Composing with Pictures

Why is this goal important?

Writing instruction can begin before students can write a letter or spell a word. And, as many have argued, it should. By teaching children to compose with pictures, they can be freed up to create texts in any genre and to understand that meaning comes first, long before they are ready to spend lots of mental energy hearing the sounds in words and writing down what they hear (Ray and Glover 2008; Glover 2009; Ray 2010). Some may call this stage of development *emergent writing*, a time when "children begin to understand that writing is a form of communication and their marks on paper convey a message" (Mayer 2007, 35).

Those of you who work with very young children may be wondering, "What does this look like in the classroom for a student to be composing *exclusively* with pictures? Is that really *writing*?" The short answer is that it looks just like what writing time may look like in upper elementary classrooms in terms of lesson structures—and even the qualities of good writing and writing habits that can be taught. For example, the teacher may begin the writing time with a focus lesson to help the children get started, or to pick up from where they left off the day before. Sometimes this lesson may take the form of a short minilesson where a strategy (like those in this chapter) is demonstrated. Other times, the teacher may choose to

revisit a favorite read-aloud picture book to discuss what the illustrator did to tell the story or to teach about the topic. Still other times, a teacher may share a student's work and explain the strategy the child used to get his ideas down on paper, drawing the best he can. Then, students get time to compose new pieces (drawing pictures to tell a story, teach about a topic, or convince the reader) or return to a piece in progress to make changes. In short, children are planning their writing, drafting, and revising—but the work is primarily (or exclusively) in pictures. Teachers support children with focusing their writing on a topic or story idea, teach them about adding in details, and even work with them to make their drawings "readable" to others.

To successfully compose with pictures, children need to learn how to represent what they see with marks on the page that communicate their meaning to their readers (i.e., I am telling the story of a time I went to the zoo with my mom and my reader can see a mom and a child at a zoo) and to make drawings that they can then "read back" to share with others or to revise. Spending time on some drawing lessons for primary elementary students will also help them feel empowered to compose independently and avoid frustration as they work on their pieces. Some of the lessons in this chapter, therefore, are meant to support students' representational drawing.

Once students have become fluent writers, there may still be reasons to support their composition with pictures. For example, sketching is used throughout the primary grades as a planning tool, so when children have automaticity getting their ideas down on the paper in pictures, they will be better set up to refer to the pictures as they draft, will be able to get more details down as they write, and will be able to have more time freed for the other parts of the writing process.

So, the strategies in this chapter will support students in pre-K through any age where they will still compose with pictures (usually around grade 2).

How do I know if this goal is right for my student?

Many pre-emergent or emergent readers would be good candidates for this as a first goal. Children who may not know many letters and sounds, or who are just beginning to develop this awareness, can be taught to create, compose, storytell, and teach through sketches and drawings. Then, when it's time for labeling and writing sentences, they will understand that first and foremost, a writer writes to communicate something. To learn about your students' letter-sound awareness, you may administer an assessment that asks them to identify letter names and letter sounds.

There are also strategies throughout this book for children who are in the early, mid, and late emergent stages that, with minor simplifying/adapting, can be used for emergent writers. For example, the engagement chapter (Chapter 2) includes strategies that support students who could use practice blocking out distraction and concentrating on their work. The focus chapter (Chapter 4) includes strategies that ask students to make sure all the pages connect to their topic. The structure chapter (Chapter 5) includes strategies that can teach children to organize a three-page story into a beginning, middle, and end. The elaboration chapter (Chapter 6) includes strategies that teach students different types of details to include in their writing (which, of course, if you're teaching emergent writers, you'd explain to mean *include in their pictures*). There is an entire chapter devoted to spelling (Chapter 8), which includes beginning strategies like using an alphabet chart, appropriate for children once they know many of their letters and sounds. So, if you decide to start in this chapter, I would encourage you to also look across the remaining nine chapters for other ideas to support your writers' composing.

In fact, I struggled with the idea of separating the strategies in this chapter from those in the other nine chapters because I believe that the process and qualities of good writing that we teach to older students can be taught to younger students as well (Ray and Glover 2008). Still, I thought it may be helpful to have all of the strategies that involve composing with pictures in one place, with the caveat that teachers of children composing with pictures will find other relevant strategies across the book—and teachers of children writing conventionally will find relevant strategies here.

As mentioned earlier, this goal may also be important for students who do know their letters and sounds and may already be writing words and sentences, but their words and sentences are disconnected from meaning. Children across the primary grades can benefit from spending time sketching their ideas before moving to writing the words. Before they are fluent writers, children often have to focus very hard and deliberately on hearing the sounds in words and writing down what they hear, so much so that sometimes they forget what they wanted to say or end up with a text that is much more simplistic than what they wanted to write. For some students in kindergarten, first, or perhaps even second grade, spending time on communicating ideas or composing a story in pictures first can help them to front-load meaning and then compose with words to match that meaning.

Strategies for Composing with Pictures

Strategy		Grade Levels	Genres/Text Types	Processes
1.1	Talk (as You Draw)	Emergent	Any	Drafting
1.2	Point Around the Pictures	Emergent	Any	Reading writing aloud, revising
1.3	Reread Your Pictures So It Sounds like a Storybook	Emergent	Narrative	Storytelling
1.4	Reread Your Pictures to Teach	Emergent	Informational/nonfiction	Reading writing aloud
1.5	Add Detail to Make Pictures Easier to Read	Emergent–K	Any	Drafting, revising, editing
1.6	Label Your Pictures	Emergent–K	Any	Drafting
1.7	Look Back and Say, "How Can I Make This Clearer?"	Emergent–K	Any	Revising, editing
1.8	Make Your Picture Look like the Picture in Your Mind	Emergent–1	Any	Rehearsing, drafting, revising
1.9	Left to Right	Emergent–2	Narrative, informational/ nonfiction	Drafting
1.10	You Can Come Back to a Piece and Do More	Emergent–2	Any	Drafting, revising
1.11	Drew the People? Draw the Place!	Emergent–2	Narrative	Drafting, revising
1.12	Writing Across the Pages	Emergent–2	Narrative, informational/ nonfiction	Rehearsing, drafting, revising
1.13	A Series of Pictures to Show Change	Emergent–2	Narrative, informational/ nonfiction, procedural	Drafting
1.14	Circles and Sticks	Emergent–2	Any	Rehearsing, drafting
1.15	Drawing with Shapes	Emergent–2	Any	Drafting
1.16	Touch, Then Draw	Emergent–2	Any	Drafting
1.17	Draw (the Best You Can) and Move On!	Emergent–2	Any	Drafting
1.18	Imagine It, Make It!	Emergent–2	Any	Rehearsing, drafting

1.4 Reread Your Pictures to Teach

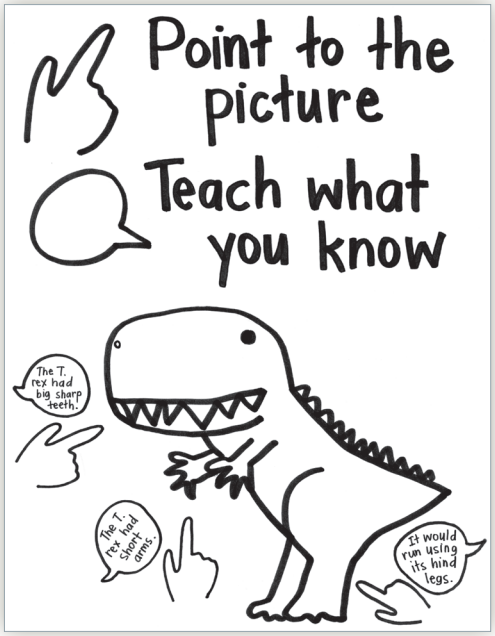
Strategy Go back to your picture(s). Point to the part or picture that teaches something important about your topic. Touch or turn to the next part. Tell what new fact about your topic this part of the picture or this page teaches.

Lesson Language *If I wrote or drew to teach, then when I read my writing back I'm going to make it sound like a teaching book. I'm going to tell my reader the facts I wrote about. Let me show you. I drew a picture of a big T. rex. I know a lot about them so I added a lot of details in my picture. I'm going to touch one part and teach what that part says. "The T. rex had very large jaws with big sharp teeth." Now I'm going to touch a new part and teach what that part says. "The T. rex had very short arms. It would only run using its hind legs."*

Teaching Tip Please see the Teaching Tip in strategy 1.3 (Ray and Glover 2008) for advice on transcribing students' retellings of their writing from pictures.

Prompts

- What does this picture teach about?
- Point to a part and tell me what I can learn from that.
- Do you know other facts?
- What does this part of the picture teach?
- Sound like a teacher.
- Your drawing teaches a lot of facts about the topic!



Marridy Gnagey

Who is this for?

LEVEL
emergent

GENRE / TEXT TYPE
informational/ nonfiction

PROCESS
reading writing aloud

Watch a video of a student teaching about a topic from his writing:

http://hein.pub/WSB

Hat Tip: *I Am Reading: Nurturing Young Children's Meaning Making and Joyful Engagement with Any Book* (Collins and Glover 2015)