

the misuse of the comma, a rather dull subject usually received with bored indifference by students, but a much livelier one when they can witness the radical change in meaning between sentences such as: "Eat here, and get gas," and "Eat here and get gas" accompanied by cartoons depicting each connotation. The first sentence in the pair mentioned above shows diners filling up their tanks while picking up some take-out, while the second cartoon humorously illustrates the sentence with a bloated woman floating overhead in an all-you-can-eat restaurant.

Unfortunately, for many students the reading materials used in the classroom are beyond their comprehension level and weighted down with vocabulary that is complicated and frustrating. Additionally, the majority of middle schoolers struggle with such high level skills as inferential thinking, and when left to read difficult materials alone to decipher the underlying meaning of the story, stare blankly and utter, "I don't have a clue what the author is trying to say."

That is where a great picture book comes in. Here's an example of a picture book lesson from my own teaching.

A read aloud

I begin the lesson in an eighth-grade classroom by reviewing the meaning of inference. The students are familiar with the term and we discuss a prediction they made the night before when the weather for the evening was supposed to be a messy mix of snow, freezing rain, and sleet. Most of the students say that they predicted that school would be cancelled. However, when they awoke to only a dismal, gray, rain-soaked morning, they could safely infer that they would indeed have school. The discussion turns to how good readers can take the information they are presented with in a story and infer what the author is trying to say: what the words say versus what the words mean. Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman (*Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*) describe inferencing as "lifting up the words and going beneath

them." I like to pass this description on to the students because it actually gives them a visual reference to a complex concept.

Next, I tell the class that I am going to read a book that appears to be a simple picture book but has a message intended for older readers like them. I ask them to jot down any words or phrases that they believe may have a different or deeper meaning than what they actually say (what the words say versus what the words mean.) I scan the illustrations from the picture books I use in the class-

room and present them as a PowerPoint so that I can read the book to the students while they take in the pictures. This way they can listen and get a good look at the graphics that accompany the text. This helps them get the whole picture at once.

One of the books Dr. Bintz introduced that I love to use for teaching inference is Eve Bunting's thought-provoking allegory, *Riding the Tiger*. Though it has a 3.5 reading level, this tale raises issues and questions pertinent

to much older students—peer pressure, gang violence, conformity and bullying. However, when they first begin listening, most of them will say that it is simply a book about a boy riding a tiger. It takes some students longer to see that there is a lot more going on than a boy's beastly joy ride, but when guided through Bunting's subtle metaphors and Frampton's wood-cut illustrations, most of them begin to grasp some of the many underlying meanings.

"It's too bad you're not wearing my colors," the tiger jeeringly says to Danny, his 10-year-old passenger. Along with this mocking statement, he also speaks of "getting respect wherever I go," and "anyone who isn't for me, is against me." After I read the story through once, we discuss the possible meaning behind the tale. I ask them to give me the clues they found that helped them to make the inferences they did. I then reread the book and stop at each point where the author's words mean more than they say. After the students begin to pick up on the inferences, they excitedly find and point out more examples.

“The best books for children aren't written for kids, they're written for adults to charm and astonish us, to prick the hairs on the back of our necks, so kids will sense our delight and will want to become readers themselves.”

—Paul Johnson,
The New York Times
(as quoted in NWREL
Northwest Report)

This book never fails to spark interesting classroom discussions and provides a great opportunity to address the overpowering loss of self-control created by peer pressure, and the addictive and destructive qualities of alcohol and drugs. Personal connections are made and the lesson of making inferences has developed into one that explores a crucial theme.

For the pure joy of reading

One of the most important things I have learned in doing picture book lessons is that no matter what their age, all students love to be read to. For the struggling reader, this may be the only time they can enjoy the magic of a book without frustration and pain. According to Regie Routman, author of *Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12*, "Reading aloud is the single most influential factor in young children's success in learning to read. Additionally, it improves listening skills, builds vocabulary, aids reading comprehension, and has a positive impact on students' attitudes toward reading."

Best of all, they learn to love books—what more can you ask for? 📖

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Great books for stimulating inferential thinking

I Never Knew Your Name by Sherry Garland
The Mysteries of Harris Burdick by Chris Van Allsburg
As the City Sleeps by Stephen T. Johnson
Something Is Going To Happen by Charlotte Zolotow
Jumanji and *The Stranger* by Chris Van Allsburg
Riding the Tiger and *The Wall* by Eve Bunting
The Wreck of the Zephyr by Chris Van Allsburg
Teammates by Peter Golenbock
Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco
Zoom and Re-Zoom by Istvan Banyai
Black and White by David Macaulay
The World That Loved Books by Stephen Parlato
June 29, 1999, Tuesday, Free Fall and Sector 7 by David Wiesner