Picture It!

Victoria M. Naughton

Picture 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"
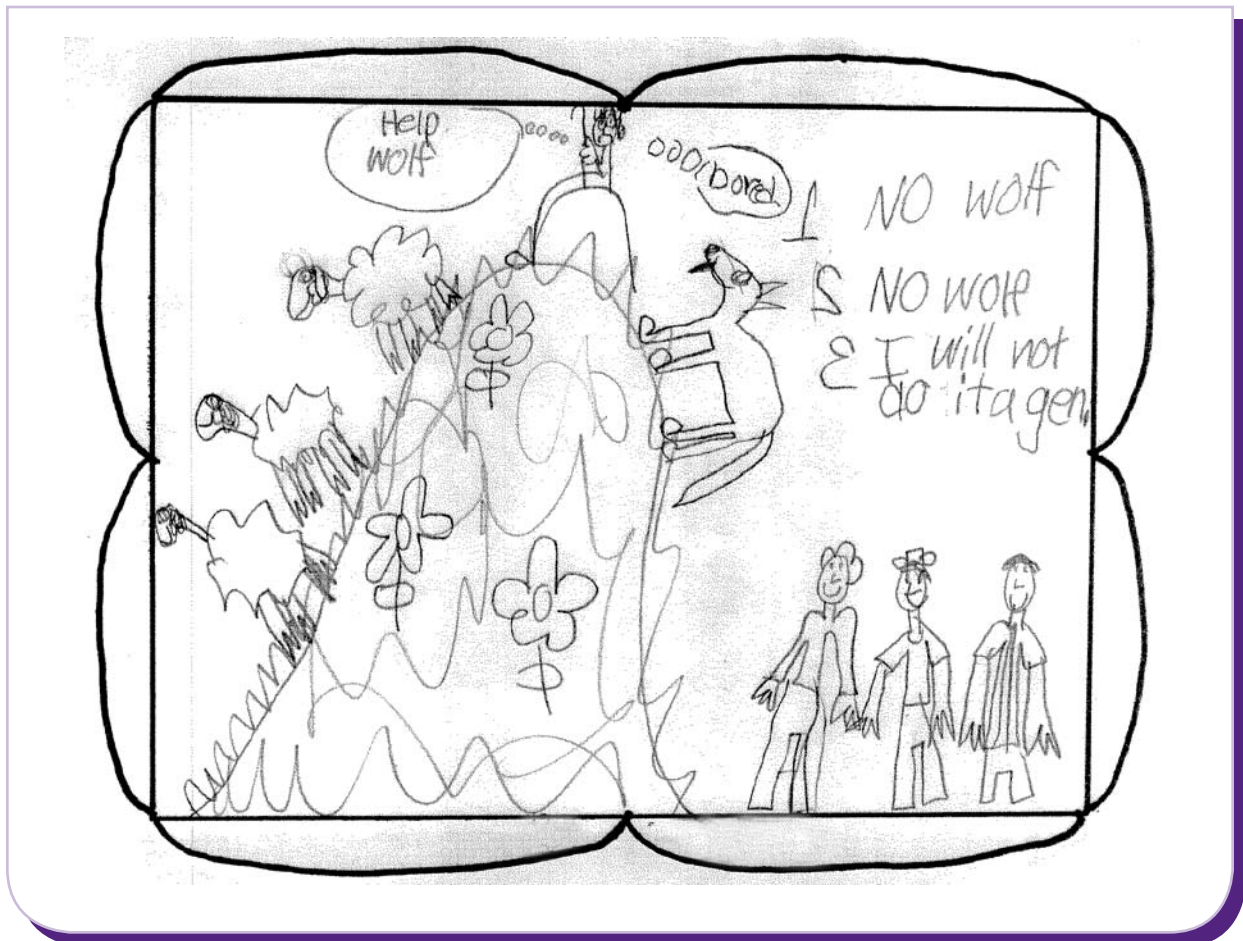
finished, the picture becomes a powerful mnemonic of the story and its meaning. Students now have a graphic representation of the overall point or meaning of the story.

As Walmsley (2006) said, "Encouraging children to focus on the big ideas of the text promotes understanding of not only the big ideas but also smaller details" (p. 282). Picture It! makes Walmsley's statement reciprocal. By illustrating the smaller details (i.e., the story's grammar), the story's meaning—the "big picture"—becomes visible. Looking at the finished picture, students see how the individual parts relate to the whole and how the whole picture illustrates the story's main idea.

As students critique finished pictures, they can add or remove details that are significant or insignificant to the story. Classroom discussions often lead to lively debates among students as they determine what belongs in the final picture. A key point to make is that in Picture It! all five components of the story's grammar need to be represented in the final picture. This usually leads to a rereading of the text to find support for adding or for removing certain details. The final composite will allow students to see how each component of the story's grammar contributes to the story's main idea and how components fit into the framework of the whole story.

Vocabulary Enhancement

In addition to providing a visual picture of a story's main idea, Picture It! can be used to teach new vocabulary. As students struggle to develop their artwork, they'll find that certain emotions, motivations, and so forth are hard to depict. Students may wish to incorporate vocabulary into their pictures to exemplify these concepts. Attaching the word *revenge* or *boredom* to a story element illustrates the meaning of the word in the story's sequence, and it acts as a powerful recall mechanism for learning the meaning of new words.

In the pictorial representation of Aesop's fable "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" (Figure 2), a first-grade class wanted to show that the boy misbehaved because he was bored. Initially, they had no idea what *bored* meant, but when the word's meaning was explained in the context of the story, they wished to incorporate the concept into the picture. Thus, the word *bored* appeared near the shepherd sitting alone at the top of the hill. Students can add vocabulary

such as a shepherd's *crook*, or *trickery*, or other explanations to further illustrate their understanding of the story based on classroom discussions or story text.

Picture It! can also serve as a pictorial semantic map. Such graphic organizers have long been considered a potent aid for learning and vocabulary development (Clarke, 1991; Vacca & Vacca, 1989). As such, they offer quick and efficient ways for students to recall critical story elements, and the image locks the new and significant vocabulary to the matching story element and to the students' schema.

In a story where key vocabulary is difficult, the ignorance of definitions is devastating to comprehension. Therefore, an understanding of new words prior to reading is needed. This is especially true when the story's context is not helpful or is confusing. However, unless students are able to attach a new word's meaning to some schema, it is often soon forgotten. Picture It! offers a schema in the form of the story's grammar to ground the new vocabulary in students' minds.

A prime example of a challenging read with obscure and abundant multisyllabic words is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." This story lends itself well to Picture It! because the reader needs to follow the progression of the story along a path strewn with unfamiliar words. In this story, the main character, the redresser, devises a plan to avenge a wrong done to him by Fortunato, a wine connoisseur. His plan is to lure Fortunato to his palazzo to taste a pipe, or cask, of amontillado, which is stored in a vault beneath his palazzo. To reach the cask of amontillado, both the redresser and Fortunato must travel through catacombs and a crypt to a niche where the wine is stored. Once the now-drunken Fortunato reaches the niche, our avenger binds him to a wall and proceeds to tier up the niche's opening with bricks and a trowel like a mason. Fortunato's fate is sealed, and our protagonist's revenge is complete.

The vocabulary illustrated in Figure 3 is critical to the journey of our protagonist and his victim, for each word is tied to one of the five components of the story's grammar. When the teacher preselects key vocabulary from the story's grammar, the vocabulary helps to guide the students through the story. Once the students learn the definitions for the keywords, they read the story and see where the words will fit in the story's map.

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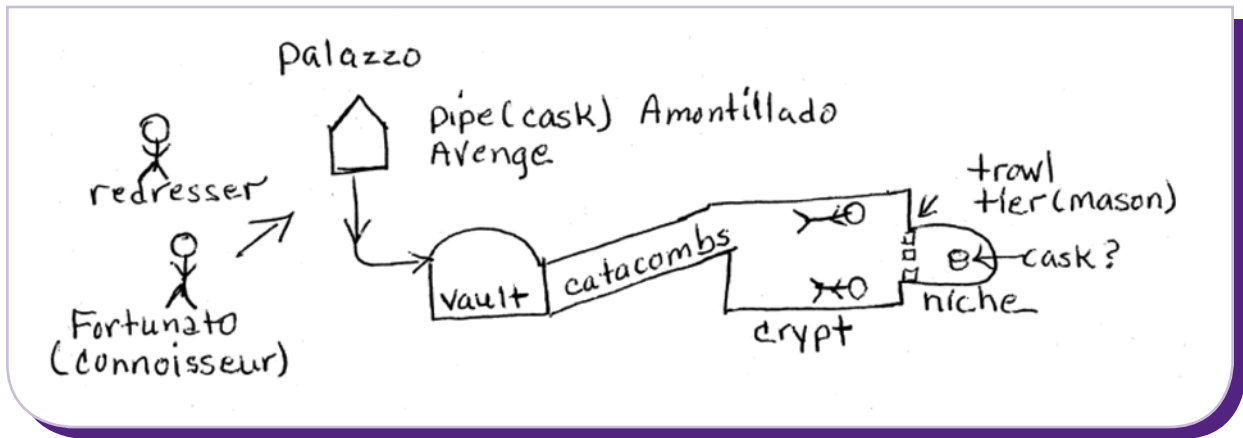**Story Map With Added Vocabulary for "The Cask of Amontillado"**

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

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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.