



I take issue with how early some people are pulling their kids away from picture books.

Picture Books and Schoolhouse Rock!

MIXED MEDIA FOR ALL AGES

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Recently, my son came home with a packet dealing with questions on basic grammar. Basic to you and me, but not to someone first learning it. Like most people learning something new, he quickly became frustrated with the first task: “Underline the predicate in the sentence.”

My son did not know what a predicate is, so he did what any kid would do: he underlined everything. This was my chance to further his belief that I was the smartest man on the planet, a belief I knew wasn’t going to last much longer, so I needed to grab every moment I could. I said to him, “The predicate is what the subject is doing.” He looked at me like I

had three heads. I definitely lost a few points on the smart scale in his eyes, and if I didn’t come up with something quickly I would lose my imaginary ranking altogether. As he erased I sat thinking. Then it struck me. Somewhere locked in a memory cell, deep in my brain waiting to be accessed, was a song from my childhood, which I sang to him:

This is the tale of Mister Morton
Mister Morton is who?
He is the subject of our tale
and the predicate tells what
Mister Morton must do.

Mister Morton walked down the street;
Mister Morton walked.
(Ahrens 1993)

In that instant I could tell just by looking at him that he got it—only to be confirmed when he said, “So ‘walked’ is the predicate because it’s telling him what to do.” Smartest Man in the World ranking saved!

For the rest of the packet, whenever he got stuck on something I had a *Schoolhouse Rock!* song to explain it. Now please understand, I do not watch old *Schoolhouse Rock!* videos. For some reason these songs were burned into my brain from back when I was a kid watching Saturday morning cartoons. I would like to think I have an incredible memory, but that is not the case. However, if you ask me to sing a song from an old TV show or commercial from the time I was my son’s age, chances

are I could do it. But why? Why is it I can't remember someone's name but I can remember:

I put a dime in the drugstore
record machine.
Oldie goldies started playin' if
you know what I mean.
I heard Chubby Checker, he was
doin' the Twist,
The Beatles and the Monkees, it
goes like this!
I put a dime in the drugstore
record machine. (Ahrens 1973)

That was a verse of "A Noun Is a Person, Place, or Thing" from *Schoolhouse Rock!*, which I heard in the 70s.

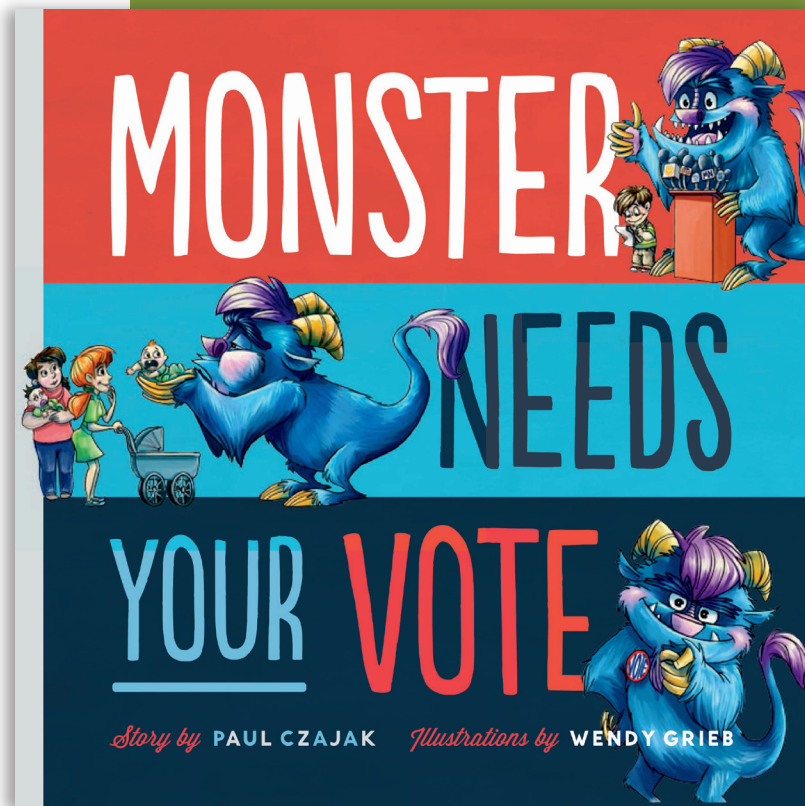
I have only a theory as to why I can remember this; I have no scientific proof. This theory is based on my own years of experience: forgetting complex equations in Analytical Chemistry class, but being able to sing the entire theme song for the *Star Blazers* TV series. I think this phenomenon has to do with the way people learn. Some people learn facts through visual learning, others through audio. When you mix facts with song you are doing both. Twice the learning power, twice the chance of remembering. *Schoolhouse Rock!* is a perfect example of this. For example:

So when you're happy (Hurray!)
or sad (Aw!)
Or frightened (Eeeeeek!) or
mad (Rats!)
Or excited (Wow!) or glad
(Hey!)
An interjection starts a sentence
right. (Ahrens 1974)

Each one of those phrases is accompanied by a picture to show how an interjection is being used. That's your visual. Toss in a catchy tune, and you have your audio. Mix the two together and you have a mixed-media extravaganza!

"Hey you got my pictures in your song! Hey you got my song in your pictures!" It's the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup of learning. But I'm sure you're wondering, "What

does *Schoolhouse Rock!* have to do with children's literature?" Well, something out there in children's literature follows a similar teaching style: picture books.



I know, readers don't necessarily sing along to a picture book, so where is the mixed media? It's in the pictures. You see, picture books are sneakier than *Schoolhouse Rock!* When an author writes a picture book, there has to be a marriage between the pictures and the words. The pictures tell just as much of the story as the words do, and this is where the sneaky part comes in. As a writer I can introduce wonderful language and new vocabulary to kids without having to explain the words because the pictures will do that for me. A child can listen to a picture book being read and not know what a word means, but be able to figure it out by looking at the corresponding illustration. Now, not only will the child hear the word but also have a picture to go along with the

definition. It's two great tastes that are even better together, just like peanut butter and chocolate! Don't think of a picture book as a way to put your kids to sleep at night; think of it as a powerful mixed-media learning tool.

I take issue with how early some people are pulling their kids away from picture books. Parents sometimes get this attitude that makes them say, "My five-year-old is reading chapter books so why do I need picture books?" I think it's great that kids are reading chapter books at such a young age, but do not get fooled into thinking that these kids are too old for picture books. Great language and vocabulary acquisition are specific to the picture book and simply not

found in chapter books. That's why a picture book is read *to* a child and a chapter book or easy reader is read *by* a child. When parents stop reading picture books to their kids too early, children miss out not only on developing a stronger vocabulary, but also on the beautiful artwork that will help them learn new Monstrous Words (see <http://mightymediapress.com/monster>).

Who knows? Maybe someday your kid will be sitting in front of the SATs, racking their brain on an analogy. Then the image of their favorite picture book pops into their head, giving them the correct answer. Maybe your kid gets into Harvard and graduates as valedictorian, all because of a book about a giant blue monster. You're welcome.

Paul Czajak got an *F*, accompanied by the words "get a tutor," on his college writing paper, and, after that, he never thought he'd become a writer. But after spending twenty years as a chemist, he knew his creativity could no longer be contained. Paul lives in New Jersey with his wife and two little monsters. In addition to the *Monster & Me™* series, he's also the author of *Seaver the Weaver*, a contributor to *Huffington Post*, and a reviewer for *New York Journal of Books*.

Work Cited:

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