

# Picture It!

Victoria M. Naughton

**P**icture it! This is a phrase we often hear when someone wants others to thoroughly understand what is being said. In reading, this visualization process is a powerful tool for comprehension and learning (Farris & Downey, 2004/2005). In today's world, the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" is increasingly meaningful to a generation for whom images speak volumes. With such a powerful medium at our disposal, we can use pictures to bring words to life. This is the power of the Picture It! reading strategy. Picture It! is a comprehensive, all-ages strategy that uses pictures and other visual elements to enhance comprehension by illuminating story structure, promoting questioning and discussion of the story, and teaching vocabulary.

To use Picture It!, students need to understand "story grammar," or the five elements of story: (1) setting, (2) characters, (3) problem, (4) attempts to resolve the problem, and (5) resolution. Prior to initiating Picture It!, students read a story and identify the five elements of the story's grammar. To begin the Picture It! strategy, once the story's elements are determined, students are asked to visually represent each element with a rough sketch or figure.

## Illuminating Story Structure

For younger readers or readers who find it difficult to organize their thoughts in a story map—which is the sequential identification of each of the five story elements noted previously, from setting to resolution—the Picture It! strategy begins with a visual interpretation of story grammar—a pictorial of the five elements of a story. This awareness of the story grammar is not only critical when assessing if a story is complete but also key to comprehending the story (Beck, Omanson, & McKeown, 1982).

Recalling the five elements of story is often a challenge for the inexperienced reader. One technique to help visually solidify the five elements in students' minds is to match them to the acronym STORY:

- S—setting
- T—talking characters
- O—oops, a problem!
- R—attempts to resolve the problem
- Y—yes, the problem is solved

This visual representation of the word *story* helps not only to cement the five components of story grammar in students' minds but also to set up a sequence to help readers anticipate the way in which the story unfolds. Comprehension is the goal in reading, and two major components of comprehension are visualization and knowledge of story elements (Fiene & McMahon, 2007). Thus, completing this visual story map promotes comprehension.

A mnemonic technique to help students visualize each component of a story's grammar is to illustrate the individual letters of the word *story*. With "STORY" written on the chalkboard or overhead projector, remind students that the goal is to visualize what is going on in the story. For *S*, draw a box or picture frame around the letter to emphasize that this is for setting—a picture of where the story takes place. Turn the letter *T* into a stick figure (character representation) by adding a head to the top and feet to the bottom of the letter to illustrate the characters. For *O*, make a frowning face to show the problem. Add a light bulb over the letter *R* to indicate ideas or attempts found in the story to solve the problem. Finally, make *Y* into a stick figure with its arms raised as a sign of success by adding a head between the fork of the letter. Figure 1 shows an example of what your final image might look like.

Once students have the understanding of the need to look for and follow a story's map by constructing and using the STORY acronym, they are free to read and look for these five story elements as they read. When reading is complete, students or the teacher can discuss each element and determine how to illustrate it. What does the setting look like? Who are the characters and what do they look like? What is the problem, and how can I visualize it? How can I

show the ways the characters dealt with the problem? What happened at the end of the story to show that the problem was solved? Students can create individual visualizations for each letter of the word *story*, or the whole class can decide collectively on the best image for each letter. Once these questions

are answered and discussed and ideas are suggested for illustrating the parts of the story, students are free to continue the Picture It! strategy by creating one picture that incorporates the story's five elements. (See Figure 2 for a sample Picture It! illustration of Aesop's "The Boy Who Cried Wolf.") The idea behind this strategy is not to create works of art but to create a visual of the story.

Some students will thoroughly enjoy the process of drawing a picture of what they see in their mind's eye, while others may be more reluctant to display their efforts. Initially, the teacher can model this creative process by drawing the suggested classroom images using whatever artistic skills he or she possesses. When students see that creating an artistic masterpiece is not the objective, they will be more comfortable drawing their own visuals. When

Figure 1  
Visual Story Map



Figure 2  
Story Map for "The Boy Who Called Wolf"

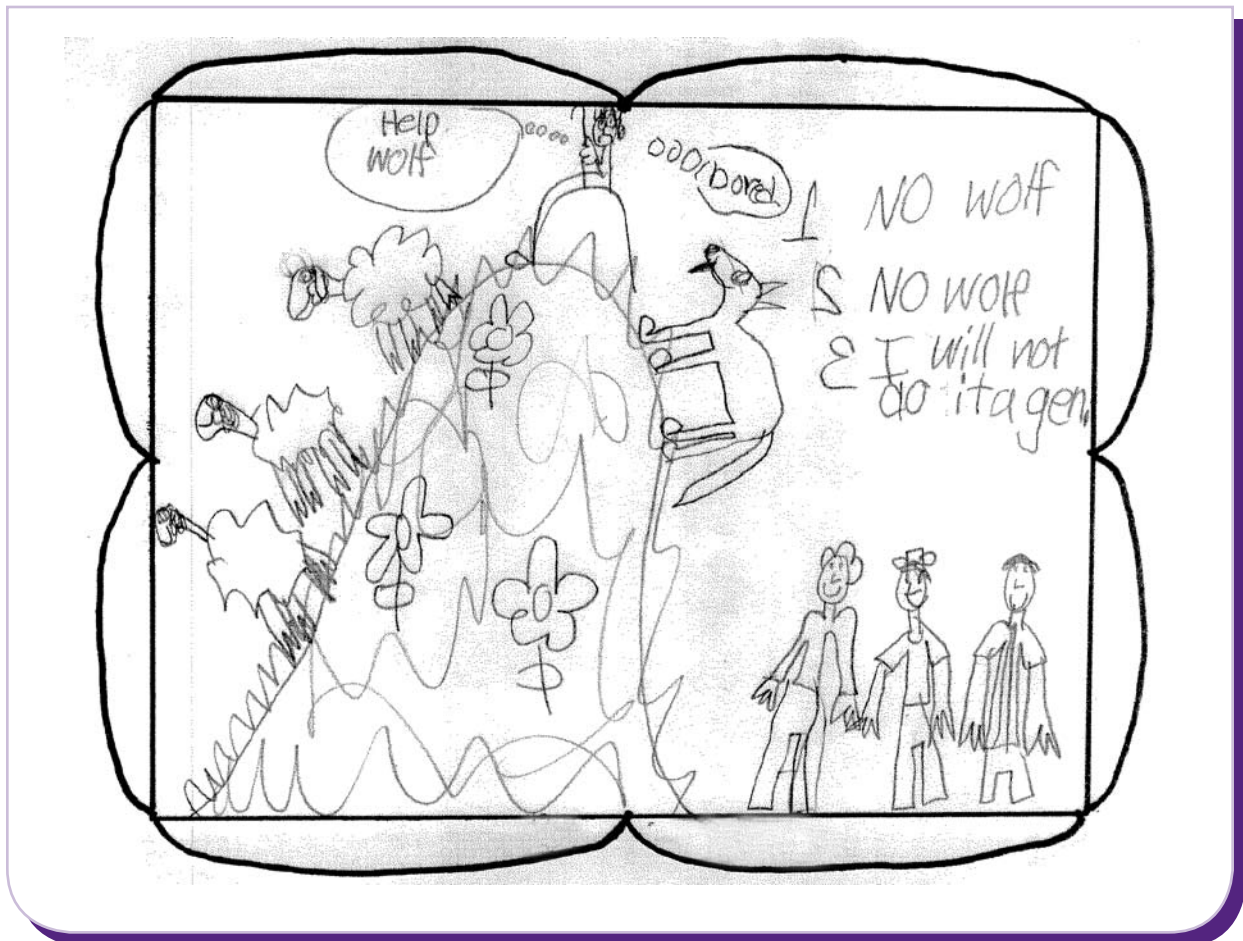






Figure 3  
 Story Map With Added Vocabulary for "The Cask of Amontillado"

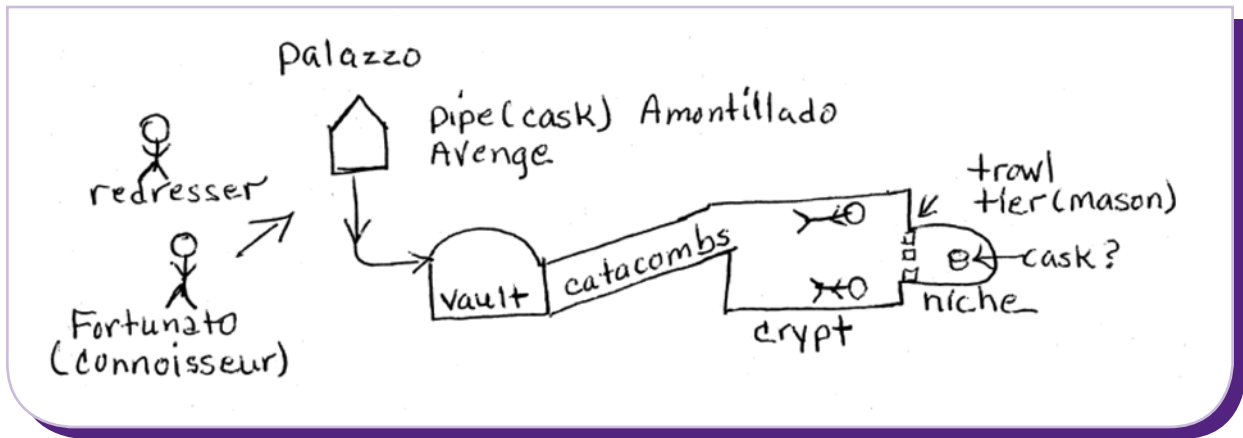


Figure 3 shows a freshman English class's Picture It! visual and added vocabulary for "The Cask of Amontillado." The picture not only illustrates the sequence of the story but also provides a semantic map for the new vocabulary. Students now have the extra benefit of adding the newly learned vocabulary to the picture to reinforce the words' definitions and how the words are used within the story to further illustrate the gist of the story. Pinpointing the vocabulary used in the story enhances recall and learning as it reinforces comprehension.

## Final Thoughts

Creating visuals is a powerful tool to aid comprehension in reading and to display what the readers see in a text. When authors write, the process is reversed and words reflect what authors see in their minds. Picture It! asks readers to reflect back what they see in the writing. The strategy creates a snapshot of readers' comprehension or lack thereof. In addition, this strategy can promote discussion among readers and enhance memory and recall of the story and its vocabulary. The finished

product truly answers the question, Did they get the picture?

## References

- Beck, I., Omanson, R., & McKeown, M. (1982). An instructional re-design of reading lessons: Effects on comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly, 17*(4), 462-481. doi:10.2307/747566
- Clarke, J.H. (1991). Using visual organizers to focus on thinking. *Journal of Reading, 34*(7), 526-534.
- Farris, P.J., & Downey, P. (2004/2005). Concept murling: Dropping visual crumbs along the instructional trail. *The Reading Teacher, 58*(4), 376-380. doi:10.1598/RT.58.4.7
- Fiene, J., & McMahon, S. (2007). Assessing comprehension: A classroom-based process. *The Reading Teacher, 60*(5), 406-417. doi:10.1598/RT.60.5.1
- Vacca, R., & Vacca, J. (1989). *Content area reading* (3rd ed.). Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman.
- Walmsley, S.A. (2006). Getting the big idea: A neglected goal for reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher, 60*(3), 281-285. doi:10.1598/RT.60.3.9

*Naughton taught at-risk readers at Wilmot Elementary School (Deerfield School District), Deerfield, Illinois, USA, and at Glenbrook North High School (Northbrook School District 225), Northbrook, Illinois; e-mail v.naughton@comcast.net.*

Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.