

HOW TO ILLUSTRATE YOUR SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON
A Necessity for All Teachers
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1. The Goal of Sunday School Teaching

Sunday School teaching is **not just talking or lecturing**; it is **causing students to see**. Without seeing, the students' minds may be informed but their heart is not touched. Since **spiritual decisions are not made through argument but through realization, seeing should be the goal of Sunday School teaching**. This is a practical-minded generation, and students are demanding to see things more than to hear them.

2. Necessities in Sunday School Teaching

When we want to **see things** in the night, we must **turn on the lights**. Likewise, if we want students to see the truth, we have to **use illustrations** in our teaching. This generation is **visual-minded**. Their minds are geared for **moving pictures**, but they are not geared for listening. They are **accustomed to pictures, images, scenes, and to rapid movement**. So the best appeal to ordinary students is through their **"eye-gate"** rather than the **"ear-gate."** Since **they like pictures** more than reasoning, they always welcome illustrations.

3. The Importance of Illustrations

Truth is not made known through theology or doctrine alone. It needs the **help of object lessons**. The teacher's job is to **describe the indescribable**, to illuminate the solid truth, to portray the eternal in terms of the temporal, and to make spiritual things comprehensible. Since Sunday School teaching is to **bring students to see, to feel and to act**, when the student has not "seen" the Sunday School teaching has not begun. Illustration is important because:

- a. It is an explanation in itself.
- b. It is frequently employed to prove a point or points of the lesson.
- c. It gives light to the contents of the lesson.
- d. It makes the teaching attractive and pleasing.
- e. It arouses the attention of the students.
- f. It serves to render a lesson impressive.
- g. It helps the student to remember the lesson better.

4. Kinds of Illustration

a. A single word may be emphasized by placing it in an unusual position in the sentence ("Rejoicing" cannot be left out in the parable of Luke 15:3-7). Examples: "Red-haired autumn" / "The day snailed by" / "As involved as spaghetti" / "Brief as a prescription."

b. Simile is a figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are compared, and the comparison is made explicitly and typically by the use of a connective such as "like", "as", "than", or a verb as "seems". Examples: Matthew 13:33; Revelation 4:7; 9:7, 10.

c. Metaphor is another figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object, idea, or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them without using the connective “as” or “like”, and is not literally applicable — “He shall eat his words.”(There are 56 metaphors in the Sermon on the Mount.) Examples: Matthew 5:13-16; 6:22a; 7:13-14.

d. Allegory means “to speak other”, or to mean more than what is really being said. It is the intentional conveying, by means of a symbol or image, a further and deeper meaning than those apparently presented. It may be said to be an extended **metaphor**, may be of greater length and complexity than a **parable**, and is imaginative where **analogy** is rational. Its object is to convey a moral or spiritual touch. Examples: Judges 9:7-15; 2 Kings 14:9; Psalm 80:8-19; Isaiah 5:1-7; Ecclesiastes 12:3-17; John 10:1-16; Ephesians 6:11-17; Revelation 13:1-8.

e. A parable is a brief story using events and characters of every day life to illustrate a moral or a spiritual truth. Examples: Matthew 20:1-16; 22:1-14; 25:1-30; Luke 8:4-8; 10:25-37; 15:1-32; 16:1-18; 18:1-14. All the above illustrations need a good intellect to grasp the profound truths and present them appealingly. The cultivation of these kinds of illustrations for a Sunday School teacher is a must.

5. The Starting of an Illustration

Illustrations should start with the title of the lesson. The title of each lesson should be **captivating, alluring, interesting, and suggestive**. It should cause the students to have a desire to listen to what you are going to teach. “Repentance” is not as attractive as “A Requirement for Salvation”, or “Give Me Another Chance”, or “The Exodus of Life”, or “Carrying out the Garbage”. “Good Samaritan” cannot be as vivid as “Ambushed”, “A Tale of a Traveler”, or “Alpha and Omega”, or “Genuine Love.” In other words, **the illustration of a title should command students’ attention, stir their imagination, and create their desire for learning.**

6. Where to Place Illustrations

a. In the Introduction. Since the introduction is the opening of the lesson, the raising of a question, the awakening of interest, or the creation of a sympathetic atmosphere, illustrations should be used here. The teacher may use an incident, a personal experience, a current event, or a comparison of two figures or events to gain the students’ attention and develop their interest. However, the illustrations should be short. The shorter and more impressive they are, the better. It is the porch of the house and not the house itself.

b. After each major or even minor point. **Since the truth should be seen by the students**, it will be better for the teacher to give an illustration **after each point** in his teaching. The sharp thrust of a **piercing simile or phrase, instead of a long story**, is better for the job.

c. In conclusion. **At the conclusion of one’s teaching, the central point must be focused.** The teacher can conclude his teaching by a summary, a statement, or a searching question, or by saying, “This is the conclusion to the lesson”, or “Now let us conclude our lesson.” But using a vivid and effective illustration is always the best.

7. Sources for Illustrations

a. Vocabulary. The terms and phrases of modern language have become more scientific, but not more devotional in quality. So constant reading of the Bible and good Christian magazines will enrich a teacher's devotional vocabulary. **Most words**, except abstract ones, **create pictures in the listener's mind**. Use of accurate and vivid words is the fundamental principle of illustrating.

b. Stories. Short stories may be used to picture an incident, an event, a character, or a personal experience. Although the effectiveness of this kind of illustration lies in the content of the story, its real effectiveness depends on whether or not the teacher can hold the students' attention. **The way to hold their attention is to keep their mind moving by raising the following questions within themselves: "What is happening?" or "What is going to happen?" or "We want to know the outcome."** **Moving forward and carrying their mind to the destination is the purpose of illustrations.**

c. History. Students are always interested in other people's undertakings and the reasons behind their actions. When historical fact is dramatically presented, students become attentive. However, historical facts are in the past. Thus the teacher must recast them in order to make them familiar and applicable to the students. Recasting requires imagination which means one must put himself back in the time and space of that history and make the walk and talk of the people of a bygone era vivid to the class. Example: Joseph's being recognized by his brothers.

Three things are necessary to make historical illustrations effective in your teaching. First, the history should **fit the present scene**; second, it should **enliven your teaching**; third, it should be applicable to your students.

d. Humor may help or destroy your teaching partially or entirely, because not all teachers have the gift of humor. Anyway, humor, if it is used, should never be used to court favor, to entertain, to display cleverness, **but to throw light upon the teaching**. There is some place for humor in teaching, but no place at all for sarcasm.

e. Poetry can focus the essential points of your teaching more beautifully and powerfully than any other type of illustration, if you have the right piece and know how to quote it.

f. Other sources can be (1) from personal observation of nature, human life, and religious experiences; (2) by personal invention; (3) from a clipping from the newspaper or magazines; (4) from passages of Scriptures; (5) from old and new sayings. All these can also serve as sources for other kinds of illustrations.

8. Cautions in Illustrating

a. **A little salt will make the food tasty; too much salt will spoil the food.** Likewise, too many illustrations will defeat the purpose and confuse the students. Although students may be entertained and delighted by illustrations, teaching will lose its convincing power. The nature of Sunday School teaching is **not** whether it **entertains** **but** whether it convinces!

- b. Never take an illustration and build your teaching around it. In other words, **never let the illustration take over the subject.** However, it does not mean that you cannot take a good Bible story and develop its truth to meet your students' need. **Teaching a Bible story is entirely different from building a lesson on an illustration.**
- c. Illustrations, in general, should fit the context.
- d. Illustrations do not need to be illustrated.
- e. A variety of illustrations is preferred.

For more help on how to teach God's Word profitably, see *The Secret of Church Growth* by Timothy Lin, published by the First Chinese Baptist Church, Los Angeles in 1992.

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