
Eyes on Maths

**A Visual Approach to
Teaching Maths Concepts**

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Contents

Preface	v	Comparing Sizes of Numbers	54
Acknowledgements	vii	Fractions: Halves	56
1. Background	1	Fractions: Quarters	58
Visualisation in Maths	1	Measurement: Meaning of Length	60
Focusing on the Important Maths	2	Measurement: Effect of Unit Size	62
Building Mathematical Communication	3	2-D Shapes Versus 3-D Shapes	64
		Comparing 2-D Shapes	66
		Comparing 3-D Shapes	68
2. Years F–2	5	3. Years 3–5	71
Counting Up by Ones	6	Multiplication: Commutativity	72
Counting Back by Ones	8	Multiplication: The Distributive Law	74
Counting Up by Twos	10	Multiplication: Two-Digit by Two-Digit	76
Counting Back by Twos	12	Division: Remainders	78
Counting Up by Fives	14	Rounding Numbers	80
Counting Back by Fives	16	Place Value: Multiplying and Dividing by Powers of 10	82
Counting Up by Tens	18	Place Value: Renaming Numbers	84
Counting Back by Tens	20	Factors: What They Are	86
Comparing Numbers by Matching	22	Factors Come in Pairs	88
Ordinal Numbers	24	Common Factors	90
Addition as Combining	26	Common Multiples	92
Addition to Describe Part-Part-Whole Situations	28	Fractions: Representing	94
Adding Zero and Adding One	30	Fractions: Equivalence	96
Addition: Commutativity	32	Fractions: Comparing	98
Adding or Subtracting 10	34	Fractions: Mixed Number/Improper Fraction Relationship	100
Subtraction as Taking Away	36	Fractions: Common Denominators	102
Subtraction to Compare	38	Decimals: Relating Hundredths to Tenths	104
Relating Addition and Subtraction	40	Measurement: Standard Units of Length	106
Multiplication: Equal Groups	42	Measurement: Time Intervals	108
Division as Equal Groups or Sharing	44	Measurement: Area of Rectangles	110
Naming Two-Digit Numbers	46	Perimeter versus Area	112
Naming Three-Digit Numbers	48		
Place Value: Grouping in Tens	50		
Place Value: Positions	52		

Lines of Symmetry	114	Describing Percentage	154
Rotations, Reflections and Translations	116	Uses of Integers	156
Enlargement Transformation	118	Subtraction of Integers as a Directed Distance	158
Patterns versus Non-patterns	120	Multiplication and Division of Integers	160
Algebraic Thinking: Growing Additively	122	Measurement Conversions	162
Algebraic Thinking: Shrinking Additively	124	Area of a Parallelogram	164
Algebraic Thinking: Growing Multiplicatively	126	Area of a Triangle	166
		Pi	168
4. Years 6–8	129	How Measurements Are and Are Not Related	170
Square Roots	130	Mean	172
Adding Fractions	132	Sampling	174
Multiplying Fractions	134	Probability: What It Means	176
Fractions: Multiplying as Resizing	136	Unpredictability	178
Fractions as Division	138	Parallel and Perpendicular Lines	180
Fraction Division	140	Angles with Parallel Lines	182
Decimals: Equivalence	142	Equation as a Balance	184
Decimals: Adding and Subtracting	144	Cartesian Plane	186
Ratios: Multiple Ratios Describe Any Situation	146	What Is Linear?	188
Equivalent Ratios	148	Sets of Linear Equations	190
Equivalent Rates	150		
Solving Rate Problems	152	References	193
		About the Authors	194

Background

THIS BOOK IS FOUNDED on two bodies of research, one focusing on the vital role visualisation plays in teaching and learning mathematics and one focusing on the importance of ensuring that students deeply understand the mathematical concepts with which they must deal.

VISUALISATION IN MATHS

When children are young, we use picture books not only to introduce them to the power of books and to the value and joy of being literate but also because visual images are powerful in helping us make sense of our world. Adams and Victor (1993) suggest that vision is the most important source of information about the world. Our embrace of the newest technologies, with the prominence of tablet computers and YouTube, indicates that we have become a highly visual culture in which pictorial images have begun to supplant the printed word as our preferred way of navigating the world.

Sadoski and Paivio (2001) have shown the critical role of visualisation in the domain of reading, and it seems reasonable that the same would be true in the development of mathematical thinking.

Another researcher who has addressed the power of visual imagery is Edward R. Tufte (2001). Although he speaks primarily on the power of visual presentation of statistical data, his ideas can be easily generalised to other aspects of mathematical information.

Consider the power, for example, of showing why $3 \times 4 = 4 \times 3$ using the visual image below as compared with the more symbolic algebraic definition that appears on the next page.

A Visual Argument for Why

$$3 \times 4 = 4 \times 3$$

I see 3 rows of 4 bananas, but I also see 4 columns of 3 bananas.

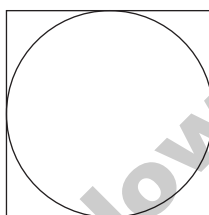
Since $m \times n$ represents m groups of n items, I am seeing both 3×4 and 4×3 when I look at the same thing.



An Algebraic Argument for Why $3 \times 4 = 4 \times 3$

$$\begin{aligned}
 3 \times 4 &= 4 + 4 + 4 \\
 &= 3 + 1 + 3 + 1 + 3 + 1 \\
 &= 3 + 3 + 3 + (1 + 1 + 1) \\
 &= 3 + 3 + 3 + 3 \\
 &= 4 \times 3
 \end{aligned}$$

Similarly, consider the power of showing why the circumference of a circle is less than four times its diameter using the picture below, where the circumference of the circle is clearly less than the perimeter of the square, which has each side length equal to the circle's diameter.



In fact, an interesting book at the secondary level is called *Proofs Without Words* (Nelsen, 2000). In its focus on higher-level mathematical thinking, it shows how ideas are often more meaningfully demonstrated by using pictures as opposed to using symbols.

Rowan and Bourne (1994) have pointed out that understanding mathematical concepts is supported by children's ability to see how those concepts play out. This often involves the use of manipulatives, and it may be that it is not just the kinesthetic, but also the visual, aspect of using manipulatives that is what is relevant. Students can maintain visual images as they work through more abstract descriptions of ideas.

Murphy (2007) points out that it is "well thought-out and carefully developed visual/verbal co-expression of content" (p. 3) that is essential for visual learning.

FOCUSING ON THE IMPORTANT MATHS

There has been an increasing emphasis on identifying "focal points" that should be addressed with students when teaching mathematics. This is evidenced in the *Curriculum Focal Points* series developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2006), as well as the NCTM series *Developing Essential Understanding . . .* (e.g. Dougherty, Flores, Louis, Sophian & Zbiek, 2010). The latter series helps teachers see the most important ideas in each of the topics addressed. Most recently, the effort to develop the Australian Curriculum: Mathematics has been an attempt to create a mathematics curricula that is more focused and more coherent than ever before. The notion is that too many people view mathematics as a checklist of individual skills and concepts students must meet and master instead of seeing it as a connected web with

a relatively small number of highly significant ideas that are visible in many individual situations.

At this point, the objective in developing methods for teaching mathematics is to focus not just on isolated topics but also on what it is about any topic that is important to emphasise. For example, Dougherty et al. (2010) list both big ideas and essential understandings for number and numeration for Pre-K to Grade 2. Rather than just suggesting how high students should count, or the size of the numbers they should add, these authors list concepts students should master in relation to number and numeration, including

- Recognising that quantities can be compared without counting
- Recognising that the size of a unit determines the number of times it must be iterated to count
- Recognising that inherent in a place value system is the use of units of different size

Ideas such as these are addressed in the visuals and questions posed about them in the book.

BUILDING MATHEMATICAL COMMUNICATION

Building a maths talk learning community is an integral step in improving mathematical understanding in a classroom. For the teacher, this involves a progression from simply asking factual short-answer questions to focusing on mathematical thinking and involving students as active participants in the development of concepts in the classroom.

Bruce (2007) points out that to cultivate valuable classroom communication, one of the important elements is the use of rich tasks. Hufferd-Ackles, Fuson and Sherin (2004) suggest that a higher level of discourse is visible in a mathematics classroom when the teacher fosters an environment where students build on one another's explanations of ideas. Sullivan and Clarke (1992) discuss the importance of open-ended questions; they suggest the need for questions that require more than simple recall, that allow pupils to learn from the act of responding to the question, and that are open, with multiple possible correct answers. The questions associated with the visuals in this resource are such open and rich questions.

In the three chapters that follow, the value of visuals, the potential for high levels of communication, and a focus on important mathematical concepts will all be evident.