

Reading Horizons

Volume 34, Issue 1

1993

Article 5

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1993

Alphabet Books Can Be Used With Fluent Readers and Writers

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Abstract

Text and pictures share the responsibility for storytelling in picture books (Bishop and Hickman, 1992). Purists often define picture books as those books in which text and picture work interdependently, the visual and verbal are integrated, and pictures and text blend perfectly to tell a story. Pragmatists tend to include in the picture book genre all books that have a picture book format: 24 and 48 pages, pictures on every double page spread, and a brief text with equal space taken up by the pictures. Alphabet books are an important part of the picture book genre because concepts are communicated through both text and illustrations.



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Alphabet books for older readers

Parents, teachers, and others assume that the purpose of alphabet books is to encourage young children to learn the alphabet and to associate a specific letter with objects that have that particular initial letter. In this case the concepts are related to learning the alphabet and matching beginning letters. Both text and pictures are critical for the emergent reader to understand the use of alphabet in reading and writing.

However, a closer look at many recently published alphabet books suggests that they may have some potential for use with intermediate and middle school students. The purpose of this article is to discuss the value of using alphabet books with older and more proficient readers, to describe alphabet books which are appropriate for the more mature reader, and to suggest some specific strategies for their use in the intermediate and middle school classrooms. Alphabet books chosen for fluent readers should contain content that appeals to older students, as well as a more sophisticated text. Adults can assume that the more mature reader has more experiential background than the younger child. However, the criteria of appropriate content and sophisticated text need not be applied as strict guidelines. Any picture book can be enjoyed by readers of any age at some level when adults have clear objectives for their use.

Using alphabet books with older readers

Perhaps the most compelling reason for using alphabet books with intermediate and middle school students is that alphabet books are enjoyable. Enjoyment should be the primary reason for sharing any book with a child (Norton, 1991; Bishop and Hickman, 1992; Newkirk, 1992). One clever and humorous alphabet book is *ANTics* by Cathi Hepworth. This alphabet book uses words in alphabetical order that include the word *ant* such as *brilliant* and *vigilant* to intrigue readers. Not only is the word *ant* in every word, but all the illustrations feature ants. Another delightful and humorous alphabet book is *Aster Aardvark's Alphabet Adventures* by Stephen Kellogg. This delightful alphabet book uses alliteration such as "Happily hibernating Harris Hare heard her howling and hastened to help, heroically heaving Hermione head over heels into the hammock" to amuse and entertain intermediate and middle school youngsters.

A principal academic reason for including the genre of alphabet books for older readers is that alphabet books provide an excellent opportunity for language and vocabulary development. One comprehensive and beautifully illustrated alphabet dictionary is *The Annotated Ultimate Alphabet* by Mike Wilks. Seven thousand and seventy seven illustrated objects are included in 26 beautiful scenes. Wilks identifies 26 words beginning with each letter of the alphabet — ultimate, for example — and provides synonyms such as *definitive, extreme, conclusive, or lasts* in a thesaurus-type format. One alphabet book that offers teachers an opportunity to facilitate language and vocabulary development is Chris Van Allsburg's *The Z Was Zapped*. This alphabet book plays with language to create a 26-act drama. The tremendous talent of Van Allsburg is demonstrated through humorous black and white illustrations, which foster the dramatic mood created by the book.

Another reason for including alphabet books as literature study for older readers is that alphabet books are often informative. Alphabet books may be used to supplement textbooks in content areas. Jerry Pallota's *The Icky Bug Alphabet Book* provides the reader with mini-science lessons about bugs and other insects. This author has also published *The Frog Alphabet Book, The Furry Alphabet Book, The Yucky Reptile Alphabet Book, and The Ocean Alphabet Book* and many other books to provide fascinating information that will delight readers regardless of grade level or age group.

Science teachers who wish to promote ecology and the environment will find several alphabet books which emphasize the need to protect and care for the environment and all living creatures. Ann Jonas focuses on endangered and extinct animals in *Aardvarks Disembark*. Jan Thornhill emphasizes the wildlife of North America in her book *The*

Wildlife ABC: A Nature Alphabet, and George Ella Lyon names familiar as well as exotic trees in *A B Cedar: An Alphabet of Trees*.

In addition to informational books about science, there are alphabet books that enhance the social studies textbooks. *Ashanti to Zulu* by Margaret Musgrove creates an authentic portrait of the customs of 26 African tribes. Leo and Dianne Dillon illustrated this alphabet book to include as much visual information as possible about each different culture. This book needs to be carefully studied to be enjoyed thoroughly. *Jambo Means Hello: Swahili Alphabet Book*, a Caldecott honor book by Muriel Feelings suggests an in-depth study of one culture. This book could be used as a model to research a personal heritage. A third alphabet book that celebrates culture is John Agard's *The Calypso Alphabet* which depicts Caribbean culture and its contemporary life. Foreign language teachers could enhance their curriculum by using Patricia Borlenghi's *From Albatross to Zoo: An Alphabet in Five Languages*. Through the creative use of different letter styles and colors she allows readers to tell whether they are reading English, German, French, Spanish or Italian.

Alphabet books also provide older students with excellent models for writing. Students' abilities to write may not develop at the same rate as their ability to read (Newkirk, 1992). Alphabet books use many forms of writing. For example, Edward Lear's classic *A Was Once An Apple Pie* demonstrates 26 rhythmic nonsense verses that almost sing. This book encourages reluctant poets of all ages to attempt nonsensical verse. Because of their economical use of language, almost all alphabet books teach a valuable lesson about writing: that communication is enhanced with the use of precise words. Many alphabet books such as Crescent Dragonwagon's *Alligator Arrived with Apples: A Potluck Alphabet Feast*

show the use of careful alliteration with such phrases as "Pumpkin pie and pickled peaches were provided by parrot" and "Onions and olives were offered by orangutan."

Finally, many alphabet books are uniquely illustrated and with adult guidance readers can begin to develop an appreciation for a variety of art forms. Lois Ehlert in her informative *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables From A to Z* uses brilliant watercolor collages to introduce readers to many less common vegetables. Lovely paintings are used to illustrate Alice and Martin Provenson's *A Peaceable Kingdom: The Shaker Abecedarius*. Detailed black and white drawings enhance *The Z Was Zapped* by Chris Van Allsburg. In Mitsumasa and Masaichiro Anno's *Anno's Magical ABC and Anamorphic Alphabet*, a curved, mirrored instrument is provided to see the distorted letters of the anamorphic art alphabet more clearly. In addition, this book gives directions to those students who would like to attempt anamorphic art.

Ways to use alphabet books with older readers

One obvious use of alphabet books with older readers suggests an alternate to the content area research report. Instead, students may choose a topic to research and create an alphabet book regarding the selected topic. Kristin Joy Pratt, the 15-year old author and illustrator of *A Walk in the Rainforest*, creates this alphabet book about the diversity of the rainforest as an independent study project. However, this seemingly simple task is in reality quite complicated. Thus, such an assignment may provide students with an opportunity for cooperative learning by allowing students to work in small groups with each student researching topics for specific letters. Also, students can develop dictionary skills by enhancing their content area alphabet books with glossaries.

Older readers may also create an alphabet book for primary children. This task which involves the use of creative thinking and writing is to encourage intermediate and middle school youngsters to create an alphabet book for primary age children. These alphabet books may or may not be thematic and can be shared with younger students. In addition, older students can study and mimic the style of writing of an author of a specific alphabet book. Certainly writing and illustrating alphabet books encourage vocabulary and language development. Most alphabet books contain little text; therefore, intermediate and middle school writers will need to focus on using the exact word needed and concentrate on economical use of precise language. The use of alphabet books with older readers and writers is only limited by the teacher's and the student's creativity.

Summary

As with any picture book, alphabet books can be used with any age reader at any time. When teachers choose alphabet books to use with intermediate and middle school students, they need to keep several guidelines in mind. Excellent A-B-C books, like any picture book, are dependent upon the quality of the text and the illustrations. The text and illustrations should enhance each other. It may seem as if picture books are only appropriate for less able older readers. However, good alphabet books provide much enjoyment for proficient older readers and writers as well as younger developing readers and writers.

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