

Props Are Powerful

Supporting Mental Models

WHAT? Props are simply objects that represent items in a story or dramatic plan. Teachers working with young children use props routinely to support vocabulary growth and concept development, such as the props shown to act out the book *Froggy Gets Dressed*, sold by <http://www.funfelt.com/>.



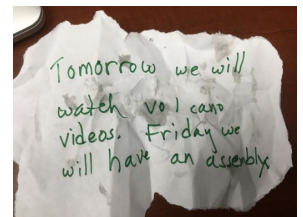
WHY USE PROPS? Props can support:

- Vocabulary Development. For some learners with visual impairments, objects can be highly supportive of learning salient features of an object, such as sails on a sailboat or a trunk on an elephant.
- Concept Development. Many concepts are difficult to explain through words alone, but can be demonstrated by using props.
- Engagement. Props can be highly motivating. We have observed students using props to retell events from texts they have read. This story retelling is a powerful base for writing narratives.
- Building Personal Connections. Some students have items from home that can be used as props to support learning.
- Building Text to Text Connections. Some props can be used across texts to demonstrate ways that they are related.

WHO IS THIS FOR? This tip is for students with very complex challenges, including intellectual impairments and visual needs (including cortical visual impairment – CVI).

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN – SAMPLE PROPS AND PURPOSES.

- Vocabulary Development. We created a 'secret message' and hid it in a book to represent the secret message in Chapter 1 of the adapted graphic novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (www.buildingwings.com). We had 'aged' the message by writing it on parchment paper, tearing the edges, crumpling it, then sprinkling water on it and crumpling it again.



Concept Development. In Chapter 7 of *Journey* lightning strikes the raft and turns the metal on the rafts to magnets. The narrator's boots have metal, so he is stuck and can barely pull his feet away. We made rafts using wooden craft sticks, then created paper boots attached to a large metal paper clip. The boots were placed on the 'raft' with a magnet below, and we tilted the raft to show that the boots stuck firmly, until students used force to pull them away.



Building Text to Text Connections. One team developed a set of props for pirate activities. These were used across several units, including: *Dr. Dolittle*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Treasure Island*.

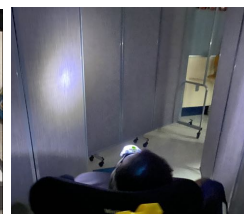
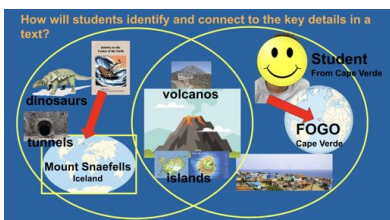


- Building Personal Connections. We were reading a set of books about volcanoes, and realized that our students had minimal background experience. We asked parents to share any connections that their children had to volcanoes including the words volcano, lava, and ashes. We received:
 - A baggie with **ashes** from the fireplace.
 - A **postcard** showing a volcano in Hawaii that a favorite aunt had visited.
 - Best of all, **the lava lamp** from one student's bedroom!



- Engagement. Finding personal connections in each unit helps to engage students. Graphic organizers help students compare key details in the text with their own Journeys (where they are from). Students identify and choose key details from the beginning, middle, and end of each text. Chosen details are brought to life in a meaningful and fun way. Students compared the **volcano** from Fogo in Cape Verde with the volcano from Journey to the Center of the Earth.

We used a tactile globe from American Printing House for the Blind to locate the setting from stories, retell stories about where they are from by recalling identified key details. Students made a clay volcano to locate the **crater** and headlamps brought the story to life searching through a **tunnel** in our classroom to locate their friends who were on the other side.



- Vocabulary Development. Connect key details from text with vocabulary in a tactile and fun way! In the Wizard of Oz, a tactile tornado with mesh fabric is the perfect material to stick Velcro to. Students can retell the story or make their own story by adding symbols, words, and/or pictures of characters or your teachers to the spinning tornado. The 'ruby slippers' can be a fun support, and helps students discuss differences from the movie (ruby slippers) and the book (silver slippers).



Ruby slippers too!-->



WORDS OF CAUTION!

- Don't Overdo the Props. While props can be highly supportive for struggling students, we don't want to do all of the 'heavy lifting' for our students. We want to help them figure out concepts, with some support from us.
- Talk to the Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI). Ask the TVI what features are truly salient to target students with vision challenges. Find out the types of props that will best support them.
- Ensure That Props Are Age-Respectful. Don't order or create babyish props for students in 'double digits'! Be sure that all props used will pass the 'eyeroll test' – that is, they will not cause same-age neurotypical peers to roll their eyes in embarrassment or disdain!