
CHAPTER

LABELS AND

CAPTIONS

TWELVE

If word play treats words *as* things, then labels and captions join words *with* things. Whereas word play sports with meaning, labels and captions convey meaning, like other texts—but not alone. They have to be read in conjunction with some nonverbal context—a place in which they are located, an object to which they are attached, or an object near which they are placed.

Environmental writing often occurs in units smaller than a sentence or in only one sentence or so. It can successfully communicate in fragments because an object, place, or picture provides the context that completes the message. A label on a can says in effect: “This can contains_____,” so that the label need be only a word or phrase that identifies the contents. Likewise, a caption under a newspaper photograph or beside a museum object identifies, defines, or explains things in a way that assumes the reader is viewing the things (or representations of them) along with the text. The double-medium of things-with-words is an important kind of communication at any age. When children engage in show-and-tell or adults in a talk-demonstration they’re doing an oral equivalent of labels and captions.

Education often neglects these texts because they occur so much outside of books and seem fragmentary. Yet they comprise a great deal of what we read and write—from packaging and marquees and warning signs to TV ads, computer graphics, and maps. This dual kind of communication, linking verbal to nonverbal, is at times very sophisticated. But it’s also some of the first reading matter that beginners can and want to read. Virtually all of the activities sketched in this chapter are appropriate for small children but are done also by adults as part of some occupation or another.

Environmental texts are easy in one sense and difficult in another. They’re easy in that the environment itself gives concrete clues to their meaning. However, they can pose a difficulty in relating the conciseness of the label or caption to the fuller experience of what it accompanies. And they’re not always used to elaborate what one sees or to direct one around in the environment. They may deliberately distort or satirize as in joke signs that mislabel or in the popular books of baby or animal faces with captions that are purposely absurd or inappropriately sophisticated. Much of cartoon art is dependent on just this kind of ironic interplay between verbal text and nonverbal context.

When this kind of discourse says what cannot be seen, it informs. When it says what can be seen, it interprets. In very different ways, both supplement things,

as they are also supplemented by them. Making these connections between words and accompanying things can run the whole gamut of primitive to sophisticated.

SIGNS

Some signs function as labels and some as captions. Making signs brings out these functions more clearly and can appeal to students of all ages. When youngsters are still mastering literacy, they will have a good reason to make tagboard labels for objects in the environment—their own coat hook or cubbyhole, shelves for specific items, containers for supplies, the clock, a class mailbox, objects in a play store or doctor's office, pieces of pretend money, plants, playground equipment, or whatever. A classroom plastered with labels is an environment to be “read,” a place to practice sight-reading, like the urban world outside.

Other signs inform, direct, warn, and comment as well as identify. These have the function of captions and may require fairly elaborated texts. Students can post some of these in environments beyond the classroom or school. Help students think of where signs may really be needed for safety or utility or be enjoyed for humor.

A very entertaining activity consists of making books of actual signs by photographing, rubbing, or drawing them. Some can make great primers for beginning readers, since many signs bear only one or two easily recognizable words. Other such books can make amusing or thoughtful books for mature readers. Think of signs in windows and businesses, parks and projects. How do signs from a particular building, neighborhood, or enterprise characterize that environment, as tombstones do a certain period or place? For youngsters who can read but don't, books of signs can act as a bridge from street to print.

EXHIBITS

Displays of three-dimensional objects can be assembled on a table or shelves as a kind of classroom museum and clarified with cards or tagboard that label and caption. Encourage students to bring in unusually old or interesting curiosities from home. They can affix written information about their history, origin, use, and so on. Or groups can bring together and display materials for science and social studies or other projects.

Of course, not all “objects” need actually be present. In fact, most labeling and captioning probably occurs within some *representation* of objects, either three-dimensional models like globes and replicas of boats or buildings, or two-dimensional depictions like pictures, maps, charts, and graphs.

Making and studying models of things helps people learn what the things do, how they work, and how they're made. Many things that students construct can be displayed both to show the finished product and to teach others about their parts, which labels can identify, and about their functions, which captions can explain. Displaying labeled and captioned models is a fine way to join physical activity and language, especially as in this case both are representational.

Like models, many pictures need no labels or captions until they are taken out of some other context and put into a display. Suppose students have found or taken some photos that they want to exhibit on bulletin boards or walls and parti-

tions. A good way for a group to go about captioning them is to write and compare captions for the same photo then discuss the fitness of each caption. Are they displaying these photos miscellaneous or thematically? As groups discuss the aptness of variant captions in order to select the best for the display, they may need to back up their choice of caption by pointing to visual evidence. Their captions may differ, however, because some aim more for style or wit and others more for description or information.

Students of all ages will often want to exhibit their art work and their writing, separately or together. Besides identifying artists/authors and the genre, they may want to surround the texts and pictures with some explanations about technique, theme, occasion, or other circumstances. Labeling and captioning can also just be part of artistically presenting *any* exhibit.

What might also be subject matter are the kinds of already labeled and captioned work described below, some of which might go into either a display or a booklet.

MAPS

Globes, terrain replicas, and dioramas constitute a kind of transition from objects themselves to flat maps, charts, and other two-dimensional graphics. Try to have on hand some of all these, especially many kinds of atlases and maps. They're an important medium and a worthy kind of reading matter. Students need to become experienced with both reading and making maps as an alternative or supplementary way of saying something. They need to discover what can best be said by maps and what can best be said in prose.

Maps feature not only proper names and labels and captions but also coding as well. Thus they'll have some of the same appeal as rebuses and codes, described in the previous chapter. We have found that maps hold an inherent fascination for youngsters, who should be allowed to play out their love affair with them. Maps need not be "taught" so much as pored over and puzzled at until they yield their meaning, without fearful anticipation of tests or required reports afterwards. Because there is no order, the reader has to move around and back and forth until the pieces come together and until he becomes curious enough about the symbols to find the key. Learners like the code-and-puzzle aspect, but to avoid frustration they can ask questions or get a partner. And in emulating professional maps to make their own, they will focus on technical aspects of maps such as keys and projections.

For beginners, obtain literary maps from well-known storybooks such as Winnie-the-Pooh's woods or The Hobbits' Middle Earth. Later, students need not only road and street maps and maps of states and countries but also maps showing distribution of rainfall, resources, wildlife, and so on; older maps showing some changes both in mapping and in knowledge of the world; stellar maps of outer space; maps made by high-altitude, thermal, and electronic photography; and computer-simulation maps.

Mapping can be a way of symbolizing all sorts of physical and psychological material. Children can begin by making simple floor plans of their room, home, or school, or maps of their neighborhood, labeling the streets, buildings, and other features. They can make treasure maps for others to follow. Older students can map inner feelings, thoughts, or interests as well as outer reality, labeling different areas of the head, for example. Once interested in maps, even less mature students will see the many interesting possibilities of the medium for both fun and fact.

CHARTS

Charting or diagraming is a kind of mapping and a good way for small children or less verbal older students to move from pictures to schemas with words, because all it takes at first is inserting words into their drawings. They display what they know about a subject in drawings, diagrams, or photographs that break the subject down into its parts and functions by means of labels and captions, as in a diagram of an airplane. Since charts almost never stand alone but need words to explain them, they provide excellent experience in coordinating words with graphics. Older students discover the value of labeled or captioned visuals as a way to get across a lot of information in a little space and few words. They can use charts to depict the relation of parts to the whole, or to array items similar in some respects and different in others, as in a comparative set of pictures of reptiles. All this corresponds to certain kinds of computer graphics.

Chronology can be shown on a chart as a time line on which are labeled the important events at the appropriate spots on the line. A youngster's first time line might be one of his own lifetime or of the most recent year of his life. Drawings depicting important events and placed on a time line make good starters for memory writing (see pages 359–365). Later he can take a longer sweep of history. Genealogy can be shown on a chart like a family tree bearing people's names and the names of their relationships.

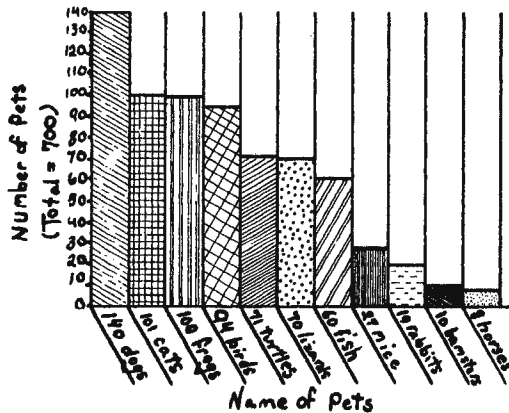
Playing with rummy-type picture card decks in which categories of objects are pictured and labeled may prove a good way to become familiar with the elements of a chart. Children can make their own card decks as suggested on page 137 in *BECOMING LITERATE*, with cut-out pictures or their drawings on one side and names of the depicted objects on the other. These cards themselves are one form of labeling and could be made into the pages of an alphabetized or miscellaneous booklet. If the cards name and depict interrelated things like sea creatures in a hierarchy, they can be made into a chart. Such cards are like an array chart cut into modules, one item per card. They can be considered separately and combined with each other, often in more than one way. Children can make a chart by arraying the cards according to how the items interrelate, as classes containing subclasses, for example.

GRAPHS

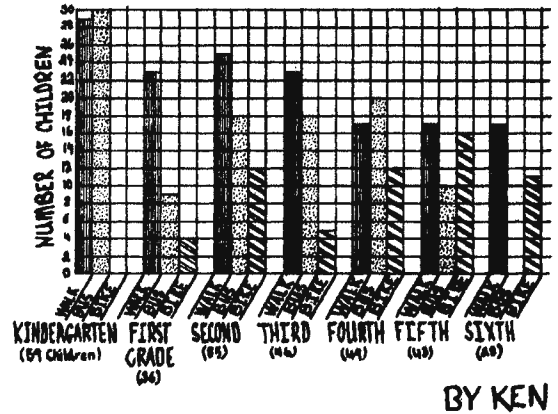
A graph is more abstract than a chart; it is a visual conceptualization of information, a matrix type of data presentation using coordinates. Generally graphs represent quantities laid against some measurement grid. Like charts, they need labels to identify items within the visual and captions above or below to explain how the graph presents its data. Making their own graphs helps students develop more efficiently the capacity to read and utilize graphs.

Elementary school youngsters can begin by graphing simple things like daily temperature or attendance tallies in the form of a bar or line graph. Graphing can, of course, complement regular math work by translating arithmetical figures into drawings and these drawings, in turn, into words. Children thereby make mathematical statements or sentences in an alternative form that in some respects is more familiar (see Figure 12.1). Graphs stand somewhere between mathematical and ordinary language and so afford an important way to translate between the two.

FIGURE 12.1 SAMPLE STUDENT GRAPHS

THE NUMBER OF DIFFERENT PETS OWNED
BY CHILDREN IN JUDY'S SCHOOL

HOW SOME CHILDREN GET TO SCHOOL



BY KEN

Source: Irving Wasserman, Novato (CA.) Unified School District

Every classroom needs to have collections of different types of charts and graphs that students can read and use as models for their own charting and graphing. Some of these can be by former students. Let them compare and define them among themselves and explore what different things may be done with them. Charts and graphs are easy in the sense that they're pictorial and nonverbal, but they're also difficult, because the relations they depict—between quantities, or parts and wholes, or members of a class—are logical relations that are in themselves rather abstract. Thus charts and graphs are a concrete way of depicting abstractions, with words playing a mediating role.

STUDENT ART

Recapitulating history, which moved from pictographs to the alphabet, children convert drawing to writing. Both symbolize meaning. Children's pictures usually encapsulate a story or situation and so lend themselves well to captioning, which gives them a chance to join their nonverbal symbols with their verbal. Writing captions can be facilitated by having available a stock of homemade (or perhaps pre-gummed) blank caption strips of the right size to be taped to the bottom of the art paper.

In small groups students take turns showing their pictures. As each picture is held up, the caption may be folded back and the rest of the group may make up captions for it. They discuss these, the artist reads his caption, and they discuss his in relation to theirs. See page 204 for the same activity with titles in a writing workshop. Many artists' captions will need further explaining because not every-

thing is in the picture and because things the caption refers to may not be evident to the other children.

This discussion prompts children to elaborate orally what the caption summarizes in writing and thus to generate further material. As children develop their writing, they will be able to add text, at the end of a discussion, to their original caption. After the discussion they may decide to write a story based on their picture, telling what action precedes and what follows the picture and answering in a narrative some of the questions their classmates asked. This story, with the picture attached, can be read to others or displayed.

Captions for drawings can be exchanged, and students can draw new pictures for each other's captions. Then these pictures can be compared with the drawings done by the first artists. A variation is to have each person caption his own drawing on a separate paper and then exchange drawings but not the captions. Then each student captions the others' pictures, and these are all compared with the ones the artists did. One of the values of comparing different people's captions is to discover how differently individuals perceive the same words or things.

Captions of particularly evocative pictures may run to several sentences and hence may be a way for some students to begin to write longer pieces without being daunted by blank paper. Gradually youngsters move from individual pictures with captions to a series of pictures that tells a story, comic-strip fashion, to stories in which the words do most of the telling. Finally, the word-picture ratio is reversed until the text is primary and the drawing, secondary. See "Comic Strips" and "Photographs" in *ACTUAL AND INVENTED DIALOGUE* for more suggestions on how to move from captioned pictures to invented dialogues and stories.

COLLAGES

Thematic statements may be expressed in collages of pictures and words pasted onto poster stock. Students can mix found pictures with their own snapshots and drawings. If students choose a subject they feel strongly about, and if they experiment with the compositional possibilities of this medium—juxtaposition, spacing, arrangement, overlapping, or cropping of pictures—the result can be an effective statement in picture and word. If the creators cut out and glue words, phrases, or sentences into a collage, the result may be a kind of found or concrete poem. In addition to making collages with things that interest them, students might collect pictures or words that they feel center on a theme such as who they would like to be in five or twenty years, their real self versus their ideal self, a pressing social issue, or a mood created by a piece of literature, music, or art.

BOOKLETS

A bulletin-board display or book of pictures of class members with their names underneath can help beginners learn to read each other's names. A fuller class book can be assembled, devoting a page or two to each member of the class with his photograph or sketches of him in various characteristic acts or poses, each appropriately captioned, of course. Drawings, paintings, photographs brought from home or taken by the youngsters—these can be captioned in books each focusing on a single subject, such as local or unusual places, sports events, animals, or special events at the school. These provide high-interest classroom reading matter.

■ DICTIONARIES AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Animal books with a picture and name of a different animal on each page can be put together by very young children. Alphabetized, this becomes an animal dictionary. Other books can illustrate and label other concrete kinds of things of high interest. Like adults, children like to show what they know in the form of dictionaries and encyclopedias, which for concrete items can consist of labeled and captioned illustrations. Their mini-dictionaries usually specialize in a favorite subject, with a page for each item students want to name, depict, and define. Elaborating dictionaries by expanding the information in the captions leads to mini-encyclopedias. These can in turn eventuate in collections of illustrated informative articles. The difference, after all, between captions and articles concerns the ratio of pictures to text, of visual illustration to verbal illustration.

■ SCRAPBOOKS

Cut-out photographs, art, cartoons, advertisements (many of which are little more than illustrations with captions), and so on can be captioned and assembled into scrapbooks. Youngsters often express themselves through these creations, especially since their captions act as personal commentary, almost like a reading journal. For this same reason other students enjoy looking and reading through them and are stimulated to talk about them. Reading captioned pictures appeals to weak readers because the words are few, and many of the words are made clear through the pictures.

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES AND MAGAZINE HEADINGS

A newspaper headline or title for an article is a special type of caption meant to attract attention to a text as well as to summarize it. Writing headlines and titles is often done in editorial offices by someone other than the author and is good experience for students of any age, because you have to capture the gist of the text to follow and to get someone to want to read it. Often an evocative photograph with its own caption serves as a way of arresting attention and leading into the main text.

WIT

More mature students find in captioning an opportunity for wit, puns, irony, alliteration, and jokes. Captions have an epigrammatic quality inherent in its root idea of *capturing* the essence of something. They also force the writer to think about what the words could say that the picture has not already said. This leads into matters of verbal style that no picture is capable of and also into more abstract sorts of past background or general circumstances that cannot be visually conveyed.

Editorial cartoons are usually drawings with captions. Depending on wit or incongruity for their humor, they may teach, satirize, or insult. Caricature and other exaggeration in the drawing are juxtaposed with a caption that uses it to make a commentary. Some students will like the challenge of drawing and captioning their own cartoon, but others can just turn a news photo into a cartoon by captioning it satirically and mounting it for posting. Generally, many pictures of

all sorts can inspire wit, and captioning for humor can become an ongoing game for which a posting corner is reserved.

For insults and epithets as witty forms of labels, see page 281, and see “Single Statements” on page 401 for short, independent texts that captioning can lead into—epitaphs, proverbs, aphorisms, definitions, and epigrams.

Labels and captions not only constitute a form of discourse significant in its own right from childhood to adulthood but give less developed literacy learners of any age an easy kind of text to create and interpret as they build toward longer and more disembedded kinds of discourse.