

The Grown-Up's Guide to Picture Books

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Educator Toolkit

A picture book is a book with pictures, but it's so much more than that! This A to Z guide helps you level up your picture book reading experiences, empowering yourself and the young readers in your world to dive deeper into what makes a great picture book great.

With histories, insights and handy talking points for shared reading, come and explore the complexities of modern picture books. Discover the science of page layouts, the purpose of rhyme, and why our favourites linger in our hearts and minds for life. Let's read!

'I know of no other book that will so quickly improve a grown-up's ability to engage more deeply with that which is so human – the combination of words and pictures to tell stories.'

Matt Shanks, award-winning Australian picture book author and illustrator

Your Starting Point

Many adults fail to recognise the power of picture books. Consider this quote from author/illustrator Anthony Browne:

Picture books are for everybody at any age, not books to be left behind as we grow older. The best ones leave a tantalising gap between the pictures and the words, a gap that is filled by the reader's imagination, adding so much to the excitement of reading a book.

When did you last read a picture book for either your own pleasure or to share with older children?

When did you last use a picture book with purpose e.g., to explain a teaching point?

Everyone has a different experience of picture books and using them. You may use them often in your teaching program or you may never have considered them as teaching tools. You may consider them essential for younger students but not for older ones.

Take some time to reflect on these points. Mentally give yourself a score and, if it suits, make some notes to consider later.

- How often do you use picture books in your teaching program specifically for their teaching points?
- Do you use picture books to support your teaching in other KLAs besides English?
- Do you consider picture books to be an integral and important part of the teaching/learning process?
- How often do you, or have you, used picture books in a teaching program for older/senior students, or even adults?
- How would you rate your depth of understanding and ability to analyse/assess picture books?
- Do you have a personal collection of picture books that you use in your teaching program?
- Do you have curated lists of titles (or access to these) for various KLAs that support your teaching program?
- What are your personal favourite picture books?
- Think about what it is that appeals to you: illustrations, language, design, themes or...?
- Are they classics or newer titles?
- Do you use them in your teaching program?
- If not, could you? And how would you use them?

Read and Analyse a Picture Book

Choose a picture book you haven't seen before. Read and analyse using the following sections of *The Grown-Up's Guide to Picture Books*:

C is for Covers [pp. 14/15]

E is for Endpapers [pp. 18/19]

S is for Spreads [pp. 44/45]

T is for Title [pp. 48/49]

W is for White Space [pp. 54/55])

Design Elements

Use a grid to focus closely on the design elements of the book:

	Describe the elements	How are these elements suited to the narrative? Why have certain aspects been used? Are they successful?
Shape & size Rectangular vertical Rectangular horizontal Square		
Front cover Font/s Border Colours Images Characters Theme		
Back cover Blurb Design features (are they continued or different?)		
Endpapers Design/pattern Plain white or solid colour Identical/different Telling part of the story		
Front matter Imprint page Additional information or foreword		
Borders		
Gutters - the place between two pages where the binding meets		
Motifs - recurring images, symbols or themes		

What points can you take from your analysis of a picture book to add value to the way you teach with it?

Next, share the book with children and note their responses.

- Which elements are stand outs?
- Which do not work as well?
- Can the children make reasonable predictions about the text [humorous, sad, characters, themes etc.] based on the cover design?

Follow this same process with a picture book pitched at a completely different audience, i.e., if your first choice was a book for younger readers, now choose one aimed at upper primary or secondary students.


Make a note of the differences and similarities in both the design elements and the response of the readers.



Visual Literacy

Illustrations are a significant component of literacy development and are, in part, included to help with textual coherence. Children are never too young to start understanding the subtext of imagery and begin to carry this with them as they grow to explore advertising, political spin, or online culture. Each of these uses colour, typography, and persuasive imagery to make an impact. [For more, see *I is for Illustrations*, pp.26-27]

Find definitions and an example image for the following:

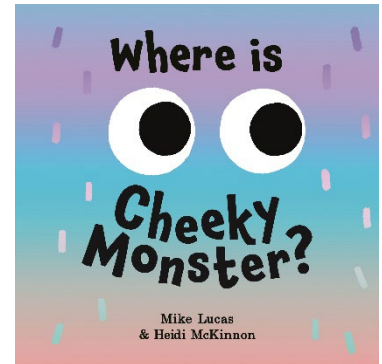
	Definition	Example
Allegory	As a literary device or image, a representation, either narrative or visual, of a hidden meaning.	 Cicada – Shaun Tan Lothian Children’s Books Bullying Belonging Corporate ‘trap’ Racism
Angle		
Body Language /gaze		
Composition		
Colour / hue /tone		
Contrast		
Framing		
Layout		
Omissions		
Orientation / PoV		
Positioning		
Rule of Thirds		
Saliency		
Symbols & symbolism		
Text Style		
Texture		
Title		
Tone		
Vectors		

Cover Art

[MIBLART](#) graphic designers suggest the following general guidelines for successful cover art. Use your own or a library collection to find picture books that match these descriptors. [Learn more at *C is for Covers*, pp. 14/15]

1-5 years:

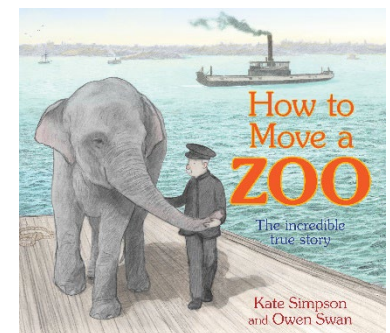
- Joyful colours with strong contrasts. Note, Children tend to be attracted to the bright block colours of the colour wheel rather than pastels or muted blends.
- Minimalist cartoonish/hand-drawn art style
- Familiar characters (pets and animals are a popular choice)
- Big text
- Simple fonts
- Short and legible title, or a longer but memorable one



Penguin Australia, 2024

6-9 years

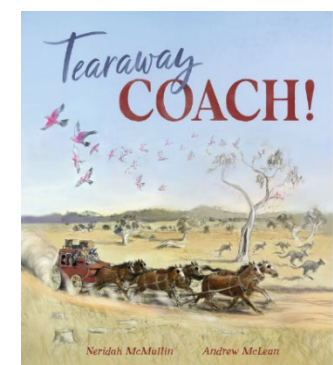
- More elaborate colour schemes, but stick to vivid colours
- Illustration with more details
- Imagery can be more abstract but still easily recognizable
- More complex typography
- Longer titles



Allen & Unwin, 2024

9-11 years

- Use grimmer/softer colour schemes if needed
- Build intrigue and tension with imagery
- Don't avoid unique art styles
- Use unique eye-catching typography
- Busy covers with plenty of details are ok now

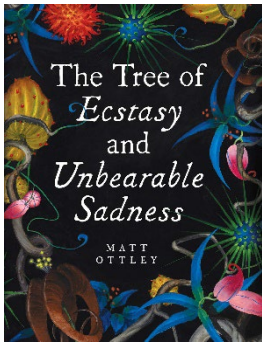


Walker Books, 2024

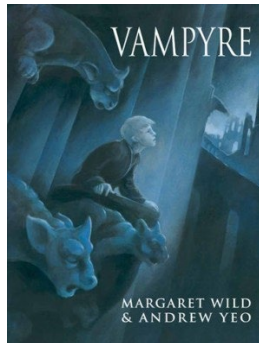
12 years to adult

These readers are discovering themselves, their likes and dislikes and more intimate knowledge of the world and how it works. Rather than specific guidelines, covers are usually approached considering their content, message, and emotional atmosphere. Look at these examples and reflect on how these might appeal to this demographic:

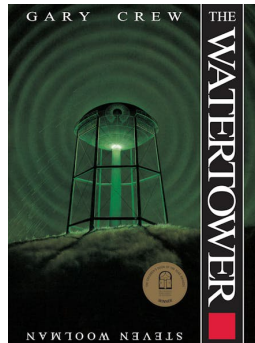
- The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness – Matt Ottley
- Vampyre – Margaret Wild & Andrew Yeo
- The Watertower – Gary Crew & Steven Woolman
- Woolvs in the Sitee – Margaret Wild & Anne Spudvilas
- The Rabbits – John Marsden & Shaun Tan



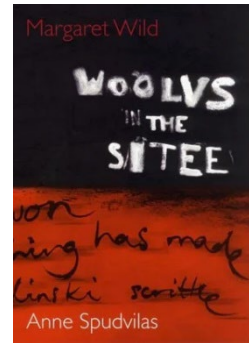
One Tentacle Publishing, 2023



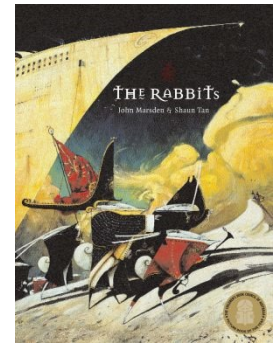
Walker Books, 2011



Lothian Childrens Books, 2023

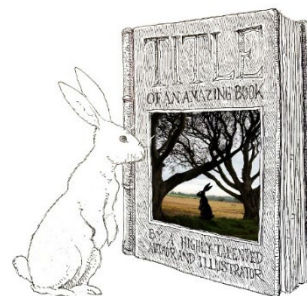


Penguin Books 2006



Lothian Childrens Books, 2008

- Choose an age group and get creative.
- Make your own book cover (both [Canva](#) and [Adobe](#) have editable templates).
- Use your book cover as a springboard to get students creatively writing.
- Have students use the same program or draw their own version of covers of a book you use in your unit. They should be encouraged to reflect on the content/narrative in their design.



Pairing Picture Books: teaching literary analysis

... I found many researchers who agree that picture books provide an accessible way to add varied materials to the curriculum, improve reading comprehension, incorporate visual literacy, stimulate higher-order creative thinking, and introduce vocabulary with rich language (Beckman & Diamond, 1984; Giorgis, 1999; Senokossoff, 2013; Tiedt, 2000; Watson, 1978). [Dr Jenna Copper, 2019]

- Have you used picture books to teach your older or secondary students literary concepts?
- Do you fully understand the various literacy concepts so you can incorporate them into your own writing or to scaffold your students?

Here are some ideas to start with:

Tone and Tonal Shift

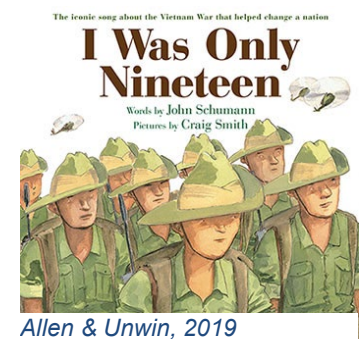
- Tone: refers to the author's attitude or feelings towards the subject matter of a text. It sets the overall mood and atmosphere of a piece of writing.
- Tonal shift: refers to a noticeable change in the attitude, mood, or tone of a piece of writing. It occurs when there is a distinct transition from one emotional state or perspective to another. (Fiveable, 2018)
- Video: [What is tone in writing for children?](#)
- Read *Neil the Amazing Sea Cucumber* – Amelia Mcinerney & Lucinda Gifford. Take note of the tone and tonal shifts.
- What could be a suitable literary text to pair to exemplify this literacy concept for your older students? One easy example is *The Highwayman* – Alfred Noyes, in which the tonal shift is obvious.

Asyndeton and Polysyndeton

- Asyndeton: A literary device whereby one or several conjunctions are deliberately omitted from related clauses for greater effect, e.g. *I came, I saw, I conquered*. Pair example: *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*.
- Polysyndeton: The inclusion of multiple coordinating conjunctions for effect, e.g., Othello Act 3 Scene 3: *If there be cords, or knives, or poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, I'll not endure it*. Pair example: *The Three Little Pigs – So he huffed, and he puffed, and he puffed, and he huffed*.
- Seek out other picture books to pair with literary concepts, whether introducing them or extending depending on what you cover in your classroom program.
- Organise a bulk loan of picture books and have students go searching for literary devices.

Compare and Contrast

- Select a text that is/has been presented in various formats and analyse the effectiveness of each, e.g., [I Was Only Nineteen](#) -John Schumann – lyrics, [YouTube video](#) and picture book.
- Decide which setting is most suited to each format but particularly which audience is most appropriate for the picture book.
- What makes the book less confronting than the film clip?



Curriculum Connections

Picture books are powerful educational tools that transcend age boundaries, offering diverse applications across the curriculum. Their interdisciplinary nature makes them a valuable tool for teachers seeking to enrich children's learning for grades F-10. [ABC, Fostering inquisitive minds with picture books. 2004]

Is there a Picture Book for That?

ACARA lists the following learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities: Literacy, Numeracy, Science, HASS, Information and communication technology (ICT) capability, The Arts, Health and Physical Education, Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding and Intercultural understanding, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia, Sustainability.

Most commonly picture books are used to demonstrate literacy concepts such as narrative structure (N is for Narrative Structure, pp. 36/37) and use of language (L is for Language, pp. 32/33), but their influence is far greater and more widely applicable than that. (*U is for Underlying Meanings*, pp. 50/51)

Curate titles via your own knowledge/usage, or using published lists that you know will fit with your teaching of these areas, at your chosen level.

Here are some examples, all multi-layered and easily used across grades, to begin with:

The Arts	Willy's Pictures – Anthony Browne
Personal and social capability - grief	My Brother – Dee, Oliver & Tiffany Huxley
Ethical understanding – women's rights	When Grandma Burnt her Bra – Samantha Tidy & Aska
HPE – emotional awareness of others	The Great Realisation – Tomos Roberts & Nomoco
Numeracy – financial literacy	The All New Must Have Orange 430 – Michael Speechly
HASS - communities	The Circles All Around Us – Brad Montague
Aboriginal Histories/Culture	Story Doctors – Boori Monty Pryor & Rita Sinclair
Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia	Our Family Dragon: a Lunar New Year story – Rebecca Lim & Cai Tse
Social Capability/Ethical understanding	Begin Again: The Story of How We Got Here and Where We Might Go. So Far – Oliver Jeffers

Harnessing the Power of Picture Books to Instil Personal Values and Attitudes

What better way to guide a young mind and provide useful lessons around behaviour and responsibility than through engaging, memorable stories and vibrant illustrations? Picture books can also be a way to desensitise readers or break down challenging subject matter for children. [The Grown-Up's Guide to Picture Books, p. 30]

Arguably one of the most impactful issues currently experienced by educators is in the area of mental health and behavioural challenges in students. Fostering resilience, emotional intelligence, self-regulation and growth mindset in young people, and reducing incidences of bullying, physical violence, online abuse and threats are common threads in discussion groups.

[H is for Heroes, pp. 24/25, K is for Kindness, pp. 30/31, M is for Magic, pp. 34/35, U is for Underlying Meanings, pp.48/49, X is for Xenophobia, pp. 56/57, Y is for Yucky Stuff, pp. 58/59]

- Introduce picture books that engage positive social, emotional and behavioural support across year levels, thereby teaching without being didactic.
- Employ narratives that will help students to process difficult situations, even traumatic events. Having a significant adult at hand to help them process subsequent reactions and emotions is of utmost importance.
- Look for lists and topics curated by bibliotherapists for reference. Seek out titles that will value-add to your personal development curriculum including those that are non-fiction.

Here are some examples:

- *Strong and Tough* – Rico Hinson-King & Nick Sharrett
- *11 Words for Love* – Randa Abdel-Fattah & Maxine Beneba-Clarke
- *The Lost Thing* – Shaun Tan
- *The Island* – Armin Greder
- *Elephant Man* – Mariangela Di Fiore & Hilde Hodnjefeld
- *The Arrival* – Shaun Tan
- *The Proudest Blue* – Ibtihaj Muhammad & S. K. Ali & Hatem Aly
- *Little Matilda and the Lost Bunny* - Caz Goodwin & Shaney Hyde
- *Dinosaur in my Pocket* – Ashleigh Barton & Blithe Fielden

Related Resources

Websites

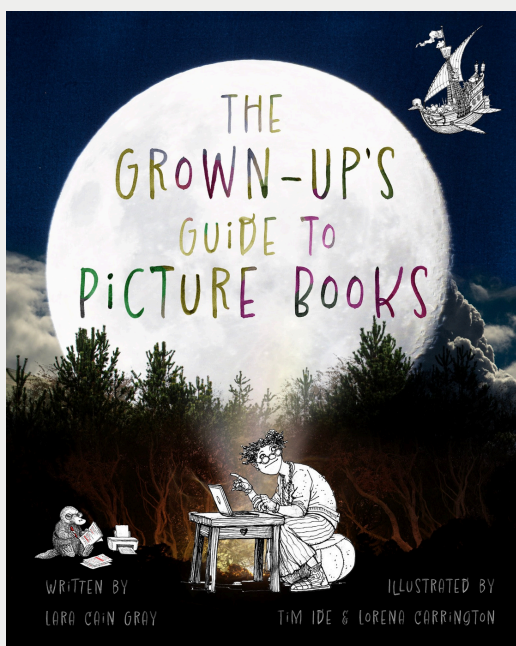
[A Guide to Using Picture Books in History K-10](#), NSW Dept of Education
[Picture Books Across the Curriculum](#) [for upper elementary/middle school]
[A Match Made in Heaven](#) [for middle/high school]
[Using Picture Books in Middle and High School](#)
[Picture Books as Teaching Partners](#)
[Using Children's Books to Teach Literary Theory in High School](#)
[Fostering inquisitive minds with picture books](#)

Themed Book Lists

[Reading Rockets](#)
[Book Trust](#)
[Picture Book Brain](#)
[Growing Book to Book](#)
[Themed Picture Books & Fiction Lists](#)
[300+ Kids Book Lists by Age and Genre](#)

Video

[Using Picture Books as Mentor Texts.](#)



HB | 297 x 210 | ISBN: 9781922858504 | \$34.99

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This stunning book guides readers through storytelling structures, offering classroom activities and encouraging a lifelong love of picture books. An empowering must-own for authors and illustrators, educators and readers. Long live the power of a picture book!

Andrea Rowe, award-winning children's picture book author

Dr Lara Cain Gray is a writer, librarian and storytelling advocate based in Brisbane, Australia. Her professional past spans library and museum curatorship, academic research, and corporate and creative writing and editing. She is currently Head of Acquisitions at nonprofit publisher Library For All, delivering cross-cultural children's books to remote and low-income communities. She reads every day and will NEVER be too old for picture books.

Timothy Ide is an Adelaide based illustrator with a number of children's books under his belt, including Tom the Outback Mailman written by Kristin Weidenbach, which won the Eve Pownall CBCA award in 2013. His most recent children's books are King of the Outback, the Story of Sidney Kidman (2017), also by Kristin Weidenbach and Born to Fly (2019) by Beverley McWilliams. Medieval Monsters and Other Creatures (2023) is his first book as both author and illustrator.

When he is not illustrating, Timothy enjoys wargaming and role-playing games as well as practising medieval fighting in full armour.

Lorena Carrington is an illustrator whose books have been published in Australia and internationally. Her works are created using photography and digital montage techniques to form richly layered images. She has worked with the likes of Kate Forsyth, Sophie Masson and Carmel Bird, and has illustrated fairy tale collections, picture books, and created covers for novels and anthologies. She also exhibits her work in galleries around Australia, and holds workshops on illustration, books and story.

She is recipient of the 2020 Australian Fairy Tale Society award, for her 'outstanding contribution to the field of Australian Fairy Tales.'