

# **Going with the Flow: Using Art to Teach Writing Skills**

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I have always viewed reading and art as interconnected. I believe a lot of this association is due to my love and fascination with picture books. I am a firm believer that picture books are some of the most integral early experiences a child can have. To quote my favorite film *You've Got Mail*, "When you read a book as a child, it becomes a part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your whole life does" (Ephron, 1998). So much of picture books is about learning to read the pictures, not necessarily the words. My first career goal was to become author and illustrator Eric Carle. When thinking back on *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* I cannot quote the text, but I can describe the illustrations and thus the story in great detail. I read those books primarily through the pictures. Similarly, when you think about Maurice Sendak's classic picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* one can fondly remember the full pages of illustrations and the story they continue to tell. Or the books that have no words at all and still tell a comprehensive story. *Flotsam* by David Weisner is a Caldecott winner that has no words and yet tells a complete story about a camera that washed up on shore. The rise in popularity of graphic novels amongst early readers is again proof that art and reading work well in tandem, each helping elevate and teach the other. All this to say that I was interested to learn more about how to better teach literacy skills through art in the classroom.

I found the webinar, *Solutions for Using Art to Teach Writing Skills: Integrate Literacy and Art Like a Pro*, to be very singularly focused. Never have I heard the word "flow" used with such frequency. And while I understood the basic concept and techniques the speakers were exploring; I wanted more evidence of how teaching art and flow directly impacted a student ability to read and write. This is not to say that I did not appreciate and learn things from this webinar. I agree with the idea that both art and reading communicate messages and ideas that can

express emotions and feelings” (Whitehead & Klein, 2019). I also can understand how learning to read art first can be beneficial to later learning to read words. As they stated in the webinar “art is text free and very engaging” and “using artwork can help the child develop the concept of flow before writing” (Whitehead & Klein, 2019). However, it was interesting that when talked about flow in art they did not use the same vocab words as they used when analyzing flow through sentence fluency traits. The two versions felt very separate. For instance, in art, they talked about line and color but when discussing reading and flow they stuck to very defined literacy terms. Not to say that all the terms apply both places, but terms like repetition, white space and rhyme feel like words that can be applied to art and strengthen the connection that flow exists in both in art and reading. I also felt that the focus on flow was a limiting way in which to “read” art. Alternatively, more could be said about reading text as art, especially when it comes to line breaks and white space. These are things we often notice before we even begin reading and can give the reader important context clues. I will be the first to admit that I am not a reading specialist, nor am I even a certified art teacher, however, I felt this webinar gave a very limited view on how art can help build literacy and reading skills.

Suffice it to say I got more out of the four-minute Edutopia video *Art as Text: Bridging Literacy and the Arts*. The statement that “Art is a universal language. Every child can read a piece of art” rings very true and points back at my example about picture books (Edutopia, 2019). I appreciated this teacher’s focus on reading visuals in a much broader sense. Her ability to focus on other literacy traits than flow felt like a better example of exercising reading skills in art. Students often get hung up on trying to read and write correctly that they miss learning the basic literacy traits and strategies (Edutopia, 2019). Reading art eliminates the focus on correctness and instead focuses on understanding. The confidence students gain through reading

art can then be applied back to reading. I found the exercise of reading a professional art piece first and then taking what they've learned and applying the same literacy ideas to their own work to be a great way to both focus on "reading" while also creating something. The gallery walk at the end of the lesson where students read each other's artwork is a great opportunity to see if what other students read is close to what the artist intended.

I know I'm not an expert, and that I'm only beginning to dip my toes into the complicated, but rewarding waters of teaching, but I am excited to try to integrate some of what I've learned into my own classroom. I would like to implement the Edutopia activity of reading a master work and then using that information to make your own art. And while I'm slightly more skeptical of the webinar practices, I do see the importance of teaching flow and understanding the commonalities between flow in art and reading. I am also interested in working with the librarian to help engage students with the many versions of reading. I would love to focus a unit on the many ways to tell a story whether it be through words or pictures or both. Helping students gain confidence reading without text can only benefit them as they continue write and create.

## References

Edutopia. (2019, March 28.) *Art as Text: Bridging Literacy and the Arts*. [Video]. Youtube.

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