

Using Picture Books To Teach Writing to Intermediate Students

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Background

From the very first day of school and throughout the year, Cristina reads picture books written for younger children to her fourth-graders. She chooses children's literature with universal themes and rich illustrations, and uses the books for a variety of purposes.

Cristina's objectives include establishing community through shared experiences; choosing books that will prompt and inspire writing; building literacy skills in students with emergent reading skills, including those who are learning English; and teaching writing craft. Cristina has created a list of books she recommends for writing craft lessons.

In this lesson, Cristina uses a picture book to teach how detail and word choice can create "mental pictures" for readers in the absence of illustrations. She also uses the book's subject matter as a writing prompt.

Instruction and Activities

Cristina introduces *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash* by Trinka Hakes Noble and Steven Kellogg (illustrator). She reads from a "big book" often used in primary grades. Cristina selected this book because the text is simple and the illustrations give all the details. The book's universal subject matter — a school field trip — makes it an effective writing prompt.

As Cristina reads the book, she asks the students to describe the setting, characters, and action and explain the reasoning behind their inferences, all of which are derived from the illustrations: It takes place after school, a little girl and her mother live in an apartment in the city, the mom works at home, the girl went on a field trip to a farm, etc.

Cristina covers the illustration on each page and asks the students to imagine they are writing the story with no pictures. She asks them what details they would need to add to the text to replace the information about setting, characters, and action provided by the illustrations.

She continues this exercise throughout the book, and also points out some techniques such as using an ellipsis in the dialogue to indicate a pause, or capitalizing the dialogue to imply surprise or shouting.

At the end of the book, Cristina leads the students in a discussion of the characteristics of fantasy-based stories. As a writing prompt, Cristina asks the students to think of a memorable field trip and to add a twist that takes the story out of the realm of reality and into the world of fantasy. She reminds the students that they are not illustrating their stories and therefore must use words to create detailed mental images.