



## Introduction

# Why Use Storyboards?



*If I can't picture it I can't understand it.*  
—Einstein

*It is impossible even to think without a mental picture.*  
—Aristotle

*For the boys in our study, the intense importance of the visual as they engaged with all forms of texts was evident, and we believe it cannot be oversold. The few engaged readers in this study all described their reading of books and stories in strikingly visual terms. The other boys described their engagement with visual or multimedia texts, such as movies and cartoons, in much the same enthusiastic way as the engaged readers described their reading. . . . All of the boys insisted that the best materials were highly visual or stimulated visual thinking. Engaged readers like Neil said to read well, it had to be a visual experience. It was important to “see” what he was reading.*  
—Smith & Wilhelm (2002, pp. 151–152)

**A** book for teachers focused on drawing and telling as writing tools may seem a tad strange, especially in a time when mandated literacy testing leaves little room for extras or frills. Yet students struggling with literacy need these tools urgently.

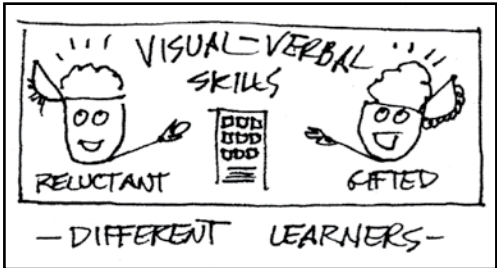
Woven throughout this practical book are stories from many classrooms where struggling students of all ages successfully use targeted visual/verbal tools as a bridge to text. We'll see how storyboards with simple drawing increase weak readers' comprehension skills and engage older, reluctant writers for the first time.

Reaching struggling students is important, but I hope you'll see the larger message their work sends. Teachers find these simple tools make learning easier for all students. In fact, the same visual tools that engage the reluctant writer have long been used as the secret weapon of teachers in the gifted and talented class to make instruction more engaging for those different learners who need more challenges.



# PRACTICAL DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

"Different" learning is the key here. If we want to reach all our learners, we need tools that work for them. Offering learning choices is the essential goal of differentiated instruction, but addressing students' different learning styles can be tough to accomplish in a jam-packed curriculum that assumes all kids must read to learn, and write to show what they know. How can we engage and support learners who have trouble reading and writing at grade level, especially when text is our central teaching tool, and achieving proficiency with text is our primary goal?



Here's the good news: Teachers who initially try alternative tools as a means of reaching their text-challenged learners often discover they can tap powerful learning potential that just can't be reached with text alone. In fact, teachers find they can reach learners with a broad range of skills—using the same tools. Let me give an example that is close to home.

## Andy's Story-Building Tools

When my son Andy began working on his first fiction assignment in his middle school Language Arts class, I knew we were in for trouble. It took a couple of weeks before I got a call from his teacher, who told me she was stuck. Her usual writing techniques, and some serious one-on-one instruction, had barely gotten Andy started. She was confronting learning issues Andy's Individual Educational Plan (IEP) only hinted at. Andy is a concrete thinker. He can play a mean game of chess, brainstorm several moves in advance, and respond to changing events, but ask him to brainstorm a simple made-up story in text and he flounders.

I know kids stalled by text can be a challenge to any teacher, even the great ones. As a text-challenged student myself, I was sent to the psychologist in third grade, because reading and writing were so difficult for me. Eventually, I learned that writing was something other kids did. It took 30 years to unlearn that deeply held lesson. I desperately wanted my son to have a different school experience. I tried suggesting at IEP meetings that low-text alternative tools worked better for Andy, but his teacher assured us Andy would respond to her well-honed (text-focused) writing lessons. Now she was stuck, and I heard the unspoken question implicit in the call: "If a student can't brainstorm a simple story, then what can I do?"



Andy's Board



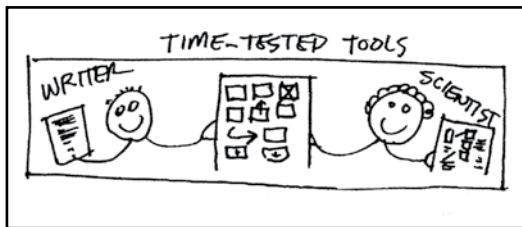
When Andy's teacher and I agreed that traditional techniques were not working for him, I suggested Andy try some serious storyboarding at home over winter vacation. I got Andy some poster board and file cards and told him he needed to storyboard the story he was working on. After some initial protests that he didn't need Dad's help, he got to work. Andy discussed his story ideas and put them down on the cards, using stick pictures and a few key words. As he taped them to the board, the cards became the building blocks of his story. The pictures made his ideas concrete and visible. They helped him invent a believable character and get a plot going. Now he could see how his story might grow.

During his vacation, Andy brought his almost-finished story—about a boy lost in the White Mountains—with him to his mother's office at the nearby university. He was a little embarrassed by it. He liked his story, but a board covered with stick pictures was not his idea of a cool thing to take to a university. He'd almost made it to his mom's office when a grad student he'd met saw his board and asked, "What's that?" Andy mumbled something about writing a story for school when the grad student interrupted. "That's a storyboard. I'm learning to use those, too!" He explained that his storyboards were part of a graduate business course. "Several of us are designing a business plan to present to NASA. We're using storyboards to brainstorm, write, and prepare our presentation. It's a national competition." The tentative middle school writer and the accomplished grad student discussing pictures as a sophisticated writing tool—Andy became a bit less reluctant.

## STORYBOARDS IN MANY PROFESSIONS

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Andy was only vaguely aware of the way storyboards helped him organize his ideas and write. The grad student, long accomplished in text, was learning why storyboards are the tool of choice for many professions for brainstorming, collaborative writing, strategic planning, oral presentations, and more.



Storyboards are time-tested writing/thinking tools; they have long been used by writers, scientists, engineers, filmmakers, and many other professionals. It is no coincidence that the same visual tool that helped Andy get started writing is used by the MBA professor to prepare his grad students for the competitive digital world. It's important to note that text-accomplished folks in the real world choose targeted visual tools because they work better than text alone for many thinking and communication tasks.

By the way, that graduate student's team won a national first prize with its storyboard presentation to NASA, and my son wrote a solid text story that he actually liked (a big prize for him).

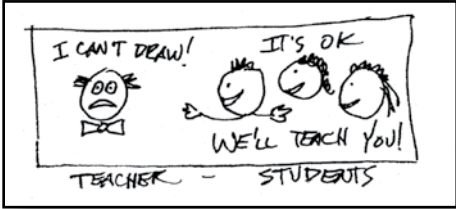


Andy and the grad student were certainly different learners, but these effective visual tools furthered both their learning goals. Grasping the power of visual tools to connect learners is great news for the classroom. We'll see how targeted visual tools make differentiation natural and easy because low-text tools take learners where they want to go, in third grade, in middle school, and beyond, into their digital/visual future.

## CLASSROOM-TESTED TOOLS

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Exploring the power of visual tools, especially simple drawings, may be new territory for many teachers, but the tools presented here have been designed and refined in real classrooms like yours. These tools are not hard to use, and they don't require expensive equipment or *any artistic skill*. You'll learn how storyboards fit easily in any classroom and how teachers at all grade levels can use visual/verbal tools to make their classrooms more inclusive and their curriculum more engaging. You'll see in practical detail how offering students a choice of paths to the same goal makes differentiated instruction a daily reality.



### Bad Drawing Is Fine—Really!

This book will provide the practical how-to, the nitty-gritty stuff you need to get started storyboarding, and students' work, to show why you should take precious time to try these tools in your classroom. Don't worry if you draw badly—that can actually be a strength: Your students will enjoy teaching you how to use simple stick pictures as a thinking/writing tool. You'll find that students of all ages enjoy the lighthearted drama of stick pictures, and they quickly learn how powerful simple pictures are as a way of conveying their ideas: brainstorming a story, preparing for a test, revising an essay, making notes from a textbook, or practicing an oral presentation.

Indeed, students often intuitively grasp the added value of using pictures as a thinking tool. When we offer real alternatives to text, students often choose storyboards for the same reason adults choose them—they work.

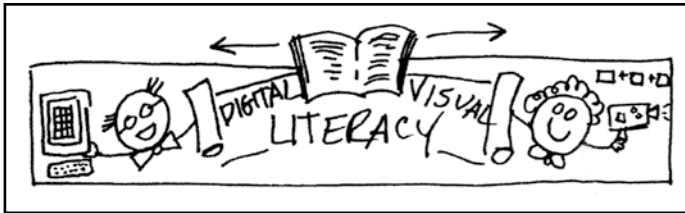
### Not Just for Special Education

Special educators may recognize variations of these visual/verbal tools. They are sometimes used in Special Education to address serious learning problems. But beware: if we think of these tools simply as "visual aids" or "accommodations" for struggling students, we are missing their essential power for all learners.



Our current curricula are text-focused because we know all students will need text literacy to participate in our complex world. We can easily expand our practice with visual tools that pull more students into the literacy circle. Making reading and writing more engaging is enough reason to start using these tools, but there are other reasons. When we offer students visual tools

integrated with their text skills, we're also helping them compete in a digital age where text and images are intimately linked. From Web design to new brain-imaging techniques, the literate student today needs to be able to communicate ideas in text and images.



## Not Just for Kids

Teachers tell me that once they start using visual tools with their students, those tools become part of their own teaching style. Teachers who initially said, *I'm not visual, I can't draw a straight line*, find themselves easily using drawing as an everyday teaching tool. As they watch visual tools boost students' learning, they find their own natural visual skills support and focus their teaching. That's differentiation at its best. As Carol Ann Tomlinson, a central architect of differentiated instruction says, "The way to get there is to teach [teachers] to look at kids as individuals and to let kids show you what they can do." (Hess, 1999, "Teachers Can Benefit")

## WHAT ARE STORYBOARDS?

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Before we go into the classroom and see storyboards at work, I want to give a quick overview of what storyboards are and how we've adapted them to best serve learners in the classroom.

Storyboarding, or picture writing, is the origin of all written languages, used by ancient cultures before text evolved and as a natural bridge to text. The Chinese language was built using pictographs. Egyptians used storyboards, or hieroglyphics, first etched in stone and later written on papyrus, to organize a complex society and to rule the ancient world.

Look at any comic strip and you'll see picture writing in action. A storyboard is a writing format, generally a set of boxes (or rectangles, circles, or other shapes) placed in a logically sequenced order. Each box or frame is a place for the writer to put information, pictures, symbols, or text.

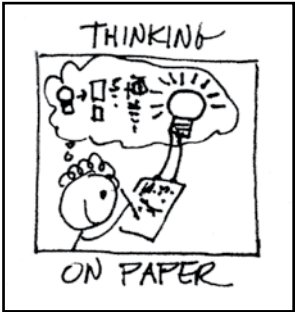
Storyboards appear in many forms, from emerging literacy books to emergency instructions on airplanes to technical textbooks. When writers in



various fields want to make ideas easily understood, they choose a storyboard format or one of its close cousins: the flow chart, the time line, or the Power-Point presentation. Storyboards are widely used because we know pictures combined with text offer a rich synthesis of information that can entertain and inform. The pictures in picture writing can be simple cartoons, photographs, or sophisticated technical diagrams.

### Stick Pictures and Text

The low-tech storyboards I use in the classroom are designed to show students a clear path to text. We use simple stick pictures combined with spare text as our essential writing style. Offering students hands-on drawing has many advantages over using premade images or clip art. A central benefit of stick pictures is that kids can do it themselves, and they like to draw. As we explore drawing as a differentiation tool, it is important to recognize that the act of drawing, like the act of writing text, is satisfying and informative. Putting pencil to paper, making symbols in pictures or text, helps our ideas to grow.



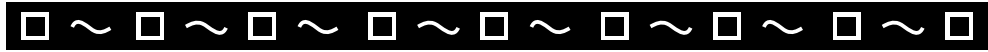
It is the logical sequencing power of storyboards, combined with the hands-on engagement of drawing, that makes these tools work for learners.

Teachers long comfortable with teaching almost exclusively with text often ask, "What if a student is reluctant to draw?" I've never had a student, from first to twelfth grade, who couldn't use stick pictures in some form. Once students and teachers start using drawing as a thinking tool, it becomes second nature. You'll see students develop their own style, quickly adapting a mix of text and simple stick pictures to fit their skills and needs, whether they're in third grade or eighth grade.

Here is a basic six-square storyboard format from teacher Amy Rocci's third-grade classroom.



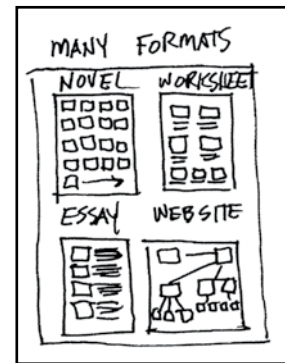




The purpose of this storyboard was to see if students could retell the main events of a fairy tale. All the basics of storyboarding in the classroom are evident in this student's work. Students were asked to retell the fairy tale using sequenced boxes containing both stick pictures and spare text—a few key words—in each square. Through her storyboard, this student conveys what she thinks are the six main events in the story. In a sense, she is creating the visual equivalent of a bulleted outline of main points. Note how her pictures and the text support and reinforce each other; together they tell the whole story.

A storyboard can be any length—two or two thousand squares. A storyboard can be simple like the Cinderella board, or elaborate and dense in content like a graphic novel.

Storyboards also can be adapted to fit many tasks, from maps to time lines. Like making text lists down a page or writing text across the page, the way we arrange storyboard boxes can help convey the logic of the task at hand, and make that task easier to accomplish. To convey content, organization boxes can be arranged vertically or horizontally, or set in meaningful clusters.

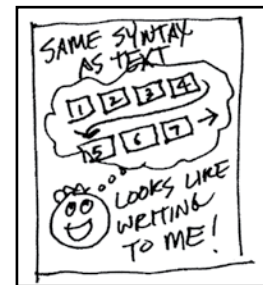


**FORMAT VARIATIONS**  
See Appendix B, pages 134–140 for descriptions and reproducible pages of several different storyboard formats.

### Path to Text

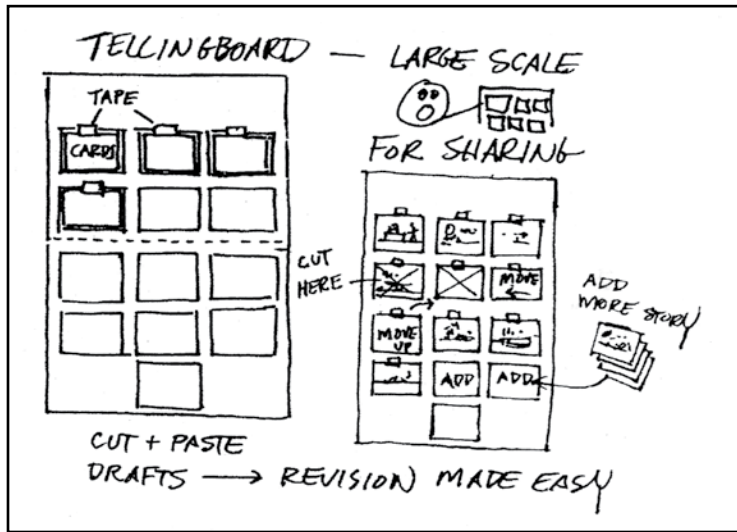
It is important to note that whenever text-writing is the goal, the storyboard format offered to students should create a clear path to text. Generally I emphasize formats that parallel writing syntax; squares are written and read across the page the same way we read lines of text, starting in the top left square, returning at the end of each line.

The other main format that creates a clear path to text is boxes with text lines beside them. I generally use this format after a story or essay has been brainstormed and revised. This format allows students to see the direct link between their storyboard and sentences or paragraphs of text.



### The Tellingboard: Brainstorming and Revision Made Easy

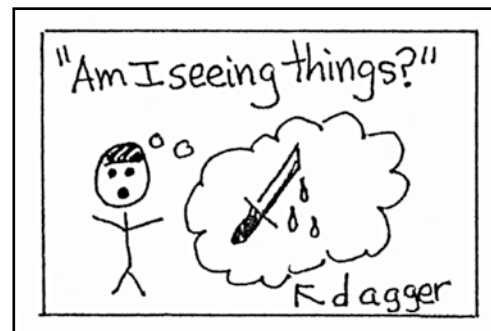
Earlier I described Andy using a board with cards to build and revise his story. He was using what I call a tellingboard, a larger-scale storyboard with movable cards, designed to allow easy brainstorming and revision. This tool makes building a story, an essay, or an oral presentation easier because the writer has hands-on, cut-and-paste capability like a word processor. As we go forward we'll see this tool can be used for many tasks, from writing to reading to revision and conferencing—making them more engaging and effective.



The tellingboard is a large-scale storyboard designed with moveable cards to allow easy drafting and revision of ideas. I recommend an 11-by-17-inch board that folds to fit in any writing folder. To learn how to make a tellingboard, see pages 97-99.

## Simple Is Best

The Cinderella example on page 11 might look like baby stuff. Don't be fooled. A storyboard is supposed to look simple, to make information visible and clear. The student's job was to summarize the main events in order, and she did a fine job. Her storyboard can be easily "read" and understood by anyone who knows the Cinderella story. You'll see the same simplicity in older students' storyboards, but a closer look will show that their simple pictures efficiently encapsulate sophisticated ideas, as seen in the excerpt from a character analysis storyboard of *Macbeth* at right.



Macbeth's potent vision, highlighted in a student's notes about his character

The use of simple tools is the real strength of storyboarding in the classroom; the same writing process can be used by kindergarteners and graduate engineers or law students. In fact, the law student's notes integrating text and pictures are easier to read and more potent because the stick-pics provide landmarks in pages of dense text. I find students often learn to storyboard faster than adults. I encourage older students to try and storyboard as simply and clearly as a sharp third grader. Whether you are retelling a fairy tale or developing a complex plot for a novel, simple often turns out to be better.