



HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

Wordless Stories

How to read a Wordless Story

SPACE TO STIR AND BE STIRRED

**TOWER OF LONDON • HAMPTON COURT PALACE • BANQUETING HOUSE
KENSINGTON PALACE • KEW PALACE • HILLSBOROUGH CASTLE AND GARDENS**

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How to read a Wordless Story

This guidance outlines a structured approach to reading a wordless story, with clear stages designed to support diverse learners. It includes step-by-step instructions for planning sessions and introducing the historical context behind the story.

Aims

- To remove barriers to learning caused by printed words
- To build skills:
 - Focus
 - Critical thinking
 - Making connections
 - Sequential organising
 - Recognising emotions
 - Empathy
 - Oracy
 - Listening to others
 - Turn taking

Planning the Reading Session

Reader

Anyone exploring a picture is referred to as a 'Reader'.

Supporter

The Supporter's role in a reading session is to encourage and guide the Readers by asking questions suitable for whichever reading level the group is working at.

It is important that the Supporter avoids imposing their own interpretation on the discussion. Remain neutral so that Readers' interpretations of the pictures take centre stage. This can be challenging, particularly if you know the facts of the story very well. Listening to and using the Readers' interpretations to stimulate deeper discussion before confirming the facts will reap greater benefits for their learning.

What does a session involve?

- A Supporter leads the session by asking a structured series of questions about each picture (see Reading levels below)
- Readers 'read' the picture out loud in their own words
- The pictures are always read in order until Readers are familiar with the story

Reading levels

1. BASIC
2. DEEP DIVE
3. MAKING CONNECTIONS

Each reading level builds on the previous one. For the best learning outcome, it is vital that all Readers, whatever their cognitive ability, are started at the BASIC level and then taken progressively to the next reading levels in order 1-3 (as suits their ability).

Instructions for each reading level are available from the Wordless Stories webpage.

Preparation

1. We recommend printing all supporting resources provided on the Wordless Stories webpage and keeping them in a ring binder for easy reference.
2. Read *Introduction to Visual Literacy*, available on the Wordless Stories webpage.
3. Read the *Reading Techniques Manual* and follow instructions for the level you'll be using.
4. Decide on the reader set up you want to try. For guidance, refer to the **Reader Set Up** section below.
5. Choose the format or combination of formats you'll be using with Readers (hard copy, handheld device and/or whiteboard). For guidance, refer to the **Which format?** section in this resource.
6. Choose the approach to take for sharing the story's historical information with your Readers. For guidance, refer to the **Which approach to History?** section below.
7. Print off a copy of the relevant Reading Level Questions for each Supporter (**BASIC**, **DEEP DIVE** or **MAKING CONNECTIONS**).
8. Familiarise yourself with your wordless story.
9. While looking at the story's illustrations practise asking yourself the Questions provided for the reading level you'll be using.

TIP: Create a wall frieze of the story by printing A3 copies of the pages for a classroom or hallway. This will encourage Readers to talk about and remember the story.

Reader Set Up

There are several ways that Readers and Supporters can be organised for a reading session.

Options:

- Class + Supporter
- Small group + Supporter
- One Reader + Supporter
- Independent Reader (no Supporter – for Readers who have become confident picture readers)

The set up can change between sessions. You could even try having different set ups for different Readers within the same session, to meet their individual needs.

You could start by having the whole class read each new page of the wordless story from a whiteboard, before they work in smaller groups using printed copies or digital devices.

Set Up	Advantages	Disadvantages
Class + Supporter	Encourages whole-class discussion, builds the sense of a shared adventure.	Higher-ability Readers may be held back, while other readers may need more support or a slower pace. Better readers are more likely to dominate discussion.
Small group + Supporter	Readers of similar ability can work together. Readers who are more or less vocal can be distributed across groups to provide balance.	Readers who struggle with listening may find group reading difficult. Try starting these Readers with One Reader + Supporter (see below).
One Reader + Supporter	Ideal for Readers with challenges that make group-working difficult e.g. (emotional, behavioural, EAL).	A lone Reader will miss out on the benefits of listening and discussion opportunities provided by group readings.
Independent Reader	Independent reading can be a valuable extension activity or homework assignment for higher-ability Readers. Independent reading of wordless stories can build a Reader's confidence about reading books with some text.	An independent Reader will miss out on the benefits of listening and discussion opportunities provided by a group, so we recommend that they also take part in group reading sessions. Some independent Readers may struggle to stay focused on the story without additional support or guidance, such as giving them a specific question to answer by exploring the pictures (for example, a question from Reading Level 3).

Which format?

Our wordless stories are provided as digital files for downloading. Choose from **PRINT** or **DISPLAY** formats to suit Readers' needs.

PRINT

This format is laid out as a book, including covers.

The layout includes a blank page opposite each picture page to limit distraction. This format is intended for use as a physical 'book' so Readers can turn the pages and have their own copy to hold.

You might prefer to give Readers one page at a time while they first read a story, followed by the full story as a 'book' once they're familiar with it. We recommend laminating each page for durability.

TIP: Give each Reader their own copy of the story as a book they can hold and turn the pages of. Turning physical pages can often be a major moment of personal development for Readers who, for whatever reason, have little or no experience of picking up a book because 'books are not for me'

Studies in special schools by Books Beyond Words have shown that Readers who have built confidence to turn pages while reading from hard copies of wordless stories will often start flicking through books that include text.

DISPLAY

Laid out as a series of illustrations without front and back covers or notes. This format is intended for use with whiteboards and handheld devices.

Pace

Read at a moderate pace. For the best learning outcome, Readers should feel relaxed and comfortable during each reading session.

Read as few/many pages in one session as suits your Readers' comfort and ability level. Give each page the time it needs.

TIP: One of the most liberating advantages of reading a wordless story is that a Reader's interpretation is never wrong, even if the story is a true one. Printed text sets information in stone – no text frees Readers to express themselves without fear of giving a wrong answer.

Use Readers' interpretations to encourage deeper discussion about choices the character may have in the picture and what the different consequences could be if they were to make these choices. This approach helps to stimulate curiosity about 'what happens next'.

Colour coding

Each of the main characters in our wordless stories is wearing a colour specific to them. For example, in *Elizabeth Tudor*, Elizabeth's signature colour is green so that readers can recognise her easily.

Some characters may also be wearing jewellery or other item that make them identifiable from one picture to the next.

Ask your Readers to find these details.

Symbols

Every detail in the story's pictures is there for a reason. A small detail may symbolise something important (e.g. the Tudor rose), reflect a past period in history (e.g. a fireplace), or give Readers a clue about what's going on (e.g. the portrait of Henry VIII watching over Anne Boleyn's arrest in *Elizabeth Tudor*).

Ask your Readers to find these details.

Supporting resources

These resources are available to download from the Wordless Stories webpage:

- SEND Learning Support

- a concise version of the story with Widgit symbols, for reading alongside the pictures
- simple questions with Widgit symbols, to accompany reading of the story's pictures
- page-by-page suggestions for Sensory Storytelling, to accompany reading of the story's pictures
- suggested activities for Blank Level questioning, to support reading of the story's pictures

- Historical Material

- a concise biography of story's main character
- concise information about the story's minor characters
- links to information about the story's locations + image slides
- image slides of original source material relevant to the story (e.g. portraits)

Introducing the History behind the story

The wordless story you're reading is a true story about real people and events from the past.

Each wordless story is supported by historical material:

1. Biography (a concise text version of the the main character's story)
2. Original Locations (slides showing photographs of some of the story's locations)
3. Original Source Material (slides of contemporary portraits, documents, etc.)

Before you start reading a wordless story, decide how and when you're going to introduce Readers to the historical material.

You might use different approaches for introducing the historical material to different Readers within the same reading session, or different approaches with the whole class for different sessions.

The **Historical Material** is available from the Wordless Stories webpage.

1. Biography

Examples of approach:

- Introduce Readers to a simple version of the main character's biography before they start reading the wordless story.
- Read the whole story through once before sharing a simple version of the main character's biography with your Readers.
Then re-read the story relating it to the facts. This approach helps to build and embed the story piece by piece and reduces the risk of 'information overwhelm'.
- Share only the facts from the main character's biography relevant to the page you're about to read. Do the same again before reading the next page, and so on.
- Read a page or two before giving Readers the details from the main character's biography relevant to the pages you've just read together.

2. Original Source Material

We recommend not sharing **Original Source Material** with Readers until they have read the whole wordless story at least once and have been introduced to the main character's biography. This is to allow Readers full freedom of interpretation and opportunity for voluntary engagement with the story.

Try accompanying DEEP DIVE and/or MAKING CONNECTIONS questions with a historic portrait from the **Original Source Material** to encourage a deeper emotional connection with a character from the story as a living, thinking, feeling human being. This can also help to embed the story for the Readers, helping them to recognise the story's characters and events beyond the classroom.

TIP: Create a small collection of reproduction historic artefacts for Readers to hold and examine while you read the wordless story; for example, a quill pen or a candleholder.

Genuine items like contemporary coins and pieces of pottery are also available to buy cheaply on online market sites like eBay.

3. Original Locations

Some scenes in our wordless stories take place at locations that still exist today. Each story's pictures include visual details from these locations so that Readers can recognise them from the image slides provided in the resources, or when visiting them in person.

We recommend that you introduce Original Locations using the same approach you've chosen for sharing the Original Source Material.

TIP: Read our wordless stories as a pre-visit introduction to a historic location you plan to visit with your class. For example, the story Elizabeth Tudor features the Tower of London.

