In Pictures and In Words

Teaching the Qualities of Good Writing
Through Illustration Study

KATIE WOOD RAY

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SECTION ONE

Illustration Study as a Foundation for Strong Writing
Illustration Study as a Foundation for Strong Writing

“What if we could support children as they make meaning both visually and verbally and know that in doing so, neither ability or competency is diminished; instead, both are strengthened?”
Why Illustration Study Matters to the Development of Young Writers

We have a particular interest in the place of the visual in the lives of children, and we hope to show that children very early on, and with very little help (despite all the encouragement), develop a surprising ability to use elements of the “visual grammar”—an ability which, we feel, should be understood better and developed further, rather than being cut off prematurely as is, too often, the case at present.

—GUNTER KRESS AND THEO VAN LEEUWEN, Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design

Six-year-old Clay’s mother knew he was becoming invested in his work as a writer when requests like this began making their way into his nightly prayers: Dear Lord, please help me have good ideas for my bat book in writing workshop tomorrow. In his kindergarten class, Clay and his classmates were studying informational books, and making this kind of picture book clearly appealed to him as a beginning writer. He was always thinking ahead. At any given time, Clay would be working on a book, but he could also tell you the topic of the next book he was planning to write. Planets. Spiders. Skeletons. Clay truly seemed to relish thinking about ways he could engage and inform his readers as he made books about topics he knew a lot about.
Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 show three books Clay wrote during this study. Each is filled with interesting decisions he made as he crafted them, but three stand out in particular. In the bat book, Clay carefully constructed a page where the reader can lift the flaps to see the bat hanging upside down in a sleeping position during the day and in flight (notice the sideways position) during the night. In the book about watches, Clay was very intentional as he thought ahead about how he could trace his hand to show a close-up of the watch on the wrist. And in the book about spiders, Clay included something he had seen other writers of nonfiction include in their books: a graph showing the relative danger of the black widow—five red x’s of danger! He also used a clever sequence of three drawings on the last page to show the reader how to draw a spider, the spidery font topping it all off.

Too often, I’m afraid, it’s easy to look at what Clay has done in these books, exclaim, “How cute is that!” and then not think much more about it. It is cute, but it is so much more than cute, and understanding all the ways in which it is so much more than cute is a big part of how this book came to be.

Consider, if you will, the sophistication of Clay’s composition process. He wasn’t just making picture books about bats and watches and spiders; he was designing them (Kress 2000) with readers in mind. As a maker of books, Clay was able to move seamlessly between content and design as he composed, and the decisions he made about how he might best represent his meaning were purposeful and deliberate. Clay thought about his writing even when he wasn’t working on it, both in his planning ahead for content and design, and in reading like a writer—getting ideas from his reading to use in his own work. In daily reflection times at the end of writing workshop, Clay was able to explain his process and decision making to other students in his class who were eager to learn from him. And finally, Clay would spend days on a single book, exhibiting a strong will for the stamina of creative work.

I think most teachers of writing would agree that their primary, long-range goal is for children like Clay to become competent, effective communicators who can use text to accomplish their meaningful goals in the world. Yes, it’s a long-range goal, but when I look at Clay’s work now, when he’s six, I can’t help but see all the ways in which he’s already well on his way to being just this kind of communicator. I also see into his future, and I know that when he is sixteen or twenty-six, or however far I want to look, being an effective communicator will involve getting words down on paper, but it will involve so much more than that—just as it involves more than that for him now, when he’s six.

Seeing all this, I can’t help but wonder, “What if there is a way to teach some of the so much more than that through the illustration work Clay and
Figure 1.1    Clay’s book about bats.  (1) Bats.  (2) 1. Bats are nocturnal.  2. Bats can climb.  3. Bats hang down.  4. Boo! Bats can fly.  5. Cool! (3) Bats are nocturnal.  (4) Bats are nocturnal.
Figure 1.1 continued (5) Bats can climb. (6) Bats hang down. (7) Boo! Bats can fly. (8) Cool.
Figure 1.2 Clay’s book about watches. (1) Watches. (2) Table of Contents 1. Watches go on your wrist. 2. Watches help you to tell the time. 3. What is the time? (3) Watches go on your wrist (labels: wrist, watch).
Figure 1.2  continued  (4) Watches help you to tell the time (label: spots). (5) Some watches look like robots. (6) What is the time?
Figure 1.3  Clay’s book about spiders. (1) Spider. (2) Web. 2. All kinds of spiders. 3. Black widows have hour glass. 4. How to draw a spider. (3) Spiders spin a web! (Labels: web!, heart). (4) There are all kinds of spiders (labels: Black Widow, Tarantula, Wolf Spider, eye).
Figure 1.3  continued (5) What do black widows do? (6) Black widows have an hour glass. (7) How to draw a spider.
other children are doing as they make picture books? What if we can support children as they make meaning both visually and verbally and know that in doing so, neither ability or competency is diminished; instead, both are strengthened? What if children are introduced to key qualities of good writing in the context of illustrations? What if children gain lots and lots of experience planning, drafting, revising, and editing content in the process of composing illustrations for their books?” These are the ideas that drive this book.

To imagine how all this rich teaching might be possible, it’s first helpful to understand some of the context in which Clay is becoming an effective communicator in his kindergarten classroom. The most important understanding, no doubt, is the fact that he works at making picture books each day in a writing workshop. The nature of this work is critical to his development as an effective communicator.

**Picture Book Making as a Template for Playful Exploration**

In many primary writing workshops, children like Clay use a combination of words and illustrations across a series of pages to make picture books about topics of interest to them. The developmentally appropriate nature of this template for writing is well documented in professional literature on the teaching of writing (Calkins 2003; Corgill 2008; Horn and Giacobbe 2007; Ray and Cleaveland 2004; Ray and Glover 2008; Rowe 1994). Making picture books is developmentally appropriate because, when supported to do so, children bring to book making the same exploratory spirit they bring to all sorts of other play. As they make books, most children (again, with support) are willing to approximate and try on the roles of writers and illustrators, much as they would try on roles in other kinds of play. And as the NAEYC Position Statement: Developmentally Appropriate Practice (2009) makes clear, the spirit of play matters because “Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence” (14).

Making picture books is important for beginning writers for other reasons as well. Because it takes some time for children to become fluent and proficient with transcription (getting words down on paper), being able to represent meaning in illustrations makes so much more possible for beginning writers. Alea’s book about fruits you’d never see, for instance (Figure 1.4), involved some very clever thinking—thinking that wouldn’t have happened if Alea weren’t comfortable using illustrations to make meaning.

A picture book is the perfect “container” for the composition of beginning writers like Alea. Children understand that when they make books, they’re not drawing instead of writing, and they haven’t been asked to make
Figure 1.4  Alea’s fruit book. (1) You’ve never seen a grape nose. (2) You’ve never seen a blueberry rain. (3) You’ve never seen an apple face. (4) You’ve never seen a banana mustache.
Figure 1.4  continued  (5) OH NO! (6) The thing is we eat fruits. (7) End page with pieces of orange on it.
picture books because they don’t yet know how to write. They’ve been asked to draw pictures to make meaning—along with words—because that’s what makers of picture books do. The most experienced authors and illustrators use a combination of pictures and words to make picture books, just as beginning writers like Alea and Clay do. Related to this, because young children are surrounded by picture books at school, it makes sense that their writing should match the kind of texts they know best.

And when they see themselves as people who make picture books, people just like Mo Willems and Emily Gravett, for example, young children notice and pick up ideas for writing and illustrating from the books adults read to them.

When they are rendered with specific detail, illustrations can also help children read their approximated spellings much more easily, serving as important picture cues for the written text. When Starr wrote a book about school, everyone at her school knew exactly what the picture represented on the page you see in Figure 1.5. Because of the meticulously drawn colored flags, it was easy for Starr’s classmates to see that the illustration was of the gym, and this assisted her classmates as they read what she’d written on this page: “At PE, Mr. Sebastyn teaches us.”

Using illustrations in picture books to make meaning is also essential for children who enter school as English language learners. Image is, in a way, a universal language, and as Danling Fu points out in An Island of English: Teaching ESL in Chinatown, “Drawing is a good way for English language beginners to tell their stories” (2003, 89). Making picture books and learning to
connect illustrations in meaningful ways makes much more possible in the expression of ideas for English language learners. And because they see picture books all around them, and they see other children making them as well, the picture-book-making context helps ELLs feel very much included—and on more equal footing—in the literate life of the community.

Finally, when young children make books, they can’t help but engage in a process of constant decision making. *What will I write about? What should come first? How should I draw it? Does this look the way I want it to look? What should come next? And next? Etc.* These process decisions are given over to children as they build ideas across the pages of books, and the experience of making so many decisions over time nurtures their development in important ways.

**Different Stances to Illustrations**

In writing workshops where children make picture books, it seems there are two different stances one might take to the illustration part of composing. The different stances suggest different teaching practices and, as a result, different composition experiences for children.

**Teaching Out of Illustrations**

One stance is that the goal of teaching should be to teach children *out* of illustrations and *into* words as quickly as possible. When this is the stance, children may be encouraged to spend less time on their illustrations and to forgo the use of color and other materials like the tape and sticky notes Clay used to make the flaps in his bat book. When the goal is to get away from illustrating as quickly as possible, children may be taught just to sketch an idea that they can then put into words—the sketch serving simply to hold the meaning rather than expand it the way illustrations do in picture books.

The countywide rubric used to assess writers like Clay takes this basic stance to the illustration part of his development. The rubric says that a Level 2 writer “uses drawings to express meaning,” while a Level 3 writer “uses drawings to plan a story.” By Level 4, writers should “use drawings to plan and describe an experience.” The shift in language certainly suggests that teaching should help children move away from drawing as expressive meaning making to drawing essentially as prewriting.

Looking at Clay’s work from this stance, one truly appreciates the thoughtful way he planned ahead for and captured meaning in his illustrations, but ultimately the hope would be that Clay would learn to write this meaning instead of illustrate it: *Bats are nocturnal. During the day when the sun is out, they hang upside down in dark places and sleep. At night, when the moon and stars come out, they fly about and go hunting for food.*
Teaching Into Illustrations

The other possible stance when children are making picture books is to teach into the illustration part of the composing process. When teaching from this stance, children are encouraged to linger longer with illustrations, to use color and other media to make meaning, and to expand what the words say by intentionally composing with illustrations. Teachers who take this stance are also supporting children to move toward more fluent transcription, but they don’t necessarily privilege word making over image making. They value them equally. Their hope is that Clay will someday be able to write this meaning instead of illustrate it, but only if he chooses to do so.

Looking at Clay’s work from this stance, one also truly appreciates the thoughtful way he planned ahead for and captured meaning in his illustrations, but the appreciation goes an important step further. This teaching stance recognizes that Clay is doing with pictures exactly what he might be doing with words, were he more fluent in his transcription or, simply, if he chose to make this meaning with words instead of pictures. He might just as efficiently use a combination of text and other media to get his meaning across effectively, even when he is fully proficient at the writing part. It depends on what kind of text he is creating. In this case, of course, he is making a picture book, and in this form of writing it is absolutely appropriate, even expected, to make lots of meaning in the illustrations.

As I’ve presented them here, teaching out of illustrations and teaching into illustrations may seem like oppositional stances, but I don’t believe they have to be—just as they clearly weren’t in Clay’s writing workshop. There is a bridge between the two, and that bridge is understanding how both writing and drawing are acts of meaning making—they are simply generated with different compositional tools. Composers of words share many of the same understandings about meaning making with composers of pictures, so choosing to teach into illustrations doesn’t necessarily mean that time for teaching writing is sacrificed. If teachers are willing to make a composing connection and show children how an illustrator’s decisions about pictures are a lot like a writer’s decisions about words, she forms a bridge of understanding that nurtures children as both illustrators and writers.

A Forward-Looking Stance to Teaching

Teaching into children’s illustration work is not a laissez-faire stance to teaching, a “just let them draw—they’re children” kind of stance. Instead, it is an incredibly intentional, forward-looking stance. It requires teachers to hold deeply grounded understandings about composing all sorts of texts in effective ways, both in terms of process and product. It requires a double sort of vision, if you will, where teachers can see how children learning a certain illustration technique are also learning a way of representing meaning that
they could just as well do with words, in a different sort of text. Clay’s page showing bats in contrasting diurnal and nocturnal settings, for example, shows he has a beginning understanding of what it means to compare and contrast. His illustrated steps for how to draw a spider show he clearly understands what it means to render something procedurally, as writers do when they write steps about how to do something. The understandings Clay is using to compose his illustrations are operationally the same understandings he’ll need to compose well-written text.

Teaching into illustrations asks teachers to understand that when children illustrate, they prewrite (or predraw, perhaps), draft, revise, and edit just as they do when they write, and to value this process equally in this parallel context. As pointed out earlier, Clay spent lots of time thinking ahead about how he would show important information in these books. He may very well grow to be the kind of writer who does a lot of prewriting in his head, planning carefully before he sets out to draft. He’s developing a fairly sophisticated process of working that way now in his illustrations. And if you look closely at the traces left by an eraser, you can also see he’s engaged in revising both pictures and words. He knows what it means to go back over something he’s made and reconsider the making of it (the essence of revision and editing).

Finally, the forward-looking nature of teaching into illustrations asks teachers to understand that the world these children live in—and will ultimately grow to be effective communicators in—is a world where the definition of text will be greatly expanded: what it means to compose a text will go far beyond composition with words only. Can you imagine, for example, going to find information on bats or watches or spiders and finding even a single resource that was only written in text, with no images at all to help convey the meaning? That’s just not what consumers of informational text find when they go looking for information, not in books or magazines or newspapers or websites. It would be exceptional to find a unimodal, text-only, resource in the world of information we live in. And so this fact begs the question, “Why would children like Clay be asked to write informational text and not be supported—with intentional teaching—to use their illustrations thoughtfully to carry important meaning in their books?”

In a recent reformatting of Newsweek magazine, the back-page essay written for years alternately by George Will and Anna Quindlen, was ditched. In its place: a graphic feature titled Back Story, “a visual dissection or explanation of an important issue or phenomenon that will satisfy one’s curiosity or pique one’s interest.” Personally, I’ve been fine dissecting important issues verbally with Will and Quindlen for years now, but I suppose the move to combine the visual and the verbal was inevitable as consumers have come to expect communication to be delivered in multi-
modal ways. And we cannot imagine the evolving meanings of text that might exist in the world where Clay and his classmates will grow to be effective communicators.

The National Council of Teachers of English Position Statement: The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies speaks so clearly to the need for an expanded view of text when considering effective communication. “As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable” (NCTE 2008).

A Hope for Future Practice

What very young children are doing with pictures and words when they are five and six and seven, they will no doubt one day be doing with interactive audio, video, simulated environments, and other technologies we can’t even imagine at the moment. Words will no doubt be a part of these texts, but composing these texts will involve a lot more than just words. I love to think of Clay as an adult one day, creating a text to inform and engage readers about the marvelous world of bats, and having at his disposal all the many tools of technology. He’ll need more than just prayers to help him work his way through all the possibilities before he composes a text!

Because of the rich, professional conversations around the teaching of writing, many, many children now go to school and find themselves in writing workshops where they make picture books. And because of the excellent unit-of-study work that has grown out of this same professional conversation, many of these children also find themselves learning to use their picture books to do all kinds of meaningful composition. Inside these books, children compose stories about their lives. They craft texts that engage and inform and teach readers how to do things. They write poetry.

In classrooms where children compose meaningfully inside picture books, teachers have created an amazing context in which to teach composition—and at a much deeper level than perhaps anyone ever imagined possible with children so young. But to get at the really deep work, teachers must look at children’s illustrating not as an afterthought or simply the means to another, more important end. To get at the really deep composition work, teachers must understand illustrating in this way—as composition. And teachers must believe that if they teach into this work, they are helping children become the kinds of effective communicators the twenty-first century demands, “possessing a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies.”
How This Book Works

*In Pictures and In Words* is about bringing the fullness of illustration study into the writing workshop. The book is divided into two sections. The first six chapters (including this one) work in consort to build a case for why teaching into children’s illustration work matters so much to their overall development as effective communicators. My professional mantra has always been, *Don’t talk about how to teach without first building a case for why it matters to teach.* So in the true sense of building, my intention is that not one of these chapters should be considered on its own, but always in conjunction with the others. The case for teaching into illustration work is multifaceted and doesn’t come into true focus until all the pieces are in place.

Chapter Two explores the idea of building stamina for creative work and the role that illustrating plays in the development of stamina in young writers. Chapter Three makes the case that creative work is always process work, and how supporting understandings about process in children’s illustration work makes sound curricular sense for them as writers. Chapter Four explores an important habit of mind all writers possess—the ability to read like a writer—and how children may be taught this habit of mind in the context of illustration study.

Chapter Five explains how illustrators make many decisions about pictures for the same reasons writers make decisions about words. Understanding how these decisions are the same can help teachers be much more intentional in how they talk about illustrations with children, supporting meaning-making possibilities in pictures and words at the same time. And finally, Chapter Six describes what a unit of study in illustrations might look like in a primary writing workshop.

Following these chapters is Section Two of the book, and it’s all about looking at illustrations with new eyes. These new eyes will help you and your students see more in illustrations, think about the decisions illustrators have made behind what you see, find new possibilities for your own illustration work, and also grow in your understanding of many qualities of good writing.

Fifty different illustration techniques are grouped into five clusters based on the qualities of good writing to which they correspond: ideas and content; precision and detail; wholeness of text; tone; and layout and design. Each cluster of techniques begins with an introduction explaining their connection to a general quality of good writing. These explanations are critical as they fuel the forward thinking teachers need in order to see how talking about illustration decisions can also help children understand important qualities of good writing. Because the content in Section Two is so different from what you’ll read in the first six chapters of the book, it has its own introduction explaining how it works and how it might be used to support your teaching.
Figure 1.1  Bats are nocturnal.

Figure 3.1  There are all kinds of spiders!

Figure 4.1  You've never seen a grape nose.

Figure 4.1  You've never seen an apple face.

Figure 4.1  You've never seen a banana mustache.

Figure 5.1  Starr's illustration of the gym.

Figure 1.4  What do Black Widows do?

Figure 2.1  Daniel's book: What Do Dinosaurs Do?
Figure 2.2  Reilly’s first book about CAT® machines.

Figure 2.4  The cover of Thomas’ Bakugan book.

Figure 3.1  Lukas’ revised page

Figure 3.4  From Sammi’s book Seasons

Figure 3.6  Me and Katie go to the waterfall.

Figure 3.7  Nate and Blake practice basketball.

Figure 3.8  I can paint the birds.

Figure 3.8  I can paint the world!
Figure 3.9  Ella’s Book About Dresses and Weddings

Figure 3.10  Eating the eggs.

Figure 3.10  Egg. Hatches. Two-headed snake.

Figure 3.10  Snakes can bite.

Figure 5.1  Anna’s memoir ending
When Students Study Illustrations . . .

Here and on the following pages are illustrations from five different picture books and examples of the kinds of things students say when they study illustrations. Working from what students notice, teachers point out the decisions illustrators have made and the techniques they’ve used to compose a picture in a particular way.

“Let’s Get a Pup!” Said Kate by Bob Graham

And with many a backward glance . . .

They slowly walked away.

Technique *32

Color choices impact the tone of a book.

Technique *36

The physical distance between animals, people, and objects affects tone.

Technique *13

Facial expressions and gestures are meaningful details.

He’s been left behind.

He’s sad.
Technique #15  Life and character are revealed through details in the background of a scene.

Uncles and aunties, cousins and friends, Mama and Daddy.
All come for Sunday dinner at Grannie's!

"Dinner MUST be ready now, Gran!"
Jay Jay grinned. And Gran laughed.
"Mm-mmm, I think it is!

Full, Full, Full of Love  by Trish Cooke
Illustrated by Paul Howard

Technique #19  Object-specific details bring authenticity to objects, both human-made and natural.

The dishes all have patterns on them.

Technique #24  Dynamic details, even seemingly insignificant ones, may reappear in a book.

"That's Jay Jay in the picture frame!"
There's the aquarium again.
Winter Dark

Winter dark comes early
mixing afternoon
and night.
Soon
there’s a comma of a moon,
and each streetlight
along the
way
puts its period
to the end of day.

Now
a neon sign
punctuates the dark
with a bright
blinking
breathless
exclamation mark!

You can see
lights on and
people inside
the buildings.

An illustration may
show two sides of a physical space
simultaneously: inside and outside;
above and below.

Mural on Second Avenue and Other City Poems
by Lillian Moore  Illustrated by Roma Karas

Technique #17
Details can show the effect of weather on a scene.

Technique #18
Using details from the world of people brings authenticity to a setting.

Technique #4
An illustration may show two sides of a physical space simultaneously: inside and outside; above and below.

Now
a neon sign
punctuates the dark
with a bright
blinking
breathless
exclamation mark!

Technique #18
Using details from the world of people brings authenticity to a setting.
**“The Trouble with Dogs...” Said Dad**  by Bob Graham

**Technique #1** Illustrations have distance perspective: a central image may be pictured as far away, close up, or any distance in between.

Spring turned to fall, and Dave was still... well... Dave!

In the park, he cu: a picnic party clean in two and ran right down the middle of the lower beds, just to show it could be done.

“Dave needs a firmer hand,” said Mom. “Someone to tell him no.”

They all looked at Dad. “No, Dave,” he said.

“No, Dave;” Mom called a little louder. “No, Dave!” said Kate as he jumped up to lick her on the nose.

**Technique #3** The central image in an illustration may have lots of background behind it, just a little, or hardly any at all.

**Technique #48** Small, meaningful images may be used as visual elements apart from the main illustration.

It’s like you’re seeing it from up high and Dave looks really tiny.

This shows Dave came back.

There are so many different people in the picture.
Cucumbers climb around and around.

Technique #20
Details can create the illusion of motion.

It looks like the ants are moving.

Technique #20

You can just see their legs and feet.

Technique #47
Pictures may extend into the invisible space beyond the natural borders of the page.

Cucumbers climb around and around.

Technique #43
Sometimes the placement of words in relation to the picture matches a specific meaning in a book.

The words are written curvy.

Up, Down, and Around by Katherine Ayres
Illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott
Crafting with Distance Perspective

**Something to Notice**
Illustrations have distance perspective: a central image may be pictured as far away, close up, or any distance in between.

**An Illustration Example**
In Martin Jenkins’ *The Emperor’s Egg* (1999), illustrator Jane Chapman used the perspective of distance to great effect several times in the book. In the opening spread, we see a male emperor penguin far off in the distance. He is very small against the snowy landscape all around him. The text on this page (7) reads, “But wait . . . what’s that shape over there? It can’t be. Yes!” The illustration supports the idea that a reader might question what is seen because it is off at such a distance. A turn of the page shows the emperor penguin again, but this time he’s pictured as if the reader is standing right behind him, his full height filling most of the single page. The words on this page suggest this much closer distance as they say in big, bold letters, “It’s a penguin!” Two pages over (12–13) and Chapman has zoomed in so close, only the bottom third of the penguin is visible; the rest of him disappears off the top of the page spread. The close-up allows us to see the egg safely tucked on top of his feet and underneath his warm tummy.

**An Understanding for Young Writers and Illustrators**
In truth, every illustration has distance perspective. When the perspective is striking, it’s because the image is pictured far away or very close up. Distance perspective is something children can easily try in their own illustrating. You’ll want to help them understand that if a central image is important to the meaning of an illustration, as the emperor penguin is in *The Emperor’s Egg*, then choosing the best distance perspective is one of the first content decisions an illustrator will make for each turn of the page. Showing the central image from far away makes the landscape around it more prominent in the scene and creates a sense of distance for the reader. Zooming in close on the central image lets readers see actions or details as the focal point, rather than the image as a whole.

As you look at illustrations that show distance perspective, talk with children about the illustrator’s decision making. Why does a faraway picture make sense here? Why a close-up? How do the words and meaning
suggest the distance? If you want to dig deeper into the whole concept of distance perspective, you might try reading some text from an unfamiliar book (without showing the illustration) and let children think about which distance perspective the words suggest. Ask them, “How far away do the words make you feel?” The key is to stress that the meaning of the words suggests the distance. Feel free to use words like *panorama*, *close-up*, *zoom*, and *perspective* as you talk about illustrations that show clear distance decisions.

Size, of course, is very related to distance perspective. People and objects seem smaller the further away they are. Think with children about the size of people and objects as you look at pictures that show different distance perspectives. Your goal is to help children realize that how large or small they draw something in a picture matters to how close or far away it seems to the reader. Quite likely, children haven’t been thinking about this as they set out to draw their pictures. They’ve just been drawing things and however big they are, they are. Teach toward intention and nudge children to think about distance perspective as they plan the composition of a picture. It will take most of them a long time to grow into this decision making, but that’s okay. They’ve got plenty of time to grow.

**In a Teacher’s Voice: An Idea for Trying It Out**

Let’s say you were making a book about your dog and how he is such a faithful friend. I can imagine an illustration that shows the school bus coming up the road and there, in the distance, is your dog waiting for you in the yard. He’ll be far away in this illustration, and that will probably make your reader want to see him more closely, just like you want to see him at the end of a long day away. Perhaps then you could turn the page and picture him up very close, just his face and your face in the middle of a big, welcome-home lick!

**A Writing Connection**

In a lecture entitled “Cinema of the Mind,” included in *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* (2005), Pulitzer Prize winning author Robert Olen Butler explored the idea that “fiction technique and film technique have a great deal in common” (63).

The narrative voice in fiction is always adjusting our view of the physical world it creates, which is equivalent to another group of film techniques on a continuum from long shot to extreme close-up, and the many stages in between . . . The narrative voice always places our reader’s consciousness at a certain distance from the image it’s creating. It can place us at a far away distance or bring us into a position of intimate proximity by its choice of detail, by what it lets through the camera lens. (66)
He then used a very short passage from a short story by Ernest Hemingway, “Cat in the Rain,” to illustrate distance perspective in writing.

*The American Wife stood at the window looking out. Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on.*

“I’m going down to get that kitty,” the American Wife said. (67)

Butler pointed out that in the space of this short passage, the distance perspective shifts a number of times. In the first sentence, Hemingway “evokes the full figure of the wife standing at the window . . . kind of a medium long shot. We see her fully across the room” (68). In the next sentence, we see what she is seeing out the window, the cat under the table, a longer-range shot, but then we move in for a close-up in the next sentence as we see the cat making herself compact to avoid the rain. Finally, when the woman speaks, our attention turns back to her and we see her again, closer now, speaking.

In the development of scenes, writers create a perspective of distance with words and the images they suggest, just as illustrators create a perspective of distance in pictures. If you want to understand this concept even more thoroughly, you might try lifting scenes from your current reading and think about the distance perspective the words suggest to you. If you were to illustrate those words, how close in or how far away would you imagine picturing your picture?
Crafting Details of Expression and Gesture

Something to Notice

Facial expressions and gestures are meaningful details.

An Illustration Example

Trish Cooke’s *Full, Full, Full of Love* (2003) is a wonderful celebration of Sunday dinner at Grandma’s house, and the details in Paul Howard’s illustrations bring the family to life, particularly in the facial expressions and gestures found on page after page. In one illustration, the family is sitting around the table having dessert and coffee and after-dinner talk. One of the aunties is leaning back in her chair and her arms are crossed high across her middle, just above her stomach. The expression on her face is one of skeptical amusement, as if she might be thinking, “Girrrlll, what are you talking about?” Everyone pictured at the table has equally telling, though different, expressions and gestures. Later, in the last illustration in the book, Howard shows four different people waving good-bye, and every wave is a little different, particularly the specifically hip, back-of-the-hand, thumb-extended wave of a young cousin.

An Understanding for Young Writers and Illustrators

Perhaps because they’re still so close to that time when they read faces and gestures to understand, that time before they understood words, children seem especially keen at noticing the expressions and gestures of the people pictured in illustrations. “Why is that man so mad?” they ask, when they see an angry face or a furious gesture. This natural keenness will serve them well in understanding how important details of this kind are to both good writing and good illustrating.

To understand how key facial expressions and gestures are to meaning making, imagine watching a couple having coffee through the front window of a diner. You can’t hear a word they’re saying, but just by watching them you can probably tell whether they are happy and in love and glad to be together, or bored out of their minds with one another, seriously discussing some matter of great import, or mad as hell and holding nothing back. You can tell all this because of gesture and expression. For a writer or an illustrator to truly bring a scene to life, attending to the details of gesture and expression is critical.
The key for teaching is to bring the natural noticing children do as they people-watch in books to a very conscious level. As you notice the looks on characters’ faces and the gestures suggested by their postures, stress the fact that showing them in this way is a result of the illustrator’s decision making. Wonder with children about those decisions. A person’s facial expressions and gestures happen in direct response to what’s happening around him, so how does it seem the character is experiencing the moment in time captured by the illustration? Based on what you see, what does the illustrator want you to believe this character is thinking or feeling? What other expressions or gestures might have been appropriate? These lines of thinking and discussing will help you build in your students a very important understanding: that details of expression and gesture always communicate something important about a character’s experience, both in illustrating and in writing.

Interestingly enough, while children notice facial expressions and gestures as they read, they don’t normally use this level of detail in their own illustrations of people unless nudged to do so. Be sure to demonstrate for the whole class the kind of thinking that leads to adding such details to an illustration. You’ll also want to help children include this sort of detail as you work with them one-on-one in writing conferences. If a child has pictured a person as part of a scene, help that child imagine the person’s response to the scene and then craft the facial expression and gesture to match that response.

In a Teacher’s Voice: An Idea for Trying It Out

If I were making a book about my nephew’s birthday party, I might have an illustration where he has opened a present and looked inside the box, but the reader can’t see what’s inside. Instead, the reader sees my nephew with his head thrown back, his eyes shut tightly, his mouth spread wide in what appears to be a big “yeeesss,” and his arms raised triumphantly in the air, fists balled with the feel of victory. In other words, he likes the Wii he sees in the box.

A Writing Connection

Natalie Goldberg wrote the following advice in her book Thunder and Lightening: Cracking Open the Writer’s Craft:

Imagine a scene as a photograph—the moment a husband tells his wife he’s just been fired from his job—and describe what you see. You cannot say, “She was shocked and furious.” You cannot say, “She was sympathetic.” These are not pictures. We are trying to bring the scene vividly alive in the reader’s mind. Instead, focus on the face of the woman in the photo; her lower lip is curled, ringed hand stretched out toward the man across the couch, eyes narrowed in slits. What does he look like? What are they wearing? And the room? Flowered carpet? Black-and-white linoleum? Fern in the corner?
Window open? Ceiling fan? Probably that photo will not reveal whether it’s in Illinois or Florida—unless there’s a palm tree out the window. We cannot know what the photo does not directly impart. No past or future is in a picture, only the revelation of the moment. Don’t let wild mind travel off into introspection—what could have happened?—or imagine how he is feeling or how she is feeling. Stay with what is given. The reader will glimpse the feelings far more immediately in the gesture—the curled lip, the outstretched arm—than in any abstract statement. Here we are developing writing as visual art, using our eyes as the primary way into a scene. (2000, 165–66)

Writing as visual art. The revelation of the moment. The connection between the use of detail in writing and its use in illustration could not be clearer. The mediums are different—words and pictures—but the understanding about crafting is exactly the same: both authors and illustrators know that readers “will glimpse the feelings far more immediately in the gesture.”
Keeping Static Details Consistent

**Something to Notice**

The static details of characters, objects, and places are consistent across a book.

**An Illustration Example**

In Ralph Fletcher’s book *The Sandman* (2008), illustrator Richard Cowdrey included some interesting details in both characters and settings. For example, Cowdrey gave Tor—the Sandman—a deeply pronounced dimple right in the middle of his chin. From any angle on page after page, the dimple is visible. To the dragon, Cowdrey gave a wonderful red goatee, amazingly unsinged despite all his fire breathing. And in Tor’s bedroom, Cowdrey helps the reader understand what an inventor Tor is by including all manner of furniture made from everyday objects like pencils and drawers and nuts and bolts. Tor, the dragon, and the bedroom are pictured in multiple illustrations, and in every one, these details are consistent.

**An Understanding for Young Writers and Illustrators**

You may be wondering whether this illustration technique is even worth the space it takes up to include as a possibility. You may be thinking, “Well of course the dimple is there in every picture. Of course, if the bed is made from a drawer in one scene, it’s the same bed in another scene.” In general, the physical details of characters, objects, and places are static. They don’t change unless something happens to change them: the dragon shaves, for instance. A significant change to a static detail would have to be accounted for in the text, however, or else the change would leave the reader perplexed.

The logic that causes illustrators to keep static details consistent may seem too obvious to be worth considering, but not when you think about this understanding in the context of children’s illustrating. Children often make books and have the same people and objects on several pages, but the static details of them are not consistent. A friend will have yellow hair in one illustration and red in another. A house will have four windows early in a book and six by the end, plus a new door and a chimney. An ice-cream cone will change from strawberry to chocolate with just the turn of a page.

To help children quickly gain a greater sense of wholeness in their composing, study the consistency of static detail you see across the illustrations in a book. Quite likely, children are aware of consistency in detail,
they just aren’t aware they’re aware of it. Certainly, children usually notice if something is suddenly inconsistent in a book. Your teaching goal is to help children think very specifically about the consistency of detail they see in illustrations. When a child mentions a detail that is striking, like the dragon’s goatee, make it a point to notice that it’s that way on every page (even though it seems obvious).

As you point out how illustrators have to be so careful to render a character or object the same way each time they’re pictured, help children imagine the work it takes to accomplish this. Illustrators must look back often at what’s already illustrated in order to keep details consistent as they add new illustrations. This process of looking back to make sure new content fits with old is directly parallel to the process a writer uses to keep wholeness in a text. As writers are drafting and adding new text, they have to stop and reread often to be sure everything is working together as intended.

In a book about my dogs playing around outside, there are several details I’ll need to keep consistent. First, I’ll make sure each of the four dogs has the same color collar on in every illustration. Next, I’ll make sure that Montana always looks the biggest, because he is the biggest. And finally, I need to show that tiny black tip on the end of Ivy’s tail in every picture, because that’s the way we tell her and Dallas apart.

A Writing Connection

Without a doubt, writers of fiction have their work cut out to keep all their details straight. Once a static detail about a character or a setting has been revealed in a text, that detail needs to remain consistent in all the scenes that follow. The thing is, once a bedspread has been labeled pale yellow or a telephone as rotary, those specific details may not be stated again. What the writer must hold onto in subsequent scenes is the truth of yellow, the truth of rotary. The writer cannot say, for instance, that his character didn’t see the black cat lying on her bed. *The one with the pale yellow bedspread?* the reader asks. *How could she not see a black cat lying on a pale yellow bedspread?* The writer cannot have his character pick up her phone and punch in her boyfriend’s number. *I thought she had an old rotary phone,* the reader thinks. The problem is, of course, that the later details don’t fit with the earlier ones. Readers lose faith in a writer when the details don’t add up.

Eve Bunting spoke of this issue when she wrote about how she checks for “overwriting” when she’s revising. In her essay, “The Power of Words,” Bunting said she asks herself the following:

> Does the dialogue sound real? I have written, “I know I am well loved.” *I, the author, might say that. But would my protagonist, the one who is speak-*
Getting real with your text and making sure that one detail matches the reality of another is the challenge for the writer.

Presuming the details of their writing are true, nonfiction writers might have to check their notes to remember specific details, but consistency should be embedded in the truth of the subject matter and not something writers have to manage. However, nonfiction writers face a similar, but slightly different challenge because they must check for the consistency of terminology. In a feature article about working people finding health insurance, for example, the writer shouldn’t refer to a person who works behind a bar as a barkeep in one place in the article and a bartender in another. The writer needs to settle on a term and stick with it. Readers want to feel as if they can trust a writer with words, and using words in a consistent manner across a text builds this trust. The idea of consistency across a text is what’s important to both illustrators and writers.
Crafting Tone with Color

Color choices impact the tone of a book.

An Illustration Example

I recently purchased three new picture books, and the use of color in each one is dramatically different. Marla Frazee’s illustrations in *All the World* (2009) by Liz Garton Scanlon were done in pencil and watercolor. The translucent softness of these materials sets the perfect tone for the warm look at how families and friends are connected as communities within the larger world. The last line reads, “All the world is all of us.”

Leslie Patricelli uses bright acrylic paints in *Higher! Higher!* (2009) and outlines the images in the pictures with heavy black lines, intensifying the colors even more. The rich, vibrant colors set the perfect tone here as well, capturing the exuberant spirit of a little girl begging to go higher and higher on her swing—all the way to outer space where she high-fives an alien—before returning safely to her father’s arms.

Just four colors—black, white, yellow, and blue—are used in the illustrations for Cynthia Rylant’s book *All in a Day* (2009). Paper artist Nikki McClure drew all the images for the book on black paper, then cut them out with an X-Acto knife, deciding which parts would be black and which would be white as she cut. The cut paper was then scanned, and background color of yellow and blue (on alternating pages) was added by a computer. The illustrations are startlingly beautiful in the intricacy of the shapes and design, but the minimal color does leave a bit of an emotional vacuum for at least some readers (I’m one of them). Words like these in the text seem to suggest color: “Every bird and every tree and every living thing loves the promise in a day, loves what it can bring,” but the finely detailed cutouts force the reader to respond to these words visually through shape rather than color. The emotional void likely comes from the feeling that the world is supposed to have color, so its absence can be unsettling for some readers, affecting the tone of the work dramatically.

An Understanding for Young Writers and Illustrators

An entire body of science is dedicated to the study of the human response to color. In your classroom, you’ll simply be introducing children to the idea that people respond to different colors in different ways, and you’ll be helping them become more purposeful in their selection of color as they illustrate their books.
You might start the inquiry into color by talking with children about color as they know it in their lives. Ask questions such as, “If you were to walk into a room meant for children to play in, what colors might that room be painted? Why? What about a room where adults do serious business? What color would that room be?” You might talk about what colors they have in their rooms at home and why. Perhaps you could imagine someone walking into your classroom dressed all in pink, then in purple, then in red or black or green. How would you respond to these different outfits? Really any line of thinking you can imagine that will get children thinking about how they respond to color will be helpful as a starting point.

As you move to thinking about color in illustrations, you might show students the illustrations in some unfamiliar picture books and talk about what the colors in those books suggest to them. Do the colors suggest playfulness and fun or sweetness and love? Do the colors look scary or anxious or perhaps very serious? Lots of adjectives could be used to express the emotions readers feel as they look at colors, so invite children to use their own words for how the colors make them feel. It will be a bit of a challenge to respond only to color, as images will evoke powerful responses as well, but nudge children to talk just about what the colors suggest.

Then, as you read new books or revisit old ones, talk about why the illustrator chose the color scheme for the book. How do the colors match the feeling of the text? How would the text be different if the colors were very different? You might even show children another book with very different colors to help them really think about how much a dramatic color change would change the book. Be sure that children understand the idea of a color scheme and that color is used consistently across a book.

To talk about color, you’ll need words like *soft*, *intense*, *light*, *bold*, *vivid*, *dark*, *bright*, *rich*, and a host of others that describe the qualities of color you see. You will no doubt become interested in the different materials illustrators use to produce different color effects. Watercolors create soft, translucent color. Gouache is a lot like watercolor but because it’s opaque, it tends to be a bit more intense. Acrylic paintings, of course, give the deepest, richest colors. And then there are pencils, pens, charcoal, pastels, paper collage, and a variety of others. In a day-to-day writing workshop, children will probably be choosing between pencils, crayons, and colored markers for their illustrations, so you’ll want to help them think about the color potentials of these materials, as well as ways to make color more or less intense with different materials.

You will probably notice that some illustrators clearly have used color to try and match as closely as possible the true colors found in nature. When this is the case, color is generally modulated, meaning different shades of a single color are used to make, say, the green leaves of a tree seem more natural than they would if just one shade of green was used. The idea that
some colors seem very natural and realistic, and others less so, is another important line of thinking about an illustrator’s purposefulness. Certainly in terms of tone, on a continuum from more serious to more playful, the more natural the color looks the more serious the tone.

As children illustrate, they tend to choose the colors they need for different people and objects. A more sophisticated understanding of color would be for children to become purposeful as they choose colors for a whole book, based on the tone or feeling they want the book to have. In many ways, this connects to children’s sense of the wholeness of text—the idea that the color scheme should work across the whole book to keep the tone consistent (unless there is a reason to shift it, as you will see in the next illustration possibility).

If I were making a book about my nana and how sweet and kind she always is to me, I would probably choose softer, lighter colors for the pictures. I wouldn’t want my illustrations to be all big and bright and bold, because that’s just not the way she is. She’s quieter than all that. But if I were making a book about my papa and how he takes me to the dirt track races sometimes on Friday nights, I would probably need to use lots and lots of brown in my pictures because it’s always so dirty and dusty. If that were the main color, my reader would get that feeling.

In a Teacher’s Voice: An Idea for Trying It Out

I couldn’t help but think of this recently when I came across this beautiful passage in Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help*:

> I listened wide-eyed, stupid. Glowing by her voice in the dim light. If chocolate was a sound, it would’ve been Constantine’s voice singing. If singing was a color, it would’ve been the color of chocolate. (2009, 67)

The passage is so sensual—it has sound and texture and taste and, of course, color. Readers do respond powerfully to color, and writers and illustrators alike can use this response to great effect when crafting words or crafting pictures. As Plotnik said:

> [But] color is ours—ours to use in ways that capture experiences and stir readers. With all the associations it triggers, one color can be worth a yard of paragraphs. (31)
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“I want to say here that I am not concerned at all about children’s development as writers. Nothing about how I work with young children has grown from concern about their development as writers. I believe that curriculum that grows from concern has the potential to be curriculum that is shoved down on students who may not be ready for it.

My work has grown, instead, from a fascination with their development as writers. I have seen again and again that when we get those markers and that paper in their hands, worlds of possibilities simply open up for all kinds of interesting developments that feel natural and joyful and absolutely appropriate. I believe that the curriculum that follows these possibilities is a “shoved-up” curriculum, pushed upon us as teachers when young children show us what they are capable of doing. I hope that my fascination, and the respect I have for the young children who instill it, will shine through in every chapter of my books.”

—Katie Wood Ray

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Invite children into that magical moment when they first put markers to paper

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