

Illustrations

Illustrations have multiple different purposes in a text. Depending on the purpose, illustrations can make a text easier to understand or they may make a particular text more complex.

Purpose	Explanation
Reinforce Text	At the simplest level, illustrations are used to reinforce the key ideas of a text. They do not extend or amplify the text. Readers “read” the illustrations in order to confirm what they read in the text.
Develop setting	Illustrations can be used to establish a story’s time and place or clarify historical background. For example, in many historical texts the time period and setting is brought to life through the illustrations. Readers “read” the illustrations in order to build a deeper understanding of where the story takes place.
Define and develop characters	Illustrations help develop characters by showing characters’ actions and reactions to events. Illustrations often show more about characters than is included in the text. Readers “read” the illustrations to notice characters’ facial expressions and body language.
Extend or develop plot	Illustrations can help advance the plot of the story. Pictures may explain a character’s problem, help the plot unfold, or show how events are resolved. These details may not be included in the text.
Develop mood	The color choices illustrators use can help set an overall mood and tone of the story. For example, an author may use a dark color palette to convey a gloomy or mysterious mood.
Provide a different viewpoint	Illustrations can tell a different story or contradictory message than what is included in the text.
Create textual coherence	Illustrations help the sequence of events in a story make sense to readers. For example, illustrations may describe events that are not present in the text but are important for moving the text forward. Or, illustrations can help a reader figure out pronouns that may not have a referent on the current page.

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Illustrations and Text Complexity

- *Low Complexity:* Text and illustrations tell the same story. Illustrations reinforce key ideas in the text, but do not add new information. Illustrations are appropriate for the intended age group.
- *High Complexity:* Text and illustrations combine to make meaning. Illustrations are critical for understanding the central ideas of the text. The illustrations may add nuanced details about setting, character, plot, or mood not found in the text. Illustrations may be abstract and hard to interpret.