

A Guide for Approaching and Interpreting Picturebooks

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Part 1: Approaching a Picturebook

- Pick up the picturebook, attending to the size, orientation (horizontal or vertical), materials used in construction of book (papers, graphics).
- Consider the author of the text and the artist. What media is used in the illustrations? What fonts are selected? Where is the text located on the page? Borders etc.
- Look at the cover, title and illustrations. What expectations are set up for you as you approach the picture book? What does the cover, title and illustrations suggest?
- Skim through the book, reading quickly to see where the story goes. What is the overall structure of the book? Home-Away-Home ? Repetitive structures or language? Cumulative? The Hero Cycle? Circular, chronological, or other?

Part 2: Peritextual Elements

- Look at the cover, title and illustrations. What expectations are set up for you as you approach the picture book? What does the cover, title and illustrations suggest?
- What is on the back cover? Is it a wrap-around design? How are borders used on the covers? What might this suggest?
- What is included in the peritext? Consider the following:
 - Endpages (front and back) – same or different? Do the endpages tell part of the story? How do they relate to the content?
 - Frontispiece or hard cover emblems
 - Book jacket content
 - Title page
 - Dedication
 - Library of Congress Summary
 - Author's or Illustrator's notes, if any

READ THROUGH THE PICTUREBOOK

Attend to the narrative flow and the flow of images. How are transitions in narrative and illustrations from page to page handled? What makes you linger? What propels you forward? Is there a place where you stopped and spent more time? Why?

Part 3: Design Elements

- Begin by considering the format of the images and their placement in the picturebook. Are the illustrations double page spreads, single page images, collages, overlapping images, or portraits?
- Consider the art and book design. What media is used in the illustrations? How does the artists' choice in media affect the mood or meanings of the story or content?
- What fonts are selected? Where is the text located on the page? How do the fonts add to the overall design?
- Are borders used to frame the illustrations? How do the borders, or lack of borders, effect the story and design?
- Begin by considering the format of the images and their placement in the picturebook
- Where is the text located? Within the image? Separated by borders or white space, Why? How do the illustrations relate to the text?
- Consider the series of images in the picturebook. Do the images change over the course of the book? Do they get bigger, smaller, change?
- Words propel the reader forward and images slow us down. How did this tension between reading and viewing affect your experience?
- Are there any unusual elements that might add to the story or meanings?
- Are there any recurring symbols, patterns or motifs in the images?
- Consider the style or artistic choices? Are they appropriate, and how do they add to the meanings of the picturebook?
- How is the background rendered? Realistic? Abstracted? How does this affect the setting and the story?

Part 4: Narrative Elements

- What is the overall structure of the text? Home-Away-Home ? Repetitive structures or language? Cumulative? The Hero Cycle? Circular, chronological, or other?
- How does the opening of the story compare with the closing of the story?
- What kind of gaps does the author / illustrator leave for the reader to fill in? Are details purposefully left out to create tension?
- How does the story flow from page to page? Are there borders that separate things or does it cross over in language and image from page to page?
- Consider Labov & Waletzky's structure of stories. Where is the orientation? How is it presented? Does the text or image change at the climax? Is there a coda? What purposes do these elements serve?

Part 5: Individual Images

Select a particularly important image or double page spread and ask yourself:

- What is fore-grounded and in the background?
- Consider the “path” your eyes follow as you approach the image. What catches your eye first? Why is that element salient?
- What colors dominate the image? What effect does this have on you as reader?
- Consider the use of white (negative) space. Are the illustrations framed or full bleed? How does this position you as a viewer?
- What is the “reality value” or level of abstraction? Are the images life-like or stick figures?
- Are there any anomalous elements? Things that stick out, or seem out of place?
- What is the artist trying to get you to look at through leading lines, colors, contrast, gestures, lighting?
- How is the image framed? Are there thick borders or faded edges?
- Consider size and scale. What is large? Why are certain elements larger than others? Does this add to meanings of power, control?
- Consider the viewers point of view. Do characters directly gaze or address the viewer? Are the characters close up or distanced? How does point of view add to relationships with the characters?

Part 6: Critical Analysis of Picturebooks

- Whose background knowledge is privileged in reading this text?
- Who is the implied reader? What would the reader have to be familiar with to understand the story?
- Whose perspective is the story from?
- What characters dominate the story? Who seems to be missing?
- What ethnic, racial and gendered groups are present? Absent? How is diversity handled? Visible?
- What themes or morals were constructed during your reading? Are there specific lessons for children suggested?