



Wordless Stories

The importance of Visual Literacy

SPACE TO STIR AND BE STIRRED

**TOWER OF LONDON • HAMPTON COURT PALACE • BANQUETING HOUSE
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What is Visual Literacy?

Visual Literacy can be defined as a person's ability to make meaning from information presented in the form of a picture. Each person's meaning is shaped by own personal interpretation of what they see.

Throughout this resource, by 'picture' we are referring to any visual source that provides realistic rather than abstract images. For example, a picture could be a photograph, a painting, a book illustration, a poster or even a tapestry.

When exploring pictures, students are referred to here as 'Readers'.

Written words as barriers to learning

Many children and young people struggle to develop their traditional literacy skills (i.e. reading written words). The reasons behind this vary from person to person, including physiological, psychological, emotional, social or cultural.

Confident word readers are able to visualise the information represented by the words as they read them. This is why reading words is often described as a powerful form of escapism, because the confident reader is transported into a visual world created by their minds in response to the words.

Written words are made up of patterns of icons (letters) moving left to right top to bottom. Struggling readers get tangled up in trying to understand the icons and don't get to the stage of visualising the words' message. Without the ability to form mental images, reading becomes a mechanical process of decoding icons rather than an engaging activity that conveys meaning.

Struggling readers often feel anger, frustration, embarrassment or even shame. Understandably, they may disengage from learning to avoid those feelings.

Pictures as pathways to learning

We humans are innately visual beings. We have been drawing pictures to express ourselves and share messages for tens of thousands of years. We only invented writing about 4000 years ago.

The freedom that reading pictures offers removes barriers to self-expression and communication.

The message and meaning provided by a group of written words are fixed and specific - each word builds on the others within the sentence to form a message and its meaning. The message and meaning of pictures are fluid and un-specific because they are open to the reader's own interpretation - they allow free thought and give the Reader an immediate emotional charge.

A picture Reader brings the full power of their own experiences to understand what their eyes are reporting back to their brains. In their minds, they visualise a version of the story that has power and resonance for them.

Picture readers can express their thoughts without fear of 'getting it wrong'.

Participation is a powerful force for learning. Picture reading encourages people to participate. If they are reading with others, comparing different interpretations will stimulate their imagination and curiosity.

Developing their Visual Literacy skills helps build students' confidence about their own ability to learn:

They can read a picture with confidence and form an opinion about what it means



Having an opinion builds confidence to share their thoughts out loud



By sharing their opinions, Readers build their vocabulary and oracy skills



By hearing other opinions, Readers develop an interest in what others think, so they learn to listen better

Good Visual Literacy skills enable young people to be part of a conversation and feel personally invested.

Written words are perceived information.

Letters are abstract icons. We need specialised knowledge to decode the icons that make up written words. The message of the words is inaccessible without cracking the icon code.

Pictures are received information.

The message is received instantaneously by our brains through our eyes. We need no formal education or code to access a picture's message on some level.

Wordless Stories for learning

A lone picture can only show a moment in a story. By putting more than one picture into a sequence, we create a narrative - a story told through sequential pictures. Comic books and graphic novels use this method to tell stories. The most obvious difference between a wordless story and a comic book/graphic novel is that it has no text at all. Our wordless stories also avoid the busy layouts of comic books, which can trigger feelings of overwhelm for some readers.

Picture readers develop deductive reasoning skills as they intuitively link the pictures of the story together. Some will start making significant mental jumps to grasp complex themes and concepts.

The visual simplicity of the pictures in our wordless stories is deliberate, yet they are subtly complex. They are carefully composed to be multi-layered and do the work of printed words by delivering to readers the information we want them to absorb. Just like a movie still, each picture has foreground action, background action, and incidental activity among minor characters.

Reading wordless stories together can act as a leveller in the classroom by nurturing a sense of shared experience between higher achieving and struggling learners. Shared engagement with visual narratives promotes collaboration and camaraderie.

Pictures provide the reader with a safe space into which their own identity and awareness are pulled, enabling them to visualise another place/time and relate to the story's characters. In other words, they can build a visual world of meaning with personal resonance.

Wordless Stories for teaching History

We have developed a simple yet powerful guided reading process for engaging students with UK history through wordless stories. By starting at the BASIC level and working their way up, Readers will become increasingly skilled at accessing, processing and remembering a story from history, by practising their Visual Literacy skills.

By being guided through the structured reading process, Readers will remember a story and recognise its main characters when they appear in other contexts, including on social media, in movies and TV dramas, or on a visit to a historic site relevant to the wordless story they have been reading.

History texts are written in the past tense, because they're describing factual events that happened in the past – the action is no longer happening in the present.

The action in a picture is always happening in the present. This means, a story is told using a sequence of pictures, it's Past, Present and Future are all visible. Wherever the Reader's eyes are focused is the Present but, by looking at the previous or next picture in the story sequence, their eyes can take in the landscape of Past and Future that sit on either side of that Present (Before, Now, Next). The story's context becomes easier for Readers to grasp and form opinions about.

By practising Visual Literacy skills to explore stories from history in a structured way, as provided by our wordless stories and supporting resources, Readers are stimulated to be emotionally invested in their nation's culture and take intellectual ownership of it, perhaps for the very first time.

Wordless Stories as pathways to reading words

All teachers know that the more students read, the better they become at reading; the better they become, the more they enjoy it; and the more they enjoy it, the more they read. Teachers also know that students who dislike reading tend to avoid it, limiting their progress.

Today's young people are already accustomed to visual media such as television, online games and social media platforms. As a result, they benefit from being provided with visual support in order to understand and remember what we would like them to learn.

Wordless stories, which rely on illustrations instead of text, address this need by allowing students to infer, predict, and reflect on 100% visual narrative content. This approach improves comprehension, nurtures confidence, and can encourage a desire to read more or try reading printed words for the first time.

For students with some reading ability try combining reading wordless stories with simple word reading and/or writing activities. For more confident word readers this multi-sensory approach stirs their imaginations and inspires them to build their writing skills.

Another approach is to start by building up students' Visual Literacy skills through reading wordless stories, before introducing comic books or graphic novels with simple text and layout, gradually increasing the difficulty level of the material.

Simply handling a book and turning its pages can be a transformative experience for some students. Wordless book charity Books Beyond Words has found with reading groups that young people who begin as non-readers gain confidence through handling hard copies or print outs of wordless books and will often start flicking through books containing both pictures and words out of pure curiosity. They no longer feel that books are 'not for me'.

By introducing wordless stories as an entry point, teachers can help learners develop a positive relationship with reading printed words.

