

Parents and teachers spend enormous energy helping children learn to read, but there is a powerful part of your students' reading toolkit that supports literacy without relying on text—the wordless picture book. Wordless picture books, or silent books, have very few to no words and rely on illustrations to tell a story.

Worth a Thousand Words for Readers

Sometimes accused of being “babyish,” with no words to read, the very concept of a wordless story is in fact quite advanced and makes great demands of the reader. Without text to offer clues, the illustrations tell the story, compared to most books where the author tells the story through dialogue or narrative. Because artwork is always open to interpretation, each reader will “read” the wordless book differently, and that same reader might see a different story every time they pick up the book.

Visual storytelling helps readers learn to interpret the illustrations and draw conclusions about critical elements of the book, including the book's characters, setting, and plot. Wordless picture books can be a unifying resource for classrooms in which multiple languages are spoken, and an invaluable bonding opportunity for families in which literacy levels or language barriers may not allow for the sharing of printed text.

Wordless picture books invite creative interpretation of the story and with that comes the comforting knowledge that there is no right or wrong version of the book. Readers who struggle with text may shine if given the opportunity to tell the story in their own words, while visual learners may see elements or details in the artwork that others would have missed in their reading. In encouraging readers to make inferences based upon the illustrations, wordless picture books forge an emotional connection between story and reader. The ownership earned by this interaction between book and child can give readers of all ages a major boost in confidence and creativity.

Expand How You Understand ‘Reading’

Even caregivers accustomed to bedtime stories might be flustered the first time they read a wordless book. In fact there *are* words: a title, an author and sometimes a separate illustrator and a whole copyright page full of interesting information. (Check here to see if the picture book's illustrator included a note about what medium they used to create the artwork, such as watercolors, acrylics, pen and ink, or digitally!) Begin by discussing what words you *do* see, and invite your reader to make predictions based upon the combination of those words and the cover art.

From there, some readers will want to jump right into their storytelling. Others may be daunted by the absence of an indicated storyline or overwhelmed by intricate and uninterrupted artwork. To guide your reader, you can:

- Ask more than just yes or no questions prompting answers without leading the reader. Leave room for any interpretation the child sees fit. Ask questions like: “what do you think the character is thinking at this moment?” or “what do you think will happen next?” or “what would you do in this character’s situation?”
- Encourage your reader to enjoy the tension of each page turn and allow them whatever time they need to linger over the details of the pictures.
- Look for context clues to help your reader draw inferences about the work. Encourage your reader to consider the color palette, facial expressions, body language and other elements of the artwork to help them draw conclusions about the characters and plot.

Picture books are used with great success for older readers, and wordless picture books are no exception. Consider using a wordless book with older kids as inspiration for thoughtful writing prompts. Share a single image or an entire wordless book and invite readers to craft a caption or entire story in text that could accompany the illustration. Listening to or reading a text often creates a mental image for readers, and, conversely, looking at an image may inspire quite a story.

Selections to Get You Started

These selections are just a few of many wordless picture books, but they rise to the top and invite rereading:

“Another” by Christian Robinson (2019)
“BirdCatDog” (Three-Story Books), by Lee Nordling and Meritxell Bosch (2014)
“Flora and the Flamingo” by Molly Idle (2013)
“Flotsam” (2006) and “Tuesday” (1991) by David Wiesner
“The Journey” trilogy, by Aaron Becker (2013)
“The Lion and the Mouse” by Jerry Pinkney (2009)
“One Little Bag: An Amazing Journey” by Henry Cole (2020)
“Over the Shop” by Jonarno Lawson and Qin Leng (2021)
“Pool” by JiHyeon Lee (2015)
“Stormy” by Guojing (2019)
“Wolf in the Snow” by Matthew Cordell (2017)

For older readers:

“The Mystery of Harris Burdock” by Chris Van Allsburg (2014)
“The Arrival” by Shawn Tan (2007)