

What Will You Do with a Wordless Book?

Erlene Bishop Killeen

Perhaps the title should read, “What won’t you do with a wordless book?” as my intentions here are to suggest that a teacher librarian or classroom teacher can use a wordless book—or an almost wordless book—to do lots of things that will meet the needs of children as well as satisfy Common Core standards.

There are at least seven ELA Reading: Literature standards at the primary levels that can be supported through exploratory work with wordless books. RL K.1–3 and 9, RL 2.1 and 3, and RL 3.3 can be made more approachable for every student with wordless books. Working with nonfiction wordless books can do the same thing for the Reading: Informational standards of RI K.1–3 and 5, RI 1.1–3, RI 2.1, and RI 3.1, 2, and 6.

Do not be confused by the standards listing *text* and my suggestion here that wordless books can provide materials to teach and meet the standards. Of course, the final goal of the ELA standards is to have our students reading fully and fluently. Every child begins to learn to read or to decode by “reading” the pictures, symbols, and emblems that they see in normal life. An a-ha moment occurs when the little guy in the car seat yells out “Pizza Hut” upon seeing the red roof sign or “McDonalds” when seeing the golden arches. When that happens, every parent realizes that advertising is teaching their child to decode symbols—a first step in reading. Drawings and diagrams constantly teach all of us to assemble things, follow directions, or find the correct bathroom in a strange airport. Every person “reads” pictures.

With wordless books, children who are struggling with reading text are freed when the visual expression is art. Children who excel in letters can be challenged when the text is missing. All children can expand their imagination and improve their verbal abilities by supplying appropriate text to a story displayed without words. Vocabulary words can be more easily learned and used, and dialogue can be created by even the youngest. Our picture book collections provide numerous resources and are readily accessible for teachers, students, and parents. Preloading, supplemental work, or follow-up experiences can be individualized for students and carried out by assistants, parents, volunteers, or even other students. Here are some quick ideas for using wordless books:

- Take a wordless book and ask children to list all the nouns in the story. Repeat with verbs represented.
- Take a paperback wordless book apart and ask students to write a short sentence telling what is happening on their page. Put the “crazy” book back together and read it, then edit it into a story.
- Pick a topic to focus on—colors, shapes, animals, etc.—and have students give descriptions of each in the pictures. The more involved the description is, the better.
- Have students reflect on a wordless book and explain the message of the story.
- Ask how a picture in the middle of the book supports the main idea or message.
- Have children discover the main character of the story and describe him/her.
- Discuss the setting or location of the story. How would it look in another season?
- Ask children why this story has no words. Does it need them?
- Ask children to pick one to three words that could be used throughout the story, and apply them in another reading of the story.
- Ask such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how.
- Have children distinguish their own point of view from that of the author/illustrator.
- Have children describe the connection between two individuals, events, or ideas.

To develop an understanding of dialogue, visual thought, and expression, create or purchase cardboard thought bubbles and ask children to write (or tell you orally while you write) in the thoughts of the character for a specific scene or set of scenes in a wordless picture book. Two or more children could develop a dialogue between or among characters using the bubbles, and the words could be posted above the appropriate characters. Eventually, students will be writing their own version of text for the wordless book, understanding character’s motivations, feelings, and points of view.

There are online resources available for use as well. Check out Mo Willems’s website, Pigeon Presents! (<http://www.pigeonpresents.com/index.aspx>) for lots of artwork to print and add speech bubbles to. Students can readily retell stories or make up their own.

Picture book authors, illustrators, and publishers are helping us reach our young students with humor and age-appropriate topics. Many have included easy-to-read or beginning reader books with characters students already know from earlier picture books. The text has been shortened or contained, but the characters are still zany and fun. Some have television or movie tie-ins. To encourage reading, teacher librarians can introduce students to those interesting characters and then point out the books aimed at the beginning reader. Some examples would include *Olivia* by Ian Falconer (Simon & Schuster), *Eloise* by Kay Thompson (Simon & Schuster), *Pete the Cat* by James Dean (HarperCollins), and *Dinotrux* by Chris Gall (Little, Brown). After mastering the early readers, the students can return to the initial picture books. Imagine the pleasure!

So what will you do with a wordless book? Enjoy it! Use it! Introduce it to your students and teach the standards with it!

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