Opening Students’ Eyes Through Picture-Guided Writing
“All of us are watchers—of television, of time clocks, of traffic on the freeway—but few are observers. Everyone is looking. Not many are seeing.”

–Peter M. Leschak

Before people wrote with letters and words, they wrote with pictures. Taking bits of charcoal from a fire, men drew tales of harrowing hunts on cave walls. Egyptians recorded elaborate burial procedures in colorful hieroglyphics. Written language is historically “picture based.”

Even though Jesus, the Master Teacher, did not have printed visual images to show His listeners, He knew the power of imagery and used it frequently in His teaching. When Jesus told the parable of the sower, His words became connected to that image. The next time the listeners spotted a farmer sowing seed, they recalled the lesson He had taught.

The universality of visual images allows them to be tools for improving writing instruction at any grade level, in any subject, and in any language. Like “universal blood donors,” pictures pump life into the teaching of any writing genre: descriptive, narrative, poetic, persuasive, etc. The picture resources for teaching writing are rich, varied, and easily acquired—ranging from historical or stock photographs to picture books and student-created artwork.

**Strategies for Teaching Descriptive Writing**

Students enjoy talking about what they see. When teaching descriptive writing, I like to tap into that natural desire by sharing a visual image with students and inviting them to write their observations about it. Sometimes I have them do guided writing, asking them to write how the image makes them feel or to describe its physical attributes. Other times, I leave the writing assignment unstructured: I simply display the image and ask my students to “write about it.” After they write their observations, I allow time for sharing. By listening to what others have written, students discover that one visual image can be viewed from numerous perspectives and can evoke a variety of thoughts. Sometimes my students’ descriptive efforts are merely jotted in a journal. At other times, they draft, craft, and revise these vignettes to publishable quality.

Because they are “visual stories,” pictures make effective tools for teaching narrative writing. One of my fa-
Opening students’ eyes through picture-guided writing needn’t be time consuming or difficult. Instead of having to generate new lesson plans, teachers can utilize resources and activities available on the Internet:

**School District 51 Mesa County Valley**
http://www.mesa.k12.co.us/2003/Students/VisualLiteracyActivities.cfm
Teacher Judy Harrington provides links to several visual literacy activities and picture resources.

**Eduscapes**
http://eduscapes.com/sessions/digital/activity1.htm
Annette Lamb offers several Web-based photo resources and activities.

**Frank W. Baker**
http://www.frankwbaker.com/vis_lit.htm
Frank W. Baker defines visual literacy, and offers readings, standards, lesson plans, and resources for finding photos.

**Photos and Persuasive Essays**

Students have opinions on all sorts of subjects. But most of them have difficulty anchoring those opinions with factual evidence and supporting details. A thought-provoking photo offers a fresh way for students to practice the skill of persuasive essay writing.

“Picture This,” an activity from the Oakland Museum of California, makes students into documentary photographers. They begin by studying Dorothea Lange’s historical photographs of subjects such as Japanese-Americans interned during World War II, which speak volumes about the emotions that motivated people to work for change. After viewing a number of these historical photographs and becoming familiar with basic photographic composition, students choose a current issue of importance to them. Using digital cameras, they take photos and write informational flyers designed to persuade others to act. These flyers provide real-life application and purpose for the persuasive essay assignment.

**Pictures—Tools for Honing Writing Craft**

Writing can be like painting with words. Beth Olshansky teaches students to paint word pictures by helping them turn works of art into artistic words. She begins by transforming young authors into artists. After producing a portfolio during art class, students “learn to ‘read’ their own images. They write about what they see in their artwork, often drawing rich, descriptive language from the colors, textures, rhythms, and shapes appearing within their own images.” In artists’/writers’ workshops with her students, Olshansky coaches them as they write and illustrate materials for publication. She uses her students’ artwork as inspiration in teaching them to use vivid verbs, figurative language, and rhythm in their writing, which opens up endless possibilities for teaching writing craft.

Many students struggle to grasp the idea that writing well does not necessarily mean crowding more words into a sentence. They don’t understand that “laboring the point kills the point of laboring.” Writing captions for photos offers students the opportunity to practice the skill of writing more by writing less. They learn to synthesize information and pare it down to the essentials.

Before technology offered the option of projecting a single image for the whole class to view, I used to cut off the captions from interesting newspaper and magazine photos. I discussed with my students the importance of effi-
cient, effective word choices that succinctly capture the story of an image. I presented each of them with a photo, minus the caption, and asked them to compose their own captions. Later, I displayed the photos and read the student-composed captions along with the originals, to see if students could pick out the original caption. The students learned when one of their well-written captions was chosen over the original.

Images provide excellent lessons in comparison and contrast. “The sooner students begin to notice similarities, the sooner their writing will become more interesting.” Differences are often easier to pick out than similarities, yet it is similarities that provide two of the most powerful writing tools—simile and metaphor. After students have practiced looking for similarities in pairs of photos or in other visual images, they will be able to effectively compare subjects with few common denominators to produce fresh, vivid metaphors.

In my experience, one of the best ways to teach students the skill of bringing characters to life is to start with real characters—photos of people. For a recent journal assignment, I showed my students photographs of five women and asked them to characterize them. After they wrote, the students could hardly wait to share. Instead of pulling characters out of thin air, the students had visual clues for their characterizations.

Studying the work of author/illustrator Marla Frazee in books such as *The Seven Silly Eaters* and *Roller Coaster* made me aware of how much time illustrators, like writers, must spend bringing a book’s characters to life. Recognizing that illustrators put that kind of effort into visualizing characters in a picture book, I decided that student authors could improve their characterization skills by studying illustrations in a picture book they hadn’t seen before and writing about the characters before reading the story. In addition, they can imagine and create possible dialogue between characters pictured in an illustration.

**Using Pictures to Teach Across the Curriculum**

Using pictures to launch students into writing projects need not be limited to language arts class. Writing is
one strategy people use to think their way into a subject and begin to make it their own. Students can thus practice writing across the curriculum.

Visual images help people relate and connect with distant times and places. Even the most vivid verbal description of the Eiffel Tower or an Elizabethan costume doesn’t provide as much information as a picture or illustration. After seeing photos of prairies in the midwestern United States, I am able to create more meaningful pictures in my mind when I read Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books.

Historical photographs are windows into the past that allow students to expand their horizons beyond the memo-
rization of facts and dates into the everyday struggles of real human beings like themselves. When teaching about any period in history, a good way to begin is to have your students study photographs or illustrations. They can then write formally or informally about what they observe, feel, and infer, which will make them feel more connection to the subject.

Science depends on careful observation and written records. Writing about the similarities they find between pictures of species in the same order or genus helps students to develop an understanding of common characteristics used in classification before they read about them.

One of my favorite classroom worship or Bible activities is a visual object-lesson assignment. After I put a variety of objects and photographs/drawings in a bag, each student selects one. After being given thinking time, each student composes a spiritual object lesson based on his or her object.

Even in physical education class, visual images and writing can enhance learning. Students who examine a series of photographs or illustrations of a person correctly executing a skill and then write a “how-to” essay will improve their language skills as well as the correct way to perform a physical technique.

Pictures Cross Language Barriers
Images open doors to struggling readers and English language learners who suffer writing anxiety. In a 1994 study, university students in an English as a second language class showed marked improvement with the use of picture-guided writing. The pictures provided contextual clues and evoked deep thought. The students said that the pictures kept them from being overly concerned about grammatical forms because they were focusing intensely on the content of the pictures. Because they were not focusing on form, the students wrote more freely and felt more comfortable trying to express their thoughts in a non-native language.

Picture-guided writing is just as effective with emergent writers learning to express themselves in the written form of their native tongue. Kindergarten students eagerly write about pictures, especially their own drawings.

Pictures Are Everywhere
Versatility is the beauty of picture-guided writing. A teacher of any subject or grade level can use this approach to teach practically any aspect
Good news! The steady growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its institutions has created a demand for qualified personnel who can support its worldwide mission with their talents and education.

In response to this need, the General Conference has launched the Adventist Professionals’ Network (APN)—an electronic global registry of Adventists who hold a college or university degree in any field and have an email address. APN assists Adventist institutions and agencies in locating candidates for positions in areas such as teaching, ministry, health care, management, administration, and research as well as consultants and personnel for mission service.

Once registered, APN members can find job opportunities in Adventist organizations, join one of many Adventist professional associations, and network with thousands of Adventist professionals around the world. Members are protected from solicitations and unwanted mail.

Enter your professional information directly in the APN secure website, free!

http://apn.adventist.org

Encourage other degreed Adventists to join APN and enjoy its many benefits. For questions and comments on APN, contact us through apn@gc.adventist.org
of the writing craft across the genres. Numerous books and Internet resources provide specific step-by-step approaches and lessons for picture-guided writing, or teachers can add pictures to writing lessons they have already developed.

Finding images is not difficult. In addition to Internet banks of photographs and illustrations, books, magazines, photographs, television, billboards, even one’s own image as reflected in a mirror can be the basis for creative writing.

Pictures Evoke Deep Thinking and Better Writing

A single photograph or drawing can take students through every level of Bloom’s taxonomy from basic knowledge about the concrete things they see in the picture to the deeper, more abstract skills of questioning, inferring, synthesizing, and evaluating.

Teachers often ask students to create “word pictures” with their writing. Yet the way writers choose words depends on what they, themselves, see. As Aristotle noted, “The soul can not think without a picture.” Unfortunately, if students haven’t learned to be visual observers instead of just watchers, they will have nothing to put into words.

When I first learned to read, my basal reader friends Dick, Jane, and Sally advised me to “look” and “see.” That advice is just as relevant to writing. When students learn the art of observation through picture-guided writing, they will “look,” and “see,” and have much more to “write.”

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
7. It’s important for the teacher to monitor and guide students’ writing to prevent negative stereotypes and hurtful statements about various cultural or racial groups from becoming part of the descriptions.
10. Aristotle as cited inhttp://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_soul_can_not_think_without_a_picture/147168.html.

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portance of “Opening Students’ Eyes Through Picture-Guided Writing.” She contends that illustrations are the “universal blood donor” that will pump life into the teaching of any genre. The benefits of this type of study are legion, as outlined in the article.

It is our hope and prayer that the readers of this themed issue will see the boundless opportunities for transforming every aspect of reading and writing when students are encouraged to learn under the influence of genre studies. And furthermore, it is our wish that readers discover that their own living and teaching are transformed as a result of “ beholding” the experiences of teachers who have shared their journeys.—Krystal Bishop and Valerie Hunt.

Krystal Bishop, Ed.D., the Coordinator for the special issue of the Journal, is a Professor of Education at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. She conducts a genre study in an elementary classroom and with undergraduate students every year; has done personal narrative, memoir, literary nonfiction, and poetry genre studies in multigrade classrooms; and has made presentations at regional and national conferences on genre studies. The editorial staff expresses appreciation for her assistance in preparing the issue.

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