to read pictures frame by frame.

One strategy you could consider using during read alouds is to start with a ‘*picture walk through*’. Children could read the pictures and narrate the story before you introduce them to the text.

## Relationship Between Pictures and Words

Illustrations play an important role in children’s books, but their relationship with the text may vary from book to book as well as within a book.

Illustrations may be:

- *symmetrical* with the text
- *complementary* to the text
- *contradictory* to what the text conveys (Matulka, 2008)

In a *symmetrical relationship*, words and pictures tell the same story. Of course, the pictures may have details that are not in the text, but these are not essential to or add significantly to the narrative (e.g. the background aspects of the setting or additional characters).



“चलो माँ घर चलें!” अनु ने पैर पटकते हुए कहा।  
 “क्यों अनु, गुड़िया अच्छी नहीं लगी तुम्हें?” मौसी ने पूछा।  
 “छी:!” अनु बोली, “भोंदू लड़की, चड्डी में छिछछी करती है! बात भी नहीं करती, खेलती भी नहीं! मुझे आपकी गुड़िया अच्छी नहीं लगी। आप अपने लिये ऐसी बुद्धू लड़की क्यों लेके आयीं?”

**Figure 1.** An illustration from *Jui Mausi ki Beti*

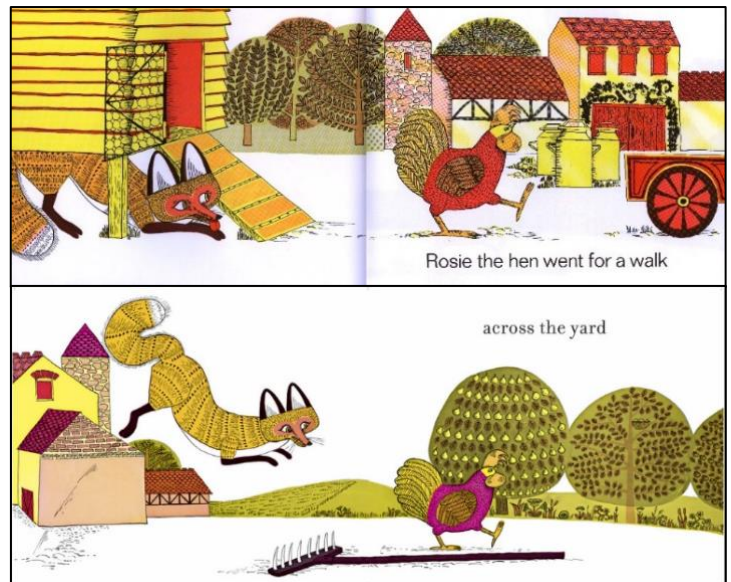
This doesn't mean that these details do not add to the reading experience. Done well, they help us imagine the world in which the story unfolds and show us interesting details that the text does not. For example, in Figure 1, the illustration from *Jui Mauski Beti*<sup>2</sup> conveys the mirth of the adults upon hearing the girl's complaints about the new-born. There is no mention of this in the text.



**Figure 2.** An illustration from *Pakdo Pakdo Us Bille Ko*

In a *contradictory relationship*, words and pictures convey opposite meanings or their combination creates an entirely new meaning. This invites the reader to interpret what is truly happening in the story. For example, in the book *Rosie's Walk*<sup>4</sup>, the text only describes the hen's walk across the farm (in just 32 words!) but the pictures reveal an entirely different angle (Figure 3). In every frame, the fox is trying to pounce on the hen and its failed attempts make the story humorous.

In a *complementary relationship*, pictures add to, or amplify, the text in important ways. Consider the book *Pakdo Pakdo Us Bille Ko*<sup>3</sup> (Figure 2). The text doesn't mention the main character's disability or a wheelchair in the first couple of pages. Illustrations show us this important aspect and help us appreciate the character's quirks better.



**Figure 3.** An illustration from *Rosie's Walk*

<sup>2</sup> Pratham Books, 2011. Written and illustrated by Madhuri Purandare. 'Aunt Jui's Baby' in English.

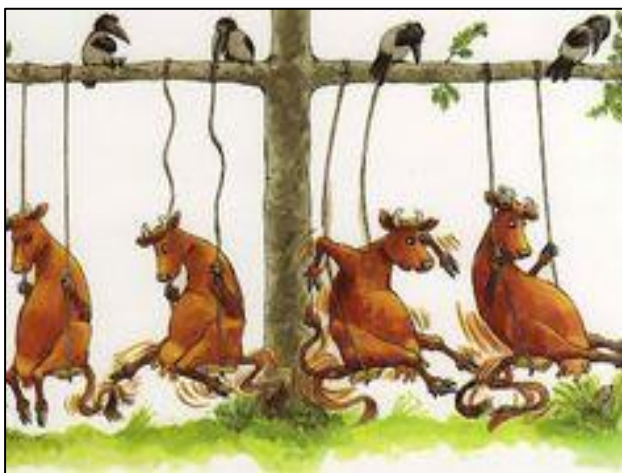
<sup>3</sup> Tulika, 2013. Written by Tharini Viswanath and illustrated by Nancy Raj. 'Catch that Cat!' in English.

<sup>4</sup> Simon & Schuster, 1968. Written and illustrated by Pat Hutchins.

As you discuss books with your students, try to draw their attention to the exciting interplay between text and illustrations. You can ask them if the illustrations convey the same thing as the text or whether there is something different in the images. Do the details help them see where the story is taking place? How? Do the text and illustrations evoke the same feelings? Does the interaction between the two make the story more interesting? Why?

### Characterisation

Good illustrators create characters that are believable and relatable. You could ask your students whether the human or animal characters in the book feel real to them. Do they have a unique personality? Has the illustrator been imaginative in depicting them? Think of *Kajri Gaay* books<sup>5</sup>. Figure 4 is an example of how this cow is shown doing things we normally associate with humans. The personality of the cow shines through the illustrations.



**Figure 4.** An illustration from *Kajri Gaay*



**Figure 5.** Different emotions of the main character in *Jui Mausi ki Beti*

Do the illustrations reveal quirks or habits of the characters? (E.g. *Dip Dip*'s tongue lolling out whenever she thinks hard, in *Pakdo Pakdo Us Bille Ko!*).

Is there any development in the character over time? Can you see the characters going through different emotions as the story progresses? The girl from *Jui Mausi ki Beti* in Figure 5 first feels excited at the prospect of meeting a new-born but slowly becomes jealous and angry about the attention the baby gets. Encourage your students to recognise characters' feelings in the illustrations.

<sup>5</sup> Published in India by A&A books, 2010. Original series in Swedish called 'Mama Moo' by Jujja Wieslander and illustrated by Sven Nordqvist.



Discuss stereotypes in illustrations, and encourage students to appreciate instances when individuals and groups are shown in a respectful light.

### Elements of Art

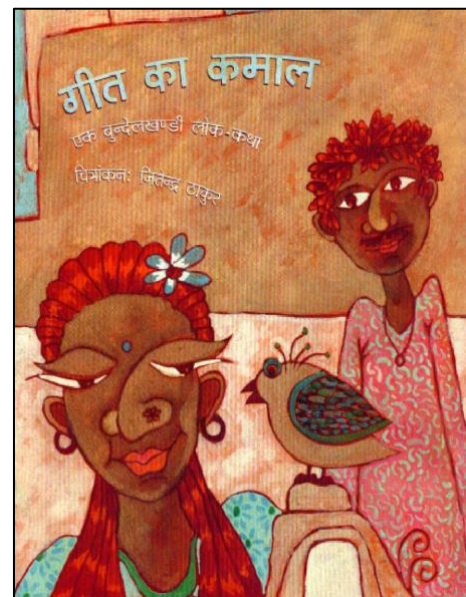
Gradually, you could introduce your students to different elements of art like *line, colour, shape, texture or pattern, technique, medium and the illustrator's style*. In fiction, illustrators usually don't depict objects and scenes exactly as they appear in reality; instead, they use art and design elements to influence readers' perception and emotion. For example, in picture books produced in Western cultures, blue is usually associated with calm, yellow with happiness and red with anger, energy or passion; lack of colour or contrasts in colour may create a different impact; pointed shapes may evoke anxiety whereas rounded shapes make us feel safe (Sipe, 2001; Bang, 2000). In terms of technique and medium, watercolours or pastels may be better suited for a soft, evocative story than bold pencil lines.

You can help students recognise the effect of these elements on their perception of the mood and setting as well as their responses to the story. You could contrast the art in different books and discuss whether illustrators' choices suit the theme.

For example, contrast the feelings and mood evoked by illustrations in *Nabiya*<sup>6</sup> (Figure 6) and *Geet ka Kamaal*<sup>7</sup> (Figure 7).



**Figures 6.** Illustrations from *Nabiya*



**Figure 7.** Cover of *Geet ka Kamaal*

<sup>6</sup> Tulika, 2013. Written by Chatura Rao and illustrated by Ruchi Mhsane.

<sup>7</sup> Eklavya, 2011. A Bundelkhandi Folktale illustrated by Jitendra Thakur. 'What a Song!' in English.

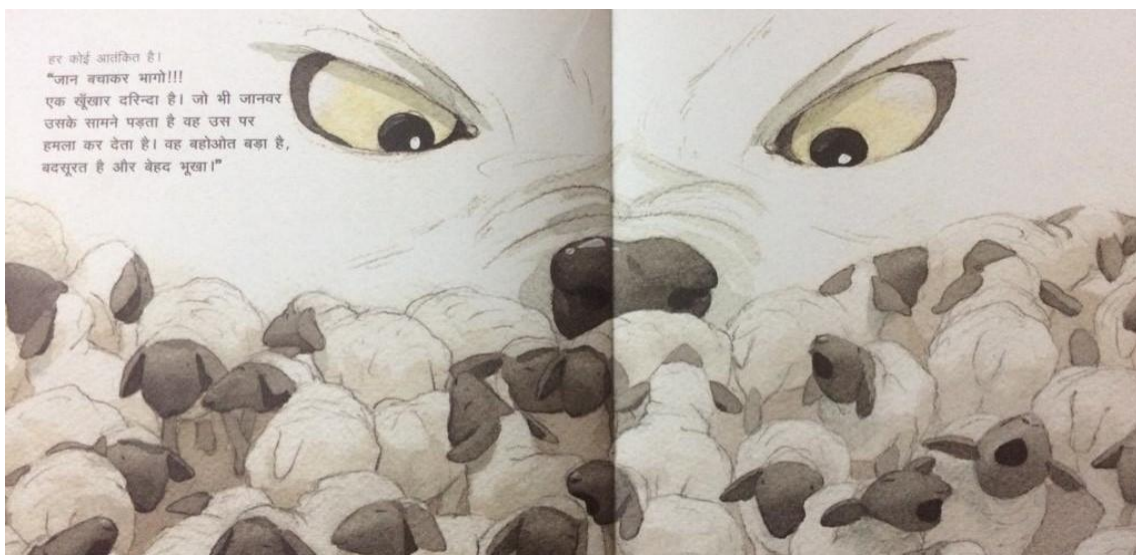
The gentle watercolour washes in *Nabiya* work well to depict the slum in the monsoon and induce a dreamy, nostalgic feeling; while the bold, tribal-like illustrations in *Geet ka Kamal* set the scene for a folktale.

There may be cultural variations in how illustrators use colour, shapes and so on to convey mood and emotion. Teachers, unless they have some exposure to art, may also be unaware of these details. Therefore, it might be a good idea to study these elements of picture books before discussing them with your students.

### Elements of Design

The way text and illustrations are arranged on the page can also change how a book appears. These are called elements of design. You could draw students' attention to interesting uses of basic design elements, like page layout, point-of-view, and ways of displaying or framing illustrations. We discuss these in this section with some examples.

**Page Layout.** Illustrations can be laid out on a single page or spread across two pages. This is called page layout. Variations of layout in a book can create a visual impact. For example, in *Bhediye ko Dusht Kyon Kehte Hain?*<sup>8</sup>, author-illustrator Quentin Greban uses a single page layout throughout the book, except in one case shown in Figure 8. At this point in the story, the rumours about the wolf's cruelty reach a peak and the image shows how other animals have come to perceive him – a menacing presence.



**Figure 8.** Double spread from *Bhediye ko Dusht Kyon Kehte Hain?*

<sup>8</sup> Hindi version published by Eklavya, 2011. 'Why do they say wolves are bad?' in English, written by Quentin Greban. Published by Jyotsna Prakashan, 2011. Originally published by Mijada Publications, 2008, in Belgium.

**Point-of-View and Distance.** *Point-of-view* (or perspective) refers to the position of the viewer in relation to the illustration (Sipe, 2001). You could be viewing the scene from top, the side or from the perspective of a child looking up at the world of adults, for example.

Illustrators often use a variety of perspectives across the book to maintain visual interest or to indicate the point-of-view of different characters in the story. The illustrations from *They All Saw a Cat*<sup>9</sup>(Figure 9) are a glorious example of varying perspectives. See how a boy, a fish and a flea are shown to perceive the same cat, depending on their location and previous experiences with the cat.

In discussing point-of-view and distance, you could also draw attention to how illustrators manipulate sizes and proportions to create the impression of varying distances and perspectives.



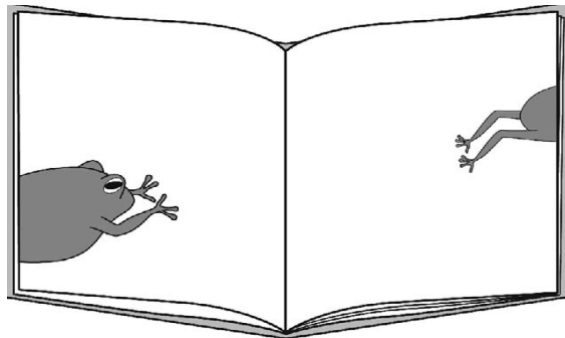
**Figure 9.** Illustrations from *They All Saw a Cat*

<sup>9</sup> Chronicle Books, 2016. Written and illustrated by Brendan Wenzel.



## Display and Framing

**Framing.** The way an illustration presents a figure entering or leaving a frame can create a sense of movement and time. It also makes us want to turn the page to see what happens next. Figure 10 presents an example from Matulka (2008, p. 116).



*Figure 10.* Example of Framing

**Panels.** With panels, the illustrator breaks an illustration into several parts. This is used to create pace, depict long sequence of actions or passage of time, or to highlight different aspects of a character's personality. The panel from *Ammachi's Glasses*<sup>10</sup> in Figure 11 shows a series of actions comprising the grandmother waking up and trying to find her glasses. In one shot, this page sets the background for the story that unfolds.



*Figure 11.* A Panel from *Ammachi's Glasses*

<sup>10</sup> Tulika, 2017. Wordless picture book created by Priya Kuriyan.



**Half-complete actions.** Illustrators can create drama and suspense by showing actions that are only half-complete (Matulka, 2008). Figure 3 from *Rosie's Walk*, showing a fox pouncing on Rosie hen, is an example of this. Doesn't it create an excitement about what is to happen next? Several illustrations in *Harold Ki Baingani Pencil*<sup>11</sup> also employ this technique. Whatever Harold draws becomes real. On many pages (see Figure 12), he is shown drawing incomplete objects, though there is enough on the page to make interesting predictions about what they might be. You could explore whether elements like these encourage students to keep reading.



*Figure 12.* Illustration from *Harold ki Baingani Pencil*

While discussing illustrations, you don't have to cover *all* aspects for every book. You don't have to use complex terminology with your students, either. For each book, just draw their attention to some select elements and describe them in a simple manner. As you highlight these elements, share your response to the illustrations. This will not only draw your students' attention to images and how they help in understanding the book, but it will also give them the vocabulary to share their own responses.

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<sup>11</sup> Hindi translation published by BGVS, 2007. Original title 'Harold and the Purple Crayon' written and illustrated by Crockett Johnson (HarperCollins Children's Books, 1981).

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