

Thinking Outside The Box: The Magic of Imagination

Keep 'em Reading • by | Judith Snyder

Grades
K-2, 3-5

What is ordinary becomes extraordinary when we engage our imaginations. For students, applying imaginative and creative thinking skills to reading can ignite a spark that moves them from concrete to abstract thought. Watching a child experience this spark—this “ah-ha” moment of higher-level thinking—is exhilarating, and fortunately, there are many picture books that can jump-start this type of mental exercise.

Picture Books and Activities

Picture Book

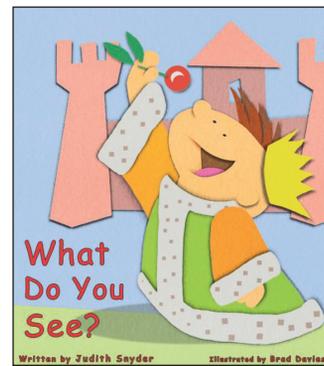
What Do You See? (Odyssey Books, 2009), invites readers to look at shapes from all different directions and to imagine various things a shape might be. The open-ended questions posed in the book lend themselves to many right answers, so children can let their creativity run wild and abstract thinking soar. The playful illustrations by Brad Davies complement the couplets that suggest two or three possible answers to the “what do you see” question. Though the repetition, verse, and pictures are geared to the younger set, the higher-level thinking concepts appeal to all ages.

Quick-time Activities

- Assemble a permanent What Do You See? bulletin board. Post a new shape each week and provide a place for students to write or illustrate what they think the shape represents.
- Build a file of your own shape cards. During transitional times, pull out one card for students to brainstorm. Encourage them to add shapes to your collection.

Creative Activity

Provide materials for students to create their own “What Do You See?” books. Invite students to draw new shapes and complete illustrations showing two or three answers to the question. Older students can write rhyming couplets to accompany the pictures.



Picture Book

Alphabet City (Viking, 1995) by Stephen Johnson is another example of a book that encourages children to examine the world in a new way. Johnson painted scenes with letters hidden in a wide variety of unlikely urban places—a G in a lamppost, an M in a bridge, and so on. The wordless book invites scrutiny of each picture as students search for the letter. Johnson’s inventiveness invites students to observe the environment with a critical (but playful) eye.

Movement Activity

This activity requires adequate floor space for movement. Students use their bodies to form letters of the alphabet. Assign one of the following letters to individuals or pairs: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, N, O, P, R, T, U. Give ample time for students to form the letters with their bodies and for you to take digital pictures. Then combine groups to spell the following words: car, bed, hug, fin, pot. Take photos of the words. Put the photos into a slide show to share with the class the next time they are in the library. Classes enjoy deciphering words fashioned by their bodies.

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Photography Activity

The author-illustrator painted the pictures of the letters in an urban setting. Challenge students to find letters in their environment or in structures around the school and use a digital camera to take pictures of these hidden letters. Produce a slide-show to share with a class of younger students.

Picture Book

It Looked Like Spilt Milk (HarperCollins, 1947) by Charles Shaw is a classic worthy of revisiting. The simple white illustrations on a dark background suggest shapes of well-known objects and animals. Readers use their predicting skills throughout the book as they consider alternative ideas to what the shapes might be. The cadence and tone of the repetitive language allow for exploration of phrasing and fluency for beginning readers and for second language learners.

Music Activity

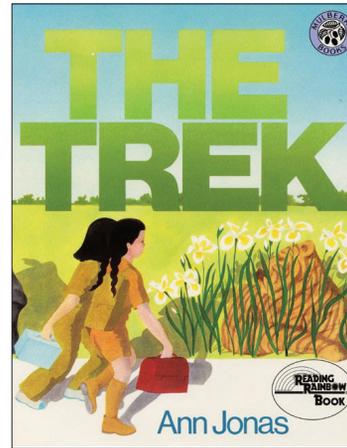
Use music rhythm sticks or a wood block and mallet to beat the cadence of the repetitive phrases. To develop oral language intonation, use xylophones to play a two-toned melody as the class repeats the refrain. Allow students to use the instruments during a second reading.

Art Activity

Let the class create their own spilt milk pictures by folding a dark sheet of construction paper in half. Open it and apply a small amount of white paint on half the sheet, and fold the paper over again. Open it up once more and let it dry. Mount their pictures on a bulletin board titled, "Sometimes It Looked Like Spilt Paint" and study the shapes to decide what they look like. Provide a place for students to list answers. As an extension, take students outside to observe the clouds and discuss the cloud shapes as they evolve.

Picture Book

The Trek by Ann Jonas (Greenwillow, 1983) is intriguing to eyes of all ages. On a walk to school, trees become a group of monkeys and bushes become sheep. Cleverly hidden animals peek out from chimneys and flowerbeds, window displays and vegetable stands. The reader must study the illustrations and make imaginative leaps to appreciate the story, whose humorous illustrations fire up the brain cells and instantly engage the viewer.



Book Look / Drawing Activity

Stack numerous nonfiction animal books at five tables. Each table group of students will browse through them and look at the pictures for a few minutes. Students will then transform a natural object into an animal, as the illustrator did in *The Trek*. For younger students, use the reproducible worksheet on page 3 that features four contour line drawings. Older students can draw their own shapes. Changing each shape into an animal uses skills of flexible thinking and elaboration.

Think About It

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Applying creative thinking in reading activities provides students with the opportunity to visualize and predict—two important beginning reading skills. As students become more adept at pictorial abstract thought, encourage them to use that knowledge to grasp the use of imagery in text.

The picture books suggested in this article, with their brief texts and standing invitations to think outside the box, appeal to all ages. Place them in the spotlight and then stand back to watch for that magic spark when students' imaginations take flight.



Judith Snyder loves to share the fun of thinking outside the box. She learned how to be a storyteller so that students would have to generate their own mental pictures to accompany her tales. Now, as an author, she hopes to help even more children grow their imaginations. Judith is the author of *What Do You See?* (Odyssey Books, 2009) and *JumpStart Your Library* (UpstartBooks, 2008). Her next picture book, *Stinky Feet*, will be available later this year.

Directions: Use a crayon, marker, or other artistic tool to change the object in each square into an animal.

