



# Using wordless picture books

Ideas for using wordless picture books in reading, writing and speaking activities in schools and libraries

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Ages 3-16

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CFE Levels Early to Fourth

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Resource created by  
Scottish Book Trust

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**Scottish  
Book Trust**  
inspiring readers and writers

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## About this resource

This resource has several aims:

- To introduce teachers and librarians to wordless picture books
- To explain more about the skills needed to read a wordless picture book
- To show how wordless picture books can benefit pupils of a wide range of ages and abilities

Wordless picture books are highly visually stimulating and are gaining popularity amongst teachers, librarians and parents as a means of developing a love of reading and comprehension skills. We hope this resource shows you that there is both a wide range of wordless picture books and an equally wide range of potential applications in a school setting.

# About wordless picture books

Wordless (or nearly wordless) picture books are most helpfully defined as books where 'the visual image carries the weight of the meaning'<sup>1</sup>. Some of them do contain small amounts of text, but the pictures provide the main means of understanding the plot, characters, setting and atmosphere of the book.

Wordless picture books, therefore, can place very different demands on their reader than books that rely on text as the primary way of conveying meaning.

Here are some important things to know about wordless picture books:

- **They invite a lot of reader participation:** because of the lack of text, there is a lot of information left for the reader to work out! For example, a reader can't just read text to work out how a character is feeling, what their personality is like, and the motivations for their actions: all of this must be deduced from the pictures.

Sometimes, the plot points of wordless picture books can be quite ambiguous, and readers can be left without a definitive answer as to what exactly has happened.

- **They can be challenging:** pupils are generally accustomed to being given lots of information through the text of a book. It takes time for them to get used to the idea that they are expected to contribute lots of their own ideas in order to construct meaning from a book. It can also be difficult for them to accept the ambiguity in some wordless picture books at first. However, once they understand these aspects, they often respond very enthusiastically.
- **Equally, they can be inclusive:** because the barrier of text is removed, wordless picture books can be accessed by pupils who struggle to decode. Often, wordless picture books explore complex characters and themes. The lack of text invites pupils to use the pictures to make sense of these characters and themes. Therefore, these books can provide an opportunity for you to assess the comprehension skills of pupils who struggle with decoding.
- **They can motivate struggling readers:** when pupils finish a task successfully, such as reading a complete book, this constitutes a 'mastery experience'. The more of these mastery experiences a child has, the greater their perception will be of themselves as a competent reader. They are then much more likely to tackle further reading experiences, with increasing amounts of challenge. Wordless picture books provide a great opportunity for a struggling reader to

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<sup>1</sup> Arizpe, E. (2013) Meaning-making from wordless (or nearly wordless) picture books: what educational research expects and what readers have to say. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43 (2). ISSN 0305-764X, p.5

finish a book and thus achieve a mastery experience. This can help them to see reading more positively, and encourage them to try more books.

For more information about how mastery experiences can motivate learners, read Albert Bandura, *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (Worth Publishers, 1997).

- **They can help develop comprehension skills:** wordless picture books develop a child's ability to infer information about character, setting and plot, because so much is left to the reader to figure out. Thus, they help develop children's understanding of how stories work.

They demand close reading, as readers must remember what they saw on previous pages and link it with visual information in upcoming pages. Often this can be challenging, particularly in the case of visually rich and complex books like *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan.

Once your pupils have had some experience reading wordless picture books, there are great opportunities to discuss the role of words and pictures when they next read a book that contains both of these media – particularly comics, manga and graphic novels. For example, do the words and pictures convey the same information? Why do you think the book's creators have chosen to convey certain information via words and certain information via images?

- **They can inspire both discussion and writing.** Because wordless picture books elicit so much reader participation, pupils are given lots of opportunities to discuss their inferences and impressions of the book. Therefore, wordless picture books are a great tool for language development, particularly in pupils with English as an additional language, as they verbalise their understanding of the books.

Wordless picture books can also inspire creative writing, as pupils can adapt the book into a format that uses text: for instance, a script or short story.

**They can help children find out about other cultures.** Due to the lack of text, there is no language barrier in wordless picture books. Thus, they can offer an uninhibited view into another culture. See for example Jeannie Baker's book *Mirror*, which compares the lives of two boys, one from Morocco and one from Sydney.

## Some tips for starting out

- **Give children plenty of time to read the book.** Plenty of re-readings are encouraged. Children can take a while to get used to the experience of a wordless book. Allow them to explore the book on their own, or share the book with them, allowing them to point out details and ask questions.
- **Don't ask children to try and re-tell the story too soon.** Although re-telling is a fun and beneficial activity, wordless books place a lot of demands on a child's ability to sequence a story in their minds.

Asking children to re-tell the story too soon can lead them to become too preoccupied with the challenge of re-telling and not focused enough on closely reading the book. This can lead to them missing vital visual clues, resulting in a re-telling which doesn't really reflect the book's narrative.<sup>2</sup>

Allow them to simply explore the characters, settings and objects before you challenge them to verbalise the sequence of events in the story.

## General activities

### Reading activities

- **'I see...do you see?':** For basic understanding, especially with less confident pupils, this is a good way to start. Go through the book and point out a few details, saying (for example), 'I see a bird. Do you see a bird?' If pupils feel more confident during the exercise, they can take over the 'I see' part of the sentence.
- **Annotate with sticky notes:** As they read through the book, you can ask pupils to use sticky notes to annotate it. You can ask them to record different amounts of types of information on their notes, depending on what you want them to investigate:
  - Pupils can make notes saying who the main characters on each page are, where they are and what they are doing
  - They can make notes with any questions they have about what is happening on each page
  - They can make notes about what characters are thinking and feeling, or what they might be saying to each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Arizpe, E. (2013) Meaning-making from wordless (or nearly wordless) picturebooks: what educational research expects and what readers have to say. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43 (2). ISSN 0305-764X, pp.22-23

- **Sequence the pages:** Copy the pages of the book and give one page to each pupil or group of pupils. Ask them to make notes about what is going on in the page, perhaps using sticky notes as above. Ask them to come together and try and sort the pages into a logical order. This can also help with the next activity.
- **Cause and effect:** Wordless picture books challenge pupils to remember visual information from previous pages and link it with new information in the page they're currently reading. Ask them to go through the book and identify character actions, then ask them to identify the effects of these actions later in the book.
- **Character analysis:** Ask pupils to do character analysis activities, exploring characters' personalities and giving evidence from the text. This can be a fun and interesting challenge when there are no words to use as evidence.
- **Come up with a title:** Show your pupils the story without showing them the title of the book. Afterwards, ask them to come up with a title. They can base their decisions on different things: what they think the main idea of the book was, which character they felt was the most pivotal, or whether the setting was particularly important.

### Speaking activities

- **Re-telling:** as previously mentioned, give pupils plenty of time to get acquainted with the book before asking them to attempt to re-tell the story.

Re-telling is a great way for pupils to develop their use of connectives indicating sequence ('First', 'next', 'then', etc) as they recount the event of the story. Pupils will probably need to do some writing to scaffold their attempts to re-tell the story. One way to do this is to design a story map, where pupils draw a line indicating the journey of the story and annotate it with words or pictures representing key events. You can see lots of example story maps on Pinterest and Google Images – they can vary in size and complexity.

Another way to scaffold re-telling is to do an activity called story stepping. This is where pupils identify key events in the story, and then come up with actions to help them remember and re-tell these events. You can see this in action in this video from a school: <http://bit.ly/Yr2StorySteps>. Pupils can stand in the one spot as they re-tell the story and perform actions; alternatively, they can create a 'map' on the floor and step to different locations for each key event.

- **Discuss the themes of the book:** many wordless picture books deal with challenging themes and help pupils think about issues like tolerance and conflict.

See the suggested discussion topics for Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* at the end of this resource for a good example.

- **Story building:** if your pupils do not have formal writing skills, you can use story building to help them develop both the ability to have a discussion and to craft a narrative.

Story building requires a fairly small group of pupils (between 6-10) and at least one adult to provide stimuli and use pupils' ideas to move the story forward.

Provide some kind of stimuli to pupils as a way to start the story off. This could be a character from one of the pages of a wordless picture book. Ask pupils who this character could be, where they are, and what they might be doing today. Once you have taken everyone's ideas, try to identify the idea the group is happiest with, and move on to ask pupils to suggest a surprising or unusual thing that could happen to the character, ideally something that presents them with a problem, or gives them something to do. For instance, do they lose something (or find something)? Is there something they want that they can't have?

Keep taking suggestions from pupils as to what happens next and how the character feels at each stage of the way – you can also ask them to describe what settings look and feel like along the way. Keep going until you arrive at an ending that everyone is happy with!

You can find out more about story building in *The Little Book of Storybuilding* by Clare Lewis and Victoria Millward: <http://bit.ly/LitBookStryBuild>.

## Writing activities

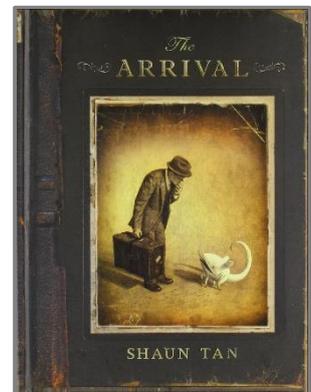
- **Write a character's dialogue or internal monologue:** this can be an ideal follow up activity to the annotation exercise where pupils write down what a character might be thinking or feeling. Encourage them to go into detail, exploring the reasons why a character might be thinking or feeling the way they are.
- **Write a short story version of the book:** Wordless picture books are an ideal way to demonstrate the concept of 'showing, not telling' to pupils, and thus can provide a good stimulus for creative writing.
- **Write from different points of view:** whichever medium your pupils write in, they can choose to write from the points of view of different characters in the text. With some books, there will be great opportunities to explore how different characters viewed each other's actions, and whether they might view the same incidents differently.

- **Produce a silent film version of the book:** wordless picture books employ many of the same techniques as films do: use of framing, mise-en-scene, and colour and lighting to convey mood and atmosphere. Older pupils can make a film version of the book, enhancing it with sound.
- **Produce a trailer for a wordless picture book:** a book trailer follows the same principles as a movie trailer: it is a short film which provides a ‘teaser’ of a book’s content, enticing potential readers. As mentioned above, wordless picture books can actually provide a good teaching tool to demonstrate cinematic techniques, and pupils can think about how they might convey snippets of character, plot and setting using these techniques.

## Activities for *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan

*The Arrival* is a great example of a wordless picture book that provides:

- A challenge to pupils’ comprehension through complex, detailed illustrations
- Topical and complex themes, ideal for developing higher order thinking skills through discussion
- A chance to build empathy with others
- Interesting artwork to explore and discuss



### Summary of the book

*The Arrival* tells the story of a man who is forced to leave his family behind in search of better prospects in a foreign land. He arrives in an overwhelming and bewildering country and must make sense of new surroundings, as well as finding a home and a job. As he attempts to make his way, he is helped by a cast of characters, each of whom has a story of their own to tell.

### Discussing the book with pupils

- Keep your initial discussions focused on pointing out details in the text. Ask pupils to say who the main character is, what he is trying to do in the initial phases of the story, and what the settings are like.
- Discussion questions might include the following:
  - Why do you think the illustrator drew the book the way he did?
  - How would you feel if you had to leave home and live in another country?
  - What would you take with you and why?
  - How do you think you could help a person who has come to live in your country to feel more at home?

## Some great wordless picture books

*The Arrival* by Shaun Tan

*The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan

*Flotsam* by David Weisner (also *Mr Wuffles!*)

*Journey* by Aaron Becker (part 1 of a 3 part series including *Quest* and *Return*)

*Red Sledge* by Lita Judge

*The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney

*Clown* by Quentin Blake

*The Wave* by Suzy Lee (also *Mirror* and *Shadow*)

*The Red Book* by Barbara Lehman

*Mirror* by Jeanie Baker

*Zoom* by Istvan Banyai

*The Only Child* by Guojing

*Sidewalk Flowers* by Jonarno Lawson

*A Ball for Daisy* by Chris Rashka

Published in other languages:

*Mi león* (My lion) by Mandana Sadat

*Il Bárbaro* (The Barbarian) by Renato Morriconi