Children often express opinions about art, but when asked why they like or dislike a photograph, artwork, movie, book, or video, they may not be able to articulate their thinking. Common Core State Standards require students to use critical literacy skills to support their opinions with reasoning. Elementary librarians, in collaboration with art teachers, can use activities related to the Caldecott awards to build students’ skills in critical visual literacy and set the stage for a Mock Caldecott culminating activity.

**Understanding Visual Art**

Before tackling a Mock Caldecott activity to evaluate picture books, engage students in analyzing and evaluating other images. Encourage them to think of pictures as visual stories that express emotion.

**Photography Study (K–5)**

Use photographs to introduce students to “reading” visual stories. Caldecott-honored illustrator Mo Willems superimposed cartoon drawings over photographs to illustrate *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* (2005), a technique children might like to emulate in their own art.

Collect pictures based on a theme. Photos of children will captivate young students, while photos related to social studies units may enhance classroom learning. Choosing photos that reflect the cultural backgrounds of your students will enable children to use insider knowledge to help them decode the photographs. Think about using photos from the school’s archives or photography collections on the web:

- The National Child Labor Committee Collection from the Library of Congress (http://tinyurl.com/m7qqvm4) or Lewis W. Hine’s photos of child labor in the United States (http://tinyurl.com/gapsa) will generate discussions about social justice issues.
- “Do You See What I See?” (http://tinyurl.com/konaib) displays photographs taken by refugee children and uploaded to photo-sharing site Flickr.
- A search for “children photographs” in the New York Public Library Digital Collections (http://digitalcollections.nypl.org) returns more than 3,000 images.
- A search for “children” in the Photos, Prints, and Drawings collections of
Rather than printing the photographs, project them one at a time onto a screen. Have students form small groups to discuss the following essential questions:

• What do you see in the picture?
• What are the people in the picture doing, thinking, looking at, and saying?
• Why did the photographer take this picture? What was the photographer thinking?
• What is outside the frame?
• What makes this picture important?
• What is the story being told by the picture?
• What questions do you have about the picture?

Students should support their answers with evidence from the photo.

**Guided Art Museum Exploration (2–5)**

SmARTkids (http://tinyurl.com/smrtkd), sponsored by the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, introduces art to students ages 7–12 through both guided and open online explorations. The site is probably best explored by pairs or trios of students, who can discuss what they see as they click through the site. Start with the “Look and Share” activities, in which students learn about photography, paintings, and sculpture. An audio-supported glossary of important terms can be accessed by clicking on underlined words or as a separate component of the site. A “sketchbook” or journal is provided for answering questions posed in the exploration activities. Student groups can collaborate on sketchbook entries, print their work just before closing the browser, and use the notes to participate in whole-class discussions about their explorations.

**Color in Art (PK–1)**

Color conveys emotion in illustrations. David Shannon’s 52-second video “Brighter Colors” (http://tinyurl.com/mular59) explains the importance of color in picture books. Download a coloring page created by illustrator Margaret Chodos-Irving (Ella Sarah Gets Dressed, 2004 Caldecott Honor Book) to illustrate Jean Reidy’s book Light Up the Night (http://tinyurl.com/1utmnp). The page can be printed or saved as an image and opened in a computer-based drawing program, such as Paint. Display children’s colored pages in the library, along with the Light Up the Night full-color poster (http://tinyurl.com/62kum5). Discuss how color changes the “feel” of the pictures.

**Illustrator Gallery Exploration (K–5)**

From analyzing a single photograph, students can progress to analyzing art collections by individual illustrators. In this activity, students independently analyze artists’ collections for common characteristics.

Almost 2,000 children’s book illustrators have posted portfolios on the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators’s website (www.scbwi.org/illustrator-gallery). Searches will narrow the selection of illustrators, with results returned as thumbnail illustrations. Choose illustrators who have posted at least six illustrations, preferably those who have worked on different types of projects. Illustrators often work on assignment, so they may have thumbnails from different types of work. For instance, although Robert Casilla is best known for his art in biographies and multicultural texts, he has also illustrated postage stamps and magazine articles. His portfolio includes artwork from nature stories, biographies, and multicultural fiction, among other work. What his illustrations have in common is that they use watercolors as a medium, pastel shades, realistic scenery, and expressive faces.

Students will write similar notes about their chosen portfolios. The following questions can guide students’ thinking:

• What colors are prominent?
• What characters are present?
• What types of stories are being illustrated?
• What is the mood(s) of the illustrations? How does the artist convey mood(s)?
• What stories are being told?
• What about this illustrator’s style appeals to you?

After analysis, students trade computers to review their peers’ choices. Give each student time to study at least two illustrators. Paired students can create graphic organizers to compare and contrast their illustrators, which calls for higher-level thinking. Collect the graphic organizers for a library display.

Learning from Caldecott Winners

Meet Caldecott Artists

Many Caldecott winners are featured in videos available online. Some videos reference winning books, and some describe the artists’ processes for illustration. Use the videos to introduce Caldecott-winning books from your library collection. The following limited sample of videos lists the illustrator’s name, winning book title(s), video link(s), and length of videos.
• Peter Brown, Creepy Carrots! (2013): http://ed.ted.com/on/a7VuJD1s (5:49) and http://vimeo.com/80293481 (4:26)
• Erin E. Stead, A Sick Day for Amos McGee (2011): http://tinyurl.com/q8o6jmy (0:46)

• Denise Fleming, In the Small, Small Pond (1994): http://tinyurl.com/mb5c3pc (11:00)

Additional videos showing Caldecott winners’ art styles can be found on the “Featured Artists” tab of the Indiana University East LibGuides Caldecott site (http://iue.libguides.com/caldecotts).

• A Ball for Daisy by Chris Raschka
• The Lion and the Mouse by Jerry Pinkney
• Tuesday, Flotsam, Sector 7, and Free Fall by David Wiesner
• The Red Book by Barbara Lehman
• Time Flies by Eric Rohmann
• The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher by Molly Bang
• Truck by Donald Crews
• Have You Seen My Duckling? by Nancy Tafuri
• Noah’s Ark by Peter Spier

Creating wordless books when you are both the author and the artist is different from authoring a nearly wordless book that will be illustrated by someone else. Compare the manuscript (http://tinyurl.com/ndams) and final published version of No Dogs Allowed! written by Linda Ashman and illustrated by Kristin Sorra. While this book did not win the Caldecott, it has won awards from other groups.
Pictures may also tell a secondary story, as Tomie dePaola explains in another video, “Reading the Pictures” (http://tinyurl.com/ly93cbh; 3:16). Use dePaola’s book Helga’s Dowry, referenced in the video clip, and the richly illustrated books by Jan Brett, such as The Mitten, The Hat, and Beauty and the Beast, to explore secondary stories.

**Conducting a Mock Caldecott**

After several experiences evaluating visual art, students will probably realize that reactions to art differ greatly from person to person. In contests such as the Caldecott, the final decisions reflect the opinions of that year’s committee members, based on their beliefs about art. At the same time, Caldecott judges make sure entries conform to the contest requirements. The Association for Library Service to Children has published the Caldecott terms and criteria (http://tinyurl.com/nkvpc4n).

A Mock Caldecott activity does not need the same restrictions. Think about criteria that make sense for your library program. If picture books from the current year are scarce, consider other approaches. Pull books from within the past five years, allow students to nominate picture books they particularly enjoy, or create a collection of past medal and honor books for a “Best of the Best” activity. Grade levels could concentrate on different genres as well: wordless books for kindergarten and first grade, biographies for second and third grades, and nonfiction for fourth and fifth grades.

Since all students need to read and study all the nominees, think strategically about how the picture books will be distributed. Perhaps teachers could read the award nominees aloud in their classrooms. Or the books could be rotated among small groups of students during library time.

What procedures will students follow for evaluating the books? One member of the 2000 Caldecott committee described a five-step process:

- Do a quick page-through to think about the genre and artistic style.
- Read or listen to the book text without looking at the pictures. Think about the plot, setting, conflict, and theme.
- Read the illustrations without the text. Study each page for the story the illustrations tell. Think about how the illustrations carry or extend the story you read. The pictures should tell more than half the story of the book.
- Read the book as a combination of text and illustrations. Consider how the art and words interact.
- Page through the book to record your impressions and complete your evaluation. Write notes about your overall assessment of the book, giving more weight to the art than to the words.

Finally, devise a voting process. Voting could be done through paper ballots, an online survey, or individual classroom selections. Announce the winners on the library website.

Students sometimes believe they’ve outgrown picture books and miss out on visually rich and thought-provoking reading experiences. Use visual literacy instruction to engage them in looking critically at the art of picture books. They’ll not only learn to support their opinions about visuals with specific reasons but also discover that picture books have appeal for all ages.

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