

# Teaching the ART and Craft of Writing: Treating Words and Pictures as Equal Languages for Learning

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*I like Picturing Writing because it help me speak English and help me learn English, and help me make my pictures better.*

**- Lorena from Brazil, age 11**

*I like Picturing Writing because makes me to learn and makes me happy.*

**- Anilette from Tanzania, age 9**

**Picturing Writing:** Fostering Literacy Through Art, and Image-Making Within The Writing Process are two art-and-literature-based approaches to literacy learning designed to meet the needs of diverse learners in the classroom. Because pictures serve as a universal language, these art-and-literature-based approaches to teaching writing have found a natural home among English language learners and their teachers. By providing students with visual and verbal modalities for thinking and expressing their ideas, these alternative literacy models invite students to enter the reading/writing process from a position of strength and enthusiasm.



## **ARTISTS/WRITERS WORKSHOP**

Picturing Writing and Image-Making teach the ART and craft of writing within the framework of the artists/writers workshop, which is an expansion of the writing workshop. Artists/writers workshop treats words and pictures as parallel, complementary, and equal languages for learning. This helps to eliminate the bias within our educational system that favors those students who work easily with words.

The artists/writers workshop follows four basic steps:

- A literature share followed by discussion
- Modeling of an art or writing process
- A work session
- Group share

The workshop always begins by sharing quality literature. This structure allows teachers to take advantage of the many quality picture books available today that can be used to show how professional writers *and* artists apply their craft to make meaning. As students study the parallel and complementary languages of pictures and words, they discover, for instance, that the lead sentences in a story and the “lead picture” often both provide information about the setting. When students read the lead picture for meaning, they see that it often includes information not only about the place, but also about the time of day, the weather, and possibly the season. The notion of setting moves from abstract to concrete as students observe and articulate the various setting elements that are addressed in the lead picture. Next the teacher models a lead picture to introduce a class story, and the students create their lead pictures to introduce their own stories; in this way the purpose of this literary element is once more reinforced.

During the group share, students discuss each other's setting pictures, all the while learning how to read their images for detail and description. By the time they are ready to create the setting for their own stories, they already understand the concept. They then turn their attention to analyzing how authors establish a sense of setting with their words. Throughout the process, students discover that there are many parallels between the work of the artist and the work of the writer. When it comes time for them to write a story to accompany their own lead picture, they need only read the picture they have created and describe the details that are embedded in their visual representation. When a student's lead picture and lead sentences are presented together during the writing group share, classmates come to understand the complementary nature of pictures and words. Combined, their picture and words convey more meaning than either alone is able to express.

## **PICTURES FIRST**

Within an artists/writers workshop, the art strand, which focuses on the language of pictures, always precedes the writing strand, which focuses on the language of words. This reversal of the traditional writing process (in which students typically write first and then illustrate their writing) affords English language learners and

others who struggle with verbal skills the opportunity to first develop their thinking in pictures before facing the challenge of getting words down on the page. In my observation of student work for over two decades, the more details students include in their images, the deeper their thinking, and the more detail they are able to include in their writing (Olshansky, 2008).

For English language learners, a pictures-first approach has the added advantage that it provides students with a universal language to think and develop their ideas before having to find the English words to convey their meaning. As students search for those words, their ideas remain permanently recorded in their pictures should they lose their train of thought. Students' artwork also provides a common language in a classroom where student speak many different languages.

### MEDIUM MATTERS

While a "pictures first" approach offers students critical tools for thinking and developing their ideas, the medium also determines the message. The quality of image and depth of thinking available to students who use the standard classroom art materials (crayons, colored pencils and markers) differs significantly from that of students using richer art materials (Figure 1).

Recognizing that most teachers do not relish the idea of having a wide range of

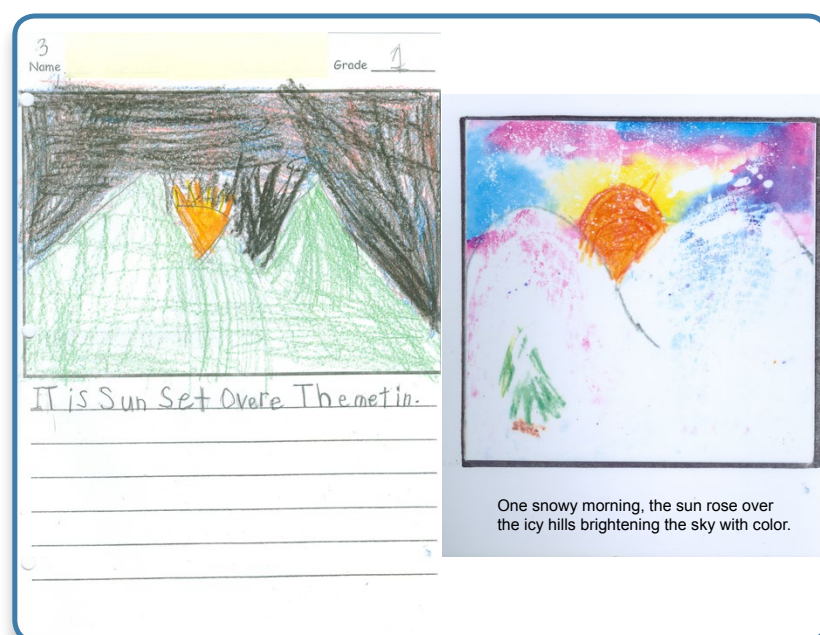


Figure 1

messy art materials available in their classroom, I have spent the last two decades honing two art processes that teachers find fairly manageable and user-friendly: crayon resist (crayon drawings washed with watercolor) and collage made from hand-painted papers.

While crayons are tools that most young children are familiar and comfortable with, adding a watercolor wash to their

crayon drawings creates a more professional-looking, more nuanced finished product. In the crayon-resist process, students use crayon to create controlled, representational aspects of their image and then apply a watercolor wash, which often produces a pleasing, unanticipated result (otherwise known as a “happy accident”).

Additional supplemental art techniques can be used to create more detail and deeper meaning. For instance, wet watercolor sprinkled with salt can create the effect of water glistening. This technique not only helps students to deepen their thinking, but also increases their interest in capturing that meaning in words. For the classroom or ELL teacher, this presents the opportunity to teach “silver-dollar” words such as *glisten*, *sparkle*, and *shimmer*. Khahn, age 11, shared her newfound love of language as she reflected on her writing, “I try to use silver dollar word because I think it beautiful” (Olshansky, 2010).

For teachers interested in exploring more deeply the potential for rich thinking and descriptive language, my favorite art form is collage made from hand-painted papers. Originally inspired by the work of collage artist/writer Eric Carle, I have found collages made from hand-painted papers to offer unparalleled opportunities not only for constructing meaning (literally), but also for inspiring and supporting revision. Collage offers students the opportunity to manipulate shapes on the page as they compose their images, and the many colors and textures within their portfolios of hand-painted papers serve to stimulate their thinking, suggest new meanings, and inspire richer language.

Gaining mastery of either or both of these art techniques offers students opportunities for richer, deeper, more nuanced thinking. Beyond that, the published books students create using either of these art techniques (on topics aligned with their grade-level curriculum) generate a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment.

## **TWO ART-BASED LITERACY MODELS**

For teachers who would like the support of professionally prepared materials, I have spent decades developing and refining two art-and-literature-based writing programs that channel the deep thinking that results from converting artwork into quality writing.

One of these programs, *Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art*, uses a simple crayon resist-based art process supplemented by an assortment of simple texturing techniques to support students’ writing (Figure 2). This approach



can be used to introduce foundational art and writing skills and acquaint students with the routines of Artists/Writers Workshop. Units of study integrated into the curriculum teach a variety of genres, including basic descriptive writing, poetry, research-based poetry, narrative writing and research-based narrative. Opportunities for informational writing, persuasive writing, and reflective writing may also be incorporated into various book projects.

My other program, Image-Making Within The Writing Process, uses collage made from hand-painted papers created by the students. These rich explorations in color and texture use a variety of simple texturing techniques and provide the raw materials for constructing a story. While the collage process is a bit more involved, it offers endless opportunities for students

to revise their images, and thus their story, before gluing their collage shapes onto their background paper (Figure 3). Additionally, utilizing hand-painted papers instead of solid-colored construction paper sparks a depth of thinking




Figure 2



Figure 3

otherwise unavailable. This, in turn, can inspire the use of more descriptive language and more detailed story writing.

While each art process holds the potential for generating quality writing, ensuring that students take full advantage of this potential should not be left to chance. To make sure that students access detail and description from their pictures, each process offers many layers of scaffolding. The Picturing-Writing and Image-Making processes

both utilize a structured oral rehearsal process (either via one-on-one support, with peers, or during the group share) in which students are taught how to read their pictures to access detail and description. They also utilize specially designed brainstorming sheets that require them to read their pictures for meaning and descriptive language before they write. With both the oral-rehearsal process and the brainstorming sheets, it is important to ensure that ELLs have access to the descriptive language they will need. Thus both Picturing Writing and Image-Making offer structured language-development activities that focus on building word banks specific to the topic the students are writing about. These are just a few examples of the ways that art-and-literature-based models can be used to support the literacy development of students with diverse learning and language needs. 

## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Beth Olshansky** has developed two proven art-and-literature-based literacy models and is author of *The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy Through Art* book/DVD and the producer of several DVDs filmed in the classroom. To view video excerpts of sample projects facilitated with English language learners, click on the following live links

[http://www.picturingwriting.org/videos/video\\_ell-picturing-writing.html](http://www.picturingwriting.org/videos/video_ell-picturing-writing.html)

[http://www.picturingwriting.org/videos/video\\_our-stories.html](http://www.picturingwriting.org/videos/video_our-stories.html)

[http://www.picturingwriting.org/NH\\_Chronicle.html](http://www.picturingwriting.org/NH_Chronicle.html)

To learn about summer teacher-training opportunities, visit:

<http://www.picturingwriting.org>.