



Picture books

Many picture books are sophisticated texts, designed as much for adults as for young children. Through carefully constructed text and image, they often work on several levels and deal with complex themes and issues.

The interaction between pictures and text is all-important to the meaning of the picture book.

Visual features

Consider the visual features and how they impact on the meaning of the text and the reader's response to the text.

The setting

The setting refers to the location of the story in time and place.

- Are characters portrayed in different settings?
- What does the setting imply about the characters? (eg fathers outside and mothers inside the kitchen).

Colour

What colours are used? How are they used? To portray different characters? As symbols? To build atmosphere?

In Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*, Roberto Innocenti's *Rose Blanche*, and Anthony Browne's *King Kong*, the colour red represents life force, energy and passion.

Sepia colours are often used to reflect past times and memories.

Symbols

Are symbols used in the written or visual text to signify something else, such as a dove for peace? A crown for royalty?

- Is there repetition of these symbols throughout the book?
- Are there religious icons?
- Are there references to other written or visual texts (intertextuality)? Why and how is this used?

Light source

How is light used? Shade and shadow can add mystery; bright light can attract the viewer's attention to a particular focus.

How is the reader positioned?

What is the social distance created? Is the reader:

- outside the novel, looking in (framed)
- a character within
- in the characters' gaze – through demand (direct gaze at the reader) or offer (indirect gaze away from the reader's eyes). How does this impact on the reading of the book? Does the reader feel sympathy for the character?

Size

How large/small are the characters and objects compared to each other? How does this relate to the characters' status and power in the book?

Position and angle of representation

What is the effect of the characters' relative placement? eg Is one always bigger, dwarfing the others' space?

Are some characters always drawn from the same or different angles? What does this imply about them?

Objects

What objects are shown with different characters and what does this imply about them?

Clothing

How do the clothes worn by the characters, and the colour of these clothes, contribute to the meaning of the text?

Body language and facial gestures

What postures and expressions do the characters have? How are they significant?

The picture book may contain a variety of ways of **telling the story**, including speech bubbles, different 'voices', maps, lists, symbols and poems, eg Nadia Wheatley's *My Place*.

Language

Consider the choice of words and grammar.

What do they say about gender relationships, development of character and atmosphere etc?

Look at the main types of verbs used – are they action verbs (eg *jumped, ran, chased, hit*)? Saying verbs (eg *replied, answered, retorted*)? Thinking verbs (eg *mused, wondered*)? Relating verbs (eg *was, have, being*)?

Consider the use of qualifying words such as *may, possibly, perhaps*.

Some descriptive words for picture books

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| accomplished | disturbing | moody | stunning |
| appeal | elegant simplicity | moral | symbolic |
| attractive | emotional | multi-layered | tactile |
| authentic | endearing | muted colour | tantalising |
| beautiful | evocative | mysterious | thought-provoking |
| brilliant | exciting | original | unpredictable |
| complex | fantasy | provocative | varied |
| constructed | gripping | quality | vibrant |
| contrasting | haunting | realistic | visual |
| dark | humorous | rich | vivid |
| depth | imaginative | satirical | witty |
| detailed | masterful | sensitive | wonderful |

The interplay of text and picture

Written text and illustrations are used in a variety of combinations in picture books in order to assist the appeal and meaning of the text.

An illustration may stand in place of written text eg Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*.