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The Picture Worth a Thousand Words

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. But who are *they* anyway? And why do they exaggerate so much? Can you really get a thousand words out of a single picture?

Probably not. A hundred, two hundred maybe. But not a thousand. Still, a couple hundred words is nothing to sneeze at.

Drawing can really help you write. When you take a few minutes to sketch a quick picture, you give yourself a chance to focus on your topic and that can make your writing richer and more detailed.

Drawing for writing is a little different than normal drawing because it has a different purpose. To achieve that purpose, we use a three-step process like this:

- **Draw.** Make a quick pencil sketch of your scene. This is a rough sketch: use outlines only, stick people are encouraged. Try to include as many little details as you can. You can't have too many details. Don't forget to include yourself in the picture if it's appropriate.
- **Label.** Create a one- or two-word text label for each item in your drawing. Label everything you can think of, even different parts of things.
- **Caption.** Write a single sentence underneath the picture that tells what is happening. This can be a very simple sentence or something more complicated if you're up for it.

You'll be surprised how much you can get out of this simple activity. As you draw different things, you'll remind yourself about different parts of your story and this will give you more things to write about. You don't even have to know how to draw. You may not think you're any good at creating cool pictures. But everyone can picture their writing.

Draw-Label-Caption

DRAW	LABEL

CAPTION

Example



I'm just about to throw the frisbee and my dog is going to go after it.

- This is just a rough sketch, not a finished illustration; I don't need to spend much time on it. I'm really just going to draw outlines and simple figures. When I'm done with my piece, I might redo the picture, in color, for a cover.
- I'm going to try to label everything I can think of; each label can become a detail in my writing.
- In the caption, I'm going to write down what I think is most important about the picture, but I'm going to try to do it in a single sentence. Later, if I want, I can go back and make the caption more interesting. I might get some ideas for my title from the caption.
- Drawing a picture makes me more familiar with the scene and helps me think of things to write about.
- Drawing helps me visualize details which helps me find the words which help my readers create the same picture in their minds that I am creating here.

What About All Those Words?

From labels to sentences. We thought we were going to get a hundred, maybe two hundred words. But all we got was a few labels and a one-sentence caption. Where do we get the rest? For each label in your picture, you can easily come up with one or more sentences like this:

ME - I'm about to throw the frisbee. This is my favorite game to play with my dog. I love to see him chase it down and catch it in his mouth before it hits the ground.

SWEATER - It's cold out but I've got a thick wool sweater on.

MY HAIR - The wind is blowing my hair all over the place.

WIND - It's unusually windy today. I'm throwing into the wind because I'm afraid that if I throw it the other way, the frisbee will go too far.

TREES - The big trees in the park are swaying from side to side. Some of the leaves are falling off.

BIRDS - There are birds flying above the trees. I wonder how they can fly in wind like this?

MY DOG - My dog is excited and ready to go. He knows that when I get the frisbee out that we're going to play one of his favorite games.

TAIL - He's wagging his tail like crazy. That means he's really happy. He can't wait to tear off after the frisbee.

PAWS - He can't keep his paws still. He's scratching at the dirt and getting ready to run.

(Almost 200 words!)

Tips on Draw-Label-Caption

Don't be shy about drawing. If you're older than seven or eight, you might think that drawing a picture before you write is kind of silly. It's not. Even if you're not the greatest artist in the world, drawing a picture in preparation for writing can really help. First of all, you'll be much more focused. Second, you'll have better command of the details. And finally, while you're drawing, you'll spend several minutes thinking about what you want to say. You can probably draw something for just about every piece you write. Better yet, make several drawings for each piece. Lay them out in order like a storyboard.

Really get into the labeling. I've already talked about how each label can be turned into a detail in your piece, and how each detail can then be turned into a sentence or two. But actually, you can go farther than that. You can actually label your labels. Here's what I mean: Say you've labeled the water in a scene about swimming at the beach: "water." You could add a label to that label that tells something about the water: "choppy waves." And then you could label that label: "about three feet high." And so on. What you're doing is building up strings of modifiers: adjectives, adverbs, and phrases that make your writing more descriptive and more specific.

Redo a picture for your cover. I think it's cool to put an illustrated cover on your piece when it's finished. Why not take one of your drawings and redo it? You can use color, fill things in, add details, etc. The picture you choose might even suggest a title for your piece.

Explore the fine art of caption writing. If you want to learn a lot about revising sentences, put in some work on your caption. Captions are short and you can revise them quickly and easily. See how much you can cram into a single sentence. See how many different ways you can change the order of the words around and have it still make sense. Add extra describing words and phrases. As you re-work your caption, try to make it more and more interesting, not just longer.

Use dialog and thought bubbles. You can treat your picture as though it was a panel in a comic strip. Use dialog bubbles to show people talking. Use thought bubbles to show people thinking. If you want, you can turn those bubbles into material for your scene. It's always great to start a scene with someone saying something. I call that a "talking" lead. And "thinking" leads are good too: "I'd better not let this get by me, I thought to myself, as the guy on the other team lined up for the penalty kick."