



Using wordless picture books

Ideas for using wordless picture books in reading, writing and talking activities in schools and libraries

Age 3–16

CFE Levels Early to Fourth

Resource created by Scottish Book Trust

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About this resource

Wordless books, despite containing no text, still develop literacy and reading skills. They can also be particularly useful for engaging reluctant readers. This resource will introduce you to wordless books and outline how they can be used with pupils of all ages.

If you are taking part in [Reading Schools](#), the activities in this resource could support delivery of Key Area 1.5.1: Access to high-quality books.

About wordless picture books

Because wordless picture books contain no, or very little, text, they create a different reading experience:

- **Wordless books still develop literacy skills.** Readers still have to infer information about characters, plot, setting – meaning wordless books still develop a reader's understanding of stories and how they work.
- **They invite a lot of reader participation.** Because of the lack of written information, the reader is invited to bring their own interpretation to the story and figure out what is happening.

- **They can be inclusive.** Wordless picture books are great for engaging pupils who are reluctant readers or have some barriers to reading – such as having English as an additional language, dyslexia or other visual stressors. As wordless books can be more readable, it allows those who are reluctant to read to feel the achievement of finishing a book.

Reading the book

Give children plenty of time to read the book, allowing time for them to re-read or re-visit specific pages. Don't rush into asking them to re-tell you the story – this can force them into 'deciding' what the book is about before they've had a chance to close read the text and look for clues.

Reading activities

Activity 1: I see... do you see...?

LIT 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a, LIT 0-07a/1-07a/2-07a/3-07a/4-07a

Go through the book and point out a few details, saying (for example), 'I see a bird. Do you see a bird?' If pupils feel more confident during the exercise, they can take over the 'I see' part of the sentence.

Activity 2: Annotate with sticky notes

LIT 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a, LIT 1-06a/2-06a/3-06a/4-06a

As they read through the book, you can ask pupils to use sticky notes to annotate it. You can ask them to record different amounts of types of information on their notes, depending on what you want them to investigate:

- Who is the main character on each page? What are they doing?
- Do they have any questions about the text they'd like to note down?
- What are the characters thinking and feeling? What do you think they would say to each other?

Activity 3: Sequence the pages

LIT 0-07a/1-07a/2-07a/3-07a/4-07a, LIT 0-09a/1-09a/2-09a/3-09a/4-09a

Copy the pages of the book and give one page to each pupil or group of pupils. Ask them to make notes about what is going on in the page, perhaps using sticky notes as above. Ask them to come together and try and sort the pages into a logical order. This can also help with the next activity.

Activity 4: Cause and effect

LIT 0-16a/1-16a/2-16a/3-16a/4-16a

Wordless picture books challenge pupils to remember visual information from previous pages and link it with new information in the page they're currently reading. Ask them to go through the book and identify character actions, then ask them to identify the effects of these actions later in the book.

Activity 5: Character analysis

LIT 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a, LIT 0-16a/1-16a/2-16a/3-16a/4-16a

Ask pupils to do character analysis activities, exploring characters' personalities and giving evidence from the text. This can be a fun and interesting challenge when there are no words to use as evidence.

Activity 6: Come up with a title

LIT 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a

Show your pupils the story without showing them the title of the book. Afterwards, ask them to come up with a title. They can base their decisions on different things: what they think the main idea of the book was, which character they felt was the most pivotal, or whether the setting was particularly important.

Talking activities

Activity 1: Re-telling

LIT 0-09b/1-09a/2-09a/3-09a/4-09a, EXA 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a

Re-telling is a great way for pupils to develop their use of connectives indicating sequence ('First', 'next', 'then', etc.) as they recount the event of the story. One way to do this is to design a story map, where pupils draw a line indicating the journey of the story and annotate it with words or pictures representing key events.

Activity 2: Discuss the themes of the book

LIT 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a, LIT 0-16a/1-16a/2-16a/3-16a/4-16a

Ask the pupils what they think the key ideas or themes of the book are. How does the author tell us what they think without using text? How do the images show us the key ideas of the text?

Activity 3: Story building

LIT 1-20a/2-20a/3-20a/4-20a, LIT 0-26a/1-26a/2-26a/3-26a/4-26a

Story building requires a fairly small group of pupils (between 6–10) and at least one adult to provide stimuli and use pupils' ideas to move the story forward. Provide some kind of stimuli to pupils to start the story off. This could be a character from one of the pages of a wordless picture book. Ask pupils who this character could be, where they are, and what they might be doing today. Once you have taken everyone's ideas, try to identify the idea the group is happiest with, and move on to ask pupils to suggest a surprising or unusual thing that could happen to the character, ideally something that presents them with a problem, or gives them something to do. For instance, do they lose something (or find something)? Is there something they want that they can't have?

Writing activities

Activity 1: Write the dialogue

LIT 0-04a/1-04a/2-04a/3-04a/4-04a, LIT 0-26a/1-26a/2-26a/3-26a/4-26a

This can be an ideal follow up activity to the annotation exercise where pupils write down what a character might be thinking or feeling. Encourage them to go into detail, exploring the reasons why a character might be thinking or feeling the way they are.

Activity 2: Write a short story version

LIT 0-09a and 0-09b/1-09a/2-09a/3-09a/4-09a, LIT 0-20a/1-20a/2-20a/3-20a/4-20a

Wordless picture books are an ideal way to demonstrate the concept of 'showing, not telling' to pupils, and thus can provide a good stimulus for creative writing.

Activity 3: Write from different points of view

LIT 0-26a/1-26a/2-26a/3-26a/4-26a, LIT 1-28a/2-28a/3-28a/4-28a

Whichever medium your pupils write in, they can choose to write from the points of view of different characters in the text. With some books, there will be great opportunities to explore how different characters viewed each other's actions, and whether they might view the same incidents differently.

Activity 4: Create a silent film

LIT 0-26a/1-26a/2-26a/3-26a/4-26a, TCH 0-01a/1-01a/2-01a/3-01a/4-01a

Wordless picture books employ many of the same techniques as films do: use of framing, mise-en-scene, and colour and lighting to convey mood and atmosphere. Older pupils can make a film version of the book, enhancing it with sound.

Further resources

- Our book list of [Wordless wonders](#) shares our ten favourite wordless books
- For younger children, our Bookbug resources have an article on [Advice for sharing picture books](#)

- We have learning resources with cross curricular activities for wordless books:
[Journey by Aaron Becker](#) (CFE Early to Second Levels) and [The Arrival by Shaun Tan](#) (CFE Levels Third and Fourth)