Elements of Design for Picture Book Illustrations

Something we all love about picture books besides the fabulous stories are the illustrations. Illustrations have the ability to empower, to engage and entertain. Illustrations can also form memories, create moods and emotions and to inspire.

One thing illustrators use to form their images are 'The Elements of Design'. The Elements of Design are the building blocks within an artwork, design or illustration that make up the composition of the artwork. There are seven Elements of Design in total. Sometimes illustrations may focus on one or more of these in the one design, but implementing the Elements of Design in any illustration is the key to creating a successful work of art.

Colour

Colour has an important role in illustrations and is much deeper than just choosing a colour because it 'looks nice'. Careful consideration in colour choices can help build more depth and understanding of what the text in a picture book is expressing. Examples of ways colour can be used to depict meaning include,

- **Moods and feelings**: Cool colours like blues can depict sadness, negativity, or depression. A warmer colour like yellow can depict hope, happiness, and cheer. A colour like red can depict love but also anger.
- **Seasons**: A field of bright colourful pink florals in a field can depict springtime, oranges and yellow leaves represent autumn.
- **Weather**: Dark blues and blacks in the sky can depict a storm approaching or it is about to rain.
- **Time**: An orange horizon can depict sunrise or sunset. A sepia colour choice of browns and yellows can depict historical periods.
- **Temperature**: Icy blues and whites can depict a cold winter day.
- **Character**: A character dressed in many bright colours and patterns can be seen as eccentric. A character dressed in darker colours (blacks/purples) can depict a serious or evil character.

Colour Theory plays a large role in illustrations and can dramatically impact an artwork. Colour wheels are helpful in making colour choices and creating impacting illustrations, which include,

Primary: Red, yellow, and blue.
Secondary: Purple, green and orange.
Tertiary: Red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green-blue-green, red-violet, blue-violet.

Complementary colours: Colours that appear opposite on the colour wheel. Using these colours together can help bring out the brightness in each colour used.

Note: Visual Examples are found in the 'Elements of Design for Picture Book Illustrations Visual Examples' document that can be downloaded on the danig.com.au website (resources tab).

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Dani G

When considering colour in an illustration, keep in mind how that colour works against another colour. For example, if your character has black hair and is wearing a dark navy-blue jacket and is up against a darker background like a night sky, the character will get lost in the composition/background. So, consider perhaps changing the colour of the jacket, moving the character against an object that may bring out the character more (a red-bricked wall for example) or have a lamp post illuminating the character with a yellow or white tinge that can help bring out the character more), as shown in the illustration below.

Line

There are also a range of lines that can be used in illustrations that can help portray meaning such as,

- Straight lines (Can depict seriousness, business like, formal)
- Wavy lines (Can depict confusion, silliness, or an unsettled ocean/sea)
- Thick and thin lines
- Dotted lines
- Curved and zigzag lines

Like direction, lines used in an artwork can help direct the viewer's eye to certain sections of the illustration. This is also referred to as the 'focal point'. Line can be an important element to use especially if there is a specific feature in the illustration you want to showcase and direct the viewer's attention towards. These include,
- Horizontal lines: Which direct the viewer's eyes across an illustration (left to right).
- Vertical lines: Which direct the viewer's eyes from the bottom to the top of the page (down and up).
- Diagonal lines: Which direct the viewer's eyes across a page (eg: bottom left to top right, or top left to bottom right).

Direction

Direction works with Line to help direct the viewer's eye in a certain direction (see information under 'line'). Sometimes direction also refers to the direction a character is looking towards or pointing to that can help direct the viewer's eye to a particular part of the composition. Sometimes direction is produced in very creative and interesting ways that isn't necessarily obvious to the viewer and shown in very subtle ways.

Shapes

There generally are two types of shapes in art,
- **Geometric Shapes (with edges):** precise and regular shapes like squares, triangles, and rectangles. These shapes tend to create more seriousness, power, strength, structure, or masculinity.
- **Geometric Shapes (circles, ovals):** Can represent gentleness, unity, and balance. Can also represent femininity.
- **Organic (abstract shapes/from the natural world):** Irregular, rounded or curved shapes like clouds.

Shapes can be 2D (flat) or 3D (dimensional - creating the illusion that a shape is popping off the page or there is more to a composition than a flat scene).

Texture

There are two types of textures in illustrations,
- **Real Texture -** A texture that you can feel with your hand (most common in board books that include fabrics and materials that a child can physically feel with their hands).
- **Simulated Texture -** A texture made to look like a certain texture (but cannot be physically felt by the hand).

Textures can help form a dimension of interest in an illustration or can also be used educationally to show readers what things look like. For example, a simulated texture of bark on a tree, the dimples on the back of a frog or a crumpled piece of paper.

Size

Size in an illustration is a very important element and can work in several ways in a design. Size is how big or small an object is. Big can only be big when compared to something small. This variation in size is called 'perspective' and helps create depth in an artwork.

When we unpack an illustration, take notice of the layers, that is the foreground (front of the page), midground or middle ground (middle of the page) and the background (the back of the page). Objects in the foreground will be larger in size as they are closer to the frame and objects in the background will be smaller in size as they are further away.

Size is also important when depicting sizes between characters in a picture book. Consideration in the size of characters also can showcase personalities of a character.

For example, imagine a school where a student is bullying another student in the school yard. The student being bullied could be depicted as a smaller size to depict innocence, youth, or weakness. A larger and taller character could depict authority, power and strength and could represent a bully character quite well. Of course, this is not always the case in all stories, but size can be a fun way to represent a character's personality.

Variation in size can also help build interest and a dynamic composition rather than a static one.

Tone

Tone is the amount of lightness or darkness shown in an object. When white is added it is a tint, when black is added it is a shade. Tone can be used to show a variety of things in an illustration through gradients which are a good way to depict time - for example, a dark blue-sky merging into an orange horizon which can show sunrise or sunset. It can also help create variation and depth in an artwork.

This resource was created by Daniela Glyntzos (Dani G). Dani G is a former high school visual art teacher who loves everything art design and theory.

You can see more of Dani G's illustrations online,

Website: www.danig.com.au
Instagram: @dani.g.writer

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Suzanne Barton

https://www.suzannebarton.com.au
Instagram: @suzannebartonauthor

Hannah Friend

https://hannahfriendcreates.com/
Instagram: @hannahfriendcreates

Kim de Haan

https://www.kimdehaan.com/
Instagram: @kimdehaanstories

Imogen Hartland

https://www.imogenhartland.com/
Instagram: @i.hearts.arts.and.crafts

Carla Hoffenberg

https://carlahoffenberg.com/portfolio
Instagram: @carlahoffenbergdraws

Our Australian HeArt – Cover art by
Rachael Robertson

Rachael Robertson

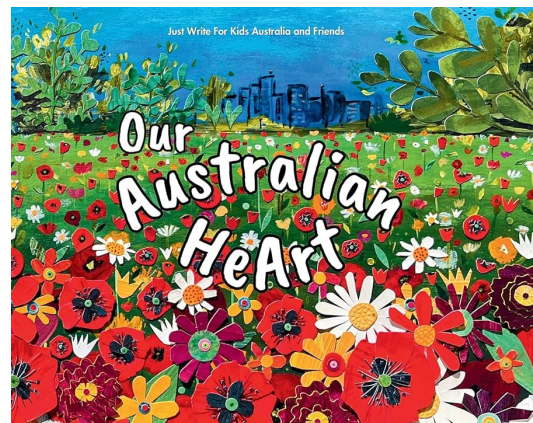Instagram: @rachaelrobertson.creates

Jeanette Stampone

https://jeanettestampone.com/
Instagram: @jeanettestampone
Instagram: @netty_illustration

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