

## Worth A Thousand Words: Using Visual Images to Tell a Story

*Michelle Smith*

### Introduction

*Read to me riddles and read to me rhymes  
Read to me stories of magical times  
Read to me tales about castles and kings  
Read to me stories of fabulous things  
Read to me pirates and read to me knights  
Read to me dragons and dragon-book fights  
Read to me spaceships and cowboys and then  
When you are finished- please read them again. – Jane Yolen*

I, like many Americans, grew up hearing and reading stories. Reading is probably the most important skill children learn in elementary school. Of course math, social skills, and writing are essential too, but reading is the springboard for much of what comes later in an education. Not only do I love to read, but I think kids should have an appreciation for reading, too. Success will be much easier to obtain if you like to read. I myself enjoy poetry, autobiographies, and history, but I love fiction, especially novels. Historical fiction and science fiction are my favorites. That's why I participated in the DTI "Things That Happen in Fiction" seminar. I feel that if children develop a love for reading, or at least hearing stories, that's half of the battle! In the unit I will teach, students will be writing and illustrating their own short fiction stories.

I am an art teacher, and some of my earliest memories are of drawing, coloring, and looking at the illustrations in books because I was too young for school and therefore couldn't read yet. A game I used to play with my older sister was to pick out a book, and make up what the book was about by "reading" the pictures. Afterwards, my sister would read the book to me so that I could hear the actual story. Without realizing it, I was "reading" images and practicing reading comprehension. I liked to read and it became a hobby. I read a variety of materials from picture books, comic strips (the funny papers, we used to call them), comic books, and short fictional stories. When I got older, reading became one of my hobbies. Now that I'm a teacher, I'd like to share my love of reading with my students. I chose fables and multicultural stories as the subject matter for my unit because I myself have always found them interesting. I particularly liked *Aesop's Fables*, *Anansi the Spider* stories, and even some of the *Uncle Remus Stories*, which came from the Anansi stories. I think these kinds of short stories are effective at teaching a moral

lesson while being funny and entertaining. Mainstream movie versions of fairy tales can alienate a large portion of the population because of a lack of ethnically diverse characters. This is one of the reasons I gravitated toward folk tales and fables when I was a child myself. These stories feature animals with human traits, or people from various ethnic backgrounds, which minority children can relate to. I'd like to create a visual arts unit that gives students the opportunity to write their own short story or fable. The challenges I expect face are my students rejecting the idea of writing in art class, managing the many elements of the unit, and limited time.

### **Rationale**

“What I love most about reading: It gives you the ability to reach higher ground, and keep climbing.” --Oprah Winfrey. Reading not only takes you places in your imagination, but in your life as well. Even though art is my content area, I support the school's efforts to improve the reading and writing skills of our students. After the DTI Seminars and reading some of the past units written by other teachers, I have made a decision about what it is I want my unit to be about. My unit will combine English Language Arts, and the Visual Arts by having students hear short stories and fables and then compose their own story. Students will also create original illustrations to help tell their stories. Of course, achieving all of this will be easier said than done. When my students come to art class, they expect to draw, paint, color, or cut and paste. I know that as soon as I mention writing anything, I am going to hear “Ms. Smith, Why do we have to write? This is *art* class!” Getting everyone to participate can be difficult at times. There are many different reasons students are resistant to the idea of writing in art class. Some feel insecure about their writing abilities, and some have language barriers. For these students, extra practice is even more important. I'm hoping students overcome these insecurities and struggles, because many of them have interesting stories inside them waiting to get out.

Since I work at the elementary school level at a relatively small school in New Castle, Delaware, I have two schools that split my weekly schedule. A large percentage of the students at each school receive free lunch. They are also both ethnically diverse with 28% of the student body being Hispanic or Latin, 28.5% African American, 34.5% Caucasian, and 2.8 % Asian at my home school.<sup>1</sup> The population at my second school is 34% Hispanic or Latin, 43.1% African American, 19.1% Caucasian, and 1.1% Asian.<sup>1</sup> Racial and socioeconomic diversity is what attracted me to Delaware and the Colonial school district. I'd like to help expose students to stories with different settings, diversity in voice, and a variety of characters to appeal to the multicultural population in this district. In our globally connected world, it is important for future generations to understand that everyone matters.<sup>2</sup> Multicultural stories can reflect the experiences lived by diverse peoples. Students will get to see how people who may be different from them live through these stories. George R.R. Martin said the “A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies... The man who never reads lives only one.”

Many of my ethnically diverse students are not even aware that there are stories out there about them and their culture. There is an abundance of multicultural stories for teachers to use in the classroom and using them will benefit all students in a variety of ways. Ethnic tales can be used to promote literacy and teach about diverse cultures at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Children should be encouraged to read stories from different cultures to build understanding of these cultures. Students will also have a personal connection to the stories that come from their particular ethnic group. To achieve this, my unit will utilize folk stories and fables, for example, Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story, or A Story, A Story, which comes from Ghana. The multicultural stories that we will cover in my unit will make the reading relatable to the majority of my students. I'm hoping that some of them will even be familiar with these stories, so that we'll be building on prior knowledge. Hearing these stories from their cultures will hopefully spark their imaginations so that they are willing to complete a writing assignment in art class.

This unit has several components, which is also a challenge for my students and for me. First, my students will listen to the fable(s) and stories read aloud by me, then they will write stories of their own, and finally they will illustrate a portion of their original story with a drawing. This unit will expose students to the art of storytelling and communicating without words. In our first DTI Seminar, "Things That Happen in Fiction," we read parables and short stories and then talked about what a story is and how a good story is constructed. The difference between *story* and *plot* is that a story tells you what happened, but a plot delves into *why* what happened happened to whom it happened.<sup>3</sup> Knowing the difference will be useful in the future when I am teaching my students to compose their short story or fable. Students will practice their skills by first writing a sentence or two, then, they'll build upon that to begin a story. Once a story has been developed further, my students will draw illustrations that help move the story along. For some students writing a beginning, middle, and ending for their story will be a large undertaking. We will work in small groups so that each student has additional support from their peers. In their small groups, students will also decide what images to use to illustrate a portion of the story that will be told without using words.

Another challenge that I will face with this unit is actually finishing all of the components in a reasonable amount of time. Students will have to work fairly quickly during class in order to do the reading, writing and illustrating necessary to complete the project. At the same time, students will have to really think about what they are doing and add necessary details to their writing and to their illustrations. Sometimes elementary school age children just want to rush to the end of a project and not take the time necessary to produce higher quality work. I don't want the fast pace of the project to encourage students to do this. Classes meet just once a week for 45 minutes, so we will need to spend four to five class periods on this unit (at least). The stories will be very short, and we will do only one illustration. It will be interesting to see if students can stay with a project like this for the five weeks. In my art classes students always want to take

anything they make home right away, finished or not. I'm always reminding them that we aren't done yet, there's more.

## **Objectives**

Carrie Downie Elm. and New Castle Elementary students need this unit to learn about themselves and people of other cultures, and also to build on their ELA skills. Reading fiction and children's stories is entertaining, but they can benefit students in a number of other ways. Some of the language usage measures that can be enhanced are descriptive language, fluency, and recall.<sup>4</sup> Reading fiction can also help improve vocabulary skills without children even realizing it. Authors often introduce words that may be new to students, which exposes readers to how these words are used in a context.<sup>5</sup> These stories also help stretch the imaginations of those who read them and gives them a glimpse into another world or perspective that they may not have been aware of. Fables are fiction stories that have an added benefit to them because they include a moral lesson. Students will learn concepts like respect, patience, perseverance, citizenship, etc. through the actions of the characters of these stories.

The goals that I have for students are to enhance their reading comprehension skills and to learn about other cultures. The ultimate objective of this unit is for students to learn how to communicate a story through visual images. I want students to tell a story, or at least part of a story, using only an illustration. Reading, listening to and writing stories are important in promoting literacy. There's a saying by Joseph Addison that goes: "Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body." I want my students to give their minds a workout by not only reading, but by writing and illustrating stories, as well. This unit connects English Language Arts and Visual Arts through the creation of an original story that is also illustrated by the author. In our seminar, we discussed writing stories and the two plots most stories have: A Stranger Comes to Town; or A Stranger Leaves Town.<sup>5</sup> My students can use either of these two plots to develop the rest of their stories. Once character, setting, and plot have been established, visual images can be created to help move the story along, or even tell the entire story. Students will use a visual language to depict parts of their story. Illustrations can show whether the story takes place in the past, or the future, what part of the world their story occurs in, and what some of their characters look like. Of course there should be action in the drawing, too.

## **The Benefits of Reading Fiction**

I don't think anyone would argue that reading is much better for young people's brains than television. Television is probably the most popular form of media, but it doesn't require a high level of thinking. Reading causes you to use your imagination to visualize the characters and action in the story. Not only do you envision the story, you put yourself in the character's shoes. You *become* the character in the story. When children are mentally transported to another place or mentally become someone else for a short time, they are better able to relate to people who are different from themselves in

reality. They can see someone else's point of view and understand their feelings. This is called "theory of mind." Theory of mind is the ability to attribute mental states –beliefs, pretending, knowledge, etc. - to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one's own.<sup>6</sup> Watching television actually reduces theory of mind. So, reading has a positive impact on how we act and how we treat others.

Children can learn to empathize with others through reading, and these feelings can be prolonged even after reading has been completed. This is because what we read stays with us for several days after reading. Brain networks are reconfigured for at least a few days when reading stories, especially those with strong narrative arcs.<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon, grounded cognition, is similar to "muscle memory" experienced by athletes who visualize performing a skill.<sup>8</sup> The brain doesn't distinguish between reading something and doing it. Reading stories with a moral lesson can change the brain and positively affect children's behavior towards others.

### **Positive Effects of Writing a Story**

Just as reading is good exercise for the brain, writing and art helps brain function too. One way of thinking is that we use the left hemisphere of the brain for creativity and seeing with a broader perspective. The right side of the brain is used for language. Reading fiction and creative writing are activities that use both sides of the brain together. This unit will engage student's imaginations and past knowledge of language arts because students will compose their own short story after we have read a couple of fables or stories by other authors. Students will also come up with a positive message that they want their readers to learn, like a moral of the story.

Another way writing improves health is by promoting a positive attitude. This unit will give students the opportunity to do some creative problem-solving, which many students enjoy. When students enjoy what they're doing they are more engaged and focused. This unit will give students the opportunity to do some creative problem-solving, which many students enjoy. Creating a story with a moral is excellent cognitive exercise and will also increase student engagement. Other positive effects of creative writing for students are stress-relief, and decreased depressive symptoms.<sup>9</sup> Writing can also help lower blood pressure and promote deeper and more sustained sleep.<sup>9</sup>

### **Content**

There are so many awesome multicultural stories out there that it is a difficult task to just choose one or two to focus on for class. I've chosen the following stories because they serve my purposes for each part of the unit. These are just summaries of the stories.

Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story, written and illustrated by Tomie DePaola

Adelita lives with her wealthy father Francisco, who is a widower, and her nanny/housekeeper, Esperanza. Her father remarries, so a stepmother and two stepsisters are added to the household. When her father dies, Adelita is treated badly by the stepmother and stepsisters. Esperanza is fired and Adelita is forced to become the maid. An invitation arrives at the household for a fiesta thrown by a wealthy family, Los Gordillos, for their bachelor son. Everyone in the house is excited about the party, but Adelita is told to stay at home by her stepmother. Esperanza secretly helps Adelita attend the party in disguise by giving her a beautiful dress to wear and a red rebozo, or shawl that used to belong to Adelita's mother.

At the fiesta, Adelita calls herself Cenicienta, or Cinderella. She gets the attention of the host's son, Javier, and dances with him all night. Javier kisses her, but she runs away. The next day Javier searches for Cenicienta because he wants to marry her. Adelita uses her red rebozo to help Javier find her by hanging it in her window for him to see. When he finally finds her, he asks her to marry him.

A Story A Story, written and illustrated by Gail E. Haley

Anansi the Spider Man weaves a ladder and climbs up to the sky to speak with Nyame, the sky god to ask if he could buy his stories. Nyame tells Anansi that he can have his box that contains all of the world's stories, if he can pay the price for it. Nyame doubts that Anansi can complete the difficult tasks he has in store for him because he is old, weak, and small. Nevertheless, Anansi agrees and is told that he must capture three creatures to earn the box of stories.

Anansi must capture Osebo, the leopard with terrible teeth, Mmboro, hornets that sting like fire, and Mmoatia, the fairy that no man ever sees. One by one, Anansi uses his wits to trick the creatures and capture them. He returns to the sky with the leopard, the hornets, and the fairy and presents them to Nyame. Nyame rewards him with the box of stories, which Anansi opens. All of the world's stories, including this one, float out of the box and are scattered to all the corners of the world for everyone to enjoy.

### **Essential Questions:**

The Colonial School District uses the Learning Focused Strategies approach to teaching. Teachers use learning maps, which a visual aids, to help students track the sequence of lessons in a unit. Each lesson in the unit also has its own Lesson Essential Question (LEQ) and the unit as a whole has a Unit Essential Question. Since the Unit Essential Question is generated by the State Standards, mine will be as follows: How is learning enhanced through the study of visual art? To answer this question, students will discuss illustrations as works of art and how artists use them to communicate meaning. Students will see that visual images can accompany any other subject matter to explain and illustrate its meaning. The Students Learning Map for this unit can be found in the

appendix. How is art used as a vehicle for communication? How does the use of certain symbols or images influence the meaning of art?

### **Classroom Activities**

When I'm writing lesson plans, I don't use a template or form that has been handed to me by an outside source. Because I teach art, I have the freedom to use my own form and to write lessons and units that are completely self-generated. Over the years I've found that beginning with the end in mind (to borrow from the *7 Habits of Effective People*) is the best for me personally. I like to decide what the end product or culminating project will be, and then choose what Standards can be taught by doing that activity. Our product will be a storyboard that will contain both written content and an illustration. Combined, the storyboard will tell an original story written and illustrated by the student. This could also be a collaborative work in which students work together to create a book / storyboard. Right now, I haven't decided whether or not to let students work together. Sometimes this is beneficial so that students who feel insecure about certain aspects of the assignment can feel confident and can get assistance from their peers. So far, I'd like this unit to last for four class periods, but it may take more. Below is a description of how the unit will go.

#### *Activity One – Pre-reading:*

**Activating Strategy:** The Class will be divided into small groups of no more than five students. Each group will view several illustrations from *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story*. The group will infer what the story is about based on the illustrations that they see. Each group will then choose a spokesperson to share their version of the story with the rest of the class.

**Lesson:** Students will then watch a power point presentation of the book, *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story*, so that they can hear the actual story. The class will discuss how each group's interpretation of the illustrations affected what they thought about the story before the book was read to them. Students will be told that they are going to write their own story. The class will be introduced to the storyboard. They will view an example of a completed storyboard version of the book *Adelita*. The rubric for the lesson will be reviewed briefly at this point. Then the students will create and write down who their main character will be and three challenges that character will face on a storyboard template worksheet. In one of our DTI sessions for *Things That Happen in Fiction* we did a similar exercise with Post It notes.<sup>3</sup> I tweaked the exercise so that there are frames on a single sheet of paper, which are labeled for students.

**Assessment:** The assessment for this activity will be participation, which will be evaluated by teacher observation. There will also be a finished product, the completed storyboard template, which will be checked by the teacher.

### *Activity Two- Writing the Story*

Activating Strategy: The class will watch the video *A Story A Story*, one of the Anansi stories. Students will get into groups and discuss who the main character of the story is and what challenges he faced in the story. They will use a completed storyboard of the video to aid in the discussion.

Lesson: Students will use their storyboard from the previous class to begin writing the details of their own story. Students will type their story in the computer lab or on laptops (whichever one we can get access to).

Assessment: This activity's assessment will be in the form of teacher observation while students are typing their stories on their laptops. Each student will need to have a "beginning" for their story.

### *Activity Three – Finishing the Story*

Activating Strategy: Students will *think-pair-share* using their storyboards and a rubric to discuss whether or not the required parts of the story are present.

Lesson: Students will type the final parts of their story.

Assessment: Peer feedback/ critique will be the main form of assessment for this activity. Participation will be determined by teacher observation.

### *Activity Four- Illustrating the Story*

Activating Strategy: Students will look at illustrations featuring mice from two popular stories from Aesop's Fables; *The Lion and the Mouse* and *City Mouse, Country Mouse*. The class will vote on which mouse they want to hear a story about based on their impression of the illustrations. The class will discuss the elements of art and how they are used in the illustration. The chosen story will then be read to the class.

Lesson: Students will choose one of their character's challenges to depict in an illustration. Each student will then draw their illustration with pencil, then trace with a black sharpie marker. The illustration needs to fully convey this part of the story without the use of text.

Assessment: Students will use a self-assessment checklist to determine if their illustrations are meeting the lesson's requirements.

### *Activity Five - Finishing the Illustration*

Activating Strategy: The class will do a "gallery crawl" in the classroom to view the illustrations of their classmates. We will briefly discuss what can be added, subtracted, or changed to better convey that portion of the story.

Lesson: Students will finish drawing their illustrations and add touches of color with watercolor paints.

Assessment: Students will use a self-assessment checklist to determine if their illustrations are meeting the lesson's requirements.

*Activity Six: Putting It All Together*

Lesson: The class will mount the printed pages of their story, a title page, and their completed illustration on a sheet of black construction paper.

Assessment: Assessment for the final product will be completed by the teacher using a final project rubric.

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## **Appendix A**

### **DE Visual Arts Standards**

Standard 1: Students will be able to select and use media, techniques, and processes to create works of art to communicate meaning.

4.1.3 Select and use different characteristics of 2-D and 3-D art media, techniques and processes in creating works of art to communicate ideas, experiences and stories.

Standard 3: Students will invent, select, evaluate, and use subjects, themes, symbols, problems, and ideas to create works of art.

4.3.2 Invent and use subjects, symbols and ideas to communicate meaning.

Standard 4: Students will understand the visual arts in relation to diverse cultures, times, and places.

4.4.5 Compare the function or purposes of works of art and design across various cultures, times and places.

Standard 6: Students will understand the visual arts in relation to other disciplines.

4.6.1 Identify similarities and differences between characteristics of the visual arts and other art disciplines.

4.6.3 Explain how the skills and concepts used in visual arts can be combined with knowledge in other disciplines providing tools for future work and everyday life.

### **ELA Common Core Standards:**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1](#): Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2](#): Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.7](#): Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

## Appendix B

### Storyboard Rubric

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Storyboard Worksheet	The story is very well organized. One idea or scene follows another in a logical sequence with clear transitions.	The story is pretty well organized. One idea or scene may seem out of place. Clear transitions are used.	The story is a little hard to follow. The transitions are sometimes not clear.	Ideas and scenes seem to be randomly arranged.
Written Story	The story contains many creative details and/or descriptions that contribute to the reader's enjoyment. The author has really used his imagination.	The story contains a few creative details and/or descriptions that contribute to the reader's enjoyment. The author has used his imagination.	The story contains a few creative details and/or descriptions, but they distract from the story. The author has tried to use his imagination.	There is little evidence of creativity in the story. The author does not seem to have used much imagination.
Illustration	Original illustrations are detailed, attractive, creative and help move the written story along. The subject matter and theme are evident.	Original illustrations are somewhat detailed, attractive, and relate to the written story. The subject matter and theme are somewhat evident.	Original illustrations relate to the written story, theme, and subject matter.	Illustrations are not present OR they are not original.
Final Storyboard	The display shows the progression of the story from beginning to end. Student devotes appropriate time and effort to the writing process, illustration, and construction of the final product. The final product is neat with no stray marks. Mistakes have been corrected.	The display somewhat shows the progression of the story.. Student devotes sufficient time and effort to the writing process. Most mistakes have been corrected. The product is somewhat neat.	The display shows a story. Student devotes some time and effort to the writing process but was not very thorough. Mistakes have not been corrected. The final product is sloppy.	The story is not clear or is unfinished. Student devotes little time and effort to the writing process. The finished product is poorly constructed.

## Appendix C

### Storyboard Practice

Directions: Write what your main character is trying to do in the story. Think of three challenges that character might face, and write them in the frames. Then, think of an ending to the story.

**Beginning:**

\_\_\_\_\_ **wants to**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Challenge 1:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Challenge 2:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Challenge 3:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**End:**

\_\_\_\_\_ **finally**

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Self-Assessment Checklist

## ART SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

Carefully review your work, and then place a checkmark in the box next to each listed component that you included in your assignment.

**Remember**, you are not to check the items you *wish* you had included, only the items that actually *can be seen*. **BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF!**

I followed all directions and guidelines for this project carefully. I included a drawing of the main character or characters trying to overcome one of their challenges.	
I did my assignment neatly and to the best of my ability. I fixed or corrected my mistakes.	
I used only the required materials for this project. I used the Elements of Art studied to achieve the desired effects.	
I added extra details that would help others understand my illustration. I tried to be creative and innovative. My artistic choices improve the overall appearance of the project.	
My artwork is original and not copied.	
I completed the written assignment with my project.	

Your Grade for this project is...

**O** if you earned 6 checkmarks.

**S** if you earned 4 or 5 checkmarks.

**U** if you earned 3 or less checkmarks.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Colonial School District, *School Profiles*

<sup>2</sup> Loh-Hagan. "Why Should We Teach Multicultural Literature"

<sup>3</sup> David Teague, DTI Seminar. "Things That Happen in Fiction"

<sup>4</sup> Horne Farell and Nessel. "Effects of Storytelling: An Ancient Art for Modern Classrooms Why Should We Teach Multicultural Literature?"

<sup>5</sup> Sikri. "Advantages of Reading Fiction Books."

<sup>6</sup> Murphy. "Your Brain on Fiction"

<sup>7</sup> Clark, Carol. "Does Reading Actually Change the Brain?"

<sup>8</sup> Brennen. "7 Benefits of Reading Fiction"

**Curriculum Unit Title**

Worth 1000 Words: Using Visual Images to Tell a Story

**Author** Michelle Smith

**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

Art is a visual system that is used to communicate thoughts and ideas, and can tell a story.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

How can visual images be used to enhance or to tell a story?

**CONCEPT A**

Reading an Illustration that tells a story

**CONCEPT B**

Writing a Story

**CONCEPT C**

Illustrating a Story

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

How can the viewer “read” a work of art as text?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

What are the elements of a story?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

How do artists create works of art that communicate meaning?

**VOCABULARY A**

subject matter, mood, context

**VOCABULARY B**

character, plot, setting

**VOCABULARY C**

focal point, background, theme

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

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