

# Thousand-Word Pictures

**LEVEL:** High Beginner (can be adapted for more advanced levels)

**TIME REQUIRED:** 30 minutes

**GOALS:** To develop written and oral descriptions of a picture; to make comparison statements describing similarities and differences; to identify cultural elements in a picture and compare them to elements from students' own local culture

**MATERIALS:** An interesting, culture-rich picture (photo-selection criteria are provided in the Preparation section); paper; pens or pencils; a projection device to display the picture (optional)

## BACKGROUND:

Have you ever heard the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words”? It suggests that pictures often communicate information more quickly and more clearly than a written text can. Pictures can be a great source of cultural information for English language learners. Images can provide examples of both surface-level culture (e.g., food, clothing, and art) and deeper cultural elements (e.g., traditional or religious celebrations and interpersonal relationship norms).

This activity, in which students analyze a picture and develop cultural comparison statements, uses some of the same techniques presented in the article describing the Cultural Facilitation Model, beginning on page 2. In this case, students use a picture as “cultural evidence.” This activity can be used with any level, from high beginners to your most

advanced students. You can find ideas for how to adapt this activity for higher-level students in the Variations and Extensions sections.

## PREPARATION:

1. Find a picture showing a culture that is different from your students' local culture. This article includes four example pictures that you can use.
  - The picture you select can relate to any situation, but it's best to find a fairly complex image showing many items, more than one person, and people engaging in real-life activities rather than posing.
  - Think about the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge that students will need to describe the picture. Prepare to teach or review those items. If you have been studying a certain vocabulary topic, try to find a picture that relates to that topic. For example, a picture of a traffic jam or a busy road could provide opportunities to practice vocabulary related to transportation. If you have recently taught terms for family members, a picture of a family party or holiday celebration is a good choice. A picture of a classroom or a school-supply store would give students a chance to use school-related vocabulary.
  - When you evaluate a picture, try to write sentences about it yourself, using the grammar and vocabulary you have taught recently. If you



**Picture 1: Marching band leaders in a New Orleans Mardi Gras parade**

can think of at least five descriptive sentences, the picture is probably rich enough to use with students. You can also think about how the scene in the picture would be different if it were happening in your own community; this can be helpful because students will make cross-cultural comparisons during the activity.

- Once you have found a suitable picture, be sure that you are allowed to use it for educational purposes according to international or local copyright rules. For example, you may need to share the picture's source and the photographer's name during the activity. For information on finding free, open-source pictures to use with this activity, see the Appendix on page 48.

**2.** Decide how you will share the picture with students during the activity. If your class has more than about ten students, a picture printed out or copied on a standard-size sheet of paper will be too small for the whole class to see in sufficient detail.

- If you plan to use paper copies of the picture, prepare enough copies so that students can look at the picture in groups of four to eight people.
- Another option is to digitally share the picture. You can electronically share a picture you found online, or you can digitize a print picture by taking a photo of it with your mobile phone, then share the image file.



Photo by Tabitha Kidwell

**Picture 2: A children's playroom in Chicago**

- o If you have a digital projector, you can project the picture file in a large format on a whiteboard or wall in the classroom.
- o If you are in touch with students via a messaging app like WhatsApp or email, you could send the picture file directly to students. They can look at it on their own mobile devices, alone or in small groups.
- o You could also send students the picture's URL (website address) or write the URL on the board so they can access the picture on mobile devices or class computers (if available). If the picture's URL is very long, you can use a free service, such as bitly.com, to shorten it.

#### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1.** Preteach or review a small number of vocabulary words that will help students describe what is happening and what they see in the picture. Be sure to include words that are needed to describe the picture's important or unusual aspects. Keep these words on the board during the activity.
- 2.** If necessary, review the grammar that students will need to use to describe the picture and write sentence frames on the board to support students' descriptions. For example, to describe Picture 1, the picture of the marching band on page 42, students could use the present continuous tense to write sentences like *Three people are leading a parade* and *Musicians are walking behind them*. To describe Picture 2, the picture of the



**Picture 3: A musician playing guitar and singing by the side of a street**

- children’s playroom on page 43, students could use the phrases *there is* and *there are* to write sentences like *There is a table* and *There are clothes hanging up*. You and your students can use similar sentence frames to write sentences describing Picture 3 (page 44) and Picture 4 (page 46).
3. Display the picture for the whole class to see, or distribute printed or small-screen digital copies of the picture to groups of four to eight students. Give students a moment to look at the picture, then briefly explain the context of the picture. For example, for Picture 1, you might say, “These are members of a secondary-school marching band participating in a Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans, a city in the southern part of the United States.” For Picture 2, you could say, “This is the playroom in the house of a family with small children in Chicago, a large city in the United States.”
  4. Ask volunteers to comment on aspects of the picture they find unusual, interesting, or different from their own local culture. If needed, ask questions to guide student responses. For example, for Picture 1, you might ask students, “Who is leading the parade?” or “What are the students doing?” Encourage volunteers to focus on describing the picture rather than interpreting or evaluating it. For example, if a student says, “The family is rich” for Picture 2, you could point out that the audience cannot know that information for sure just by looking at the image, and you can encourage students to say instead, “The family owns a lot of toys.”
  5. Write one example sentence about the picture on the board. If using Picture 1, you might draw students’ attention to the top right corner and write *People are watching the parade*.

6. Tell students to write at least three sentences to describe elements in the picture that they consider unusual, interesting, or different from their own local culture. Though three sentences should be the minimum, encourage students to write as many sentences as they can during the time provided.
7. Walk around the room to monitor student progress, read students' sentences, and offer feedback.
8. When most students have written at least two sentences, invite several student volunteers to write a sentence on the board as the rest of the class continues writing. Continue until there are at least six sentences on the board.
9. As a class, review the sentences on the board. Work together to correct any major grammatical or informational issues. Don't slow the activity down by spending too much time discussing grammar—if you observe any high-frequency errors, plan to review the associated grammar points at the end of the activity or in a future lesson. Ask students if anyone wrote a sentence about an important detail in the picture that is not yet on the board; add sentences that students suggest.
10. Tell students to imagine that a situation similar to the one in the picture were taking place in their community. Ask

them what would be the same and what would be different about the setting, people, activity, and other items seen in the picture. To get students started, you might ask a specific question about the picture. For Picture 2, you could say, "This family has a room used only for children to play with their toys. Would it be the same in our community?"

11. Ask students which of the sentences on the board would be different and which would be similar if the context of the picture were their own community. To help students develop their answers, you can write these language frames on the board:

- *In the picture*, [old sentence], *but in our community*, [new sentence]. (This shows that things are different.)
- *In the picture and in our community*, [old sentence]. (This shows that things are the same.)

Support students as they share ideas about how to change the original sentences on the board to reflect comparisons made to the local cultural context. Write the comparison sentences on the board. Figure 1 lists examples of how students' descriptive sentences about Picture 2 could be changed into comparison statements that use the language frames.

Original sentence	Comparison sentence
The baby is sitting in a chair.	<u>In the picture</u> , the baby is sitting in a chair, <u>but in our community</u> , babies are usually held by adults.
There is a slide in the room.	<u>In the picture</u> , there is a slide in the room, <u>but in our community</u> , slides are usually at parks.
The children have a toy truck.	<u>In the picture and in our community</u> , children have toy trucks.

**Figure 1. Using language frames to create comparison statements about Picture 2**



**Picture 4: People picking out pumpkins for Halloween**

- 12.** Tell students to review the sentences they wrote and change them to add contrasting information about their community’s culture or to comment on cultural similarities they observe. Students can use the sentence frames and example sentences on the board for support.
- 13.** Have students read their new sentences to a partner.
- 14.** With the whole class, discuss the similarities and differences between the culture shown in the picture and their local community’s culture. Discuss why these similarities and differences might exist.

### VARIATIONS

#### Local Photos

- 1.** Follow Steps 1 to 9, as listed above.
- 2.** For homework, ask students to find or take a picture of a scene in their own

community that is similar to the scene shown in the picture you discussed. Students should bring the picture to the next class.

- 3.** During the next class, ask students to write three to five sentences comparing the first picture and their own picture. Encourage them to build on the sentences they wrote during the previous class by using the pattern “*In the first picture, [old sentence], but in my community, [new sentence]*” to describe differences and the pattern “*In the picture and in our community, [old sentence]*” to describe similarities.
- 4.** Have students read their sentences to a partner.
- 5.** With the whole class, discuss the similarities and differences between the culture shown in the picture and the

culture of their community. Discuss why these similarities and differences might exist.

### Higher-Level Students

Advanced students should be able to describe pictures without the support of sentence frames and vocabulary review. Here are options to adapt this activity for higher-level students:

- Provide a number of pictures to choose from and allow students to choose a picture to write about, based on their own interests. Have them share their descriptions with someone who wrote about a different picture.
- Display a number of pictures around the room, along with a large sheet of paper and some markers for each picture. Have students walk from picture to picture independently, writing descriptive sentences about each picture on the papers and reading the sentences others have written before them. Continue until each picture has at least five sentences. Then, divide students into small groups and have each group discuss cultural differences between their own local culture and what they see in one of the pictures. Tell each group to update the sentences about their picture and share some of their updated sentences with the class.
- Rather than having students write isolated sentences, ask students to write a paragraph about the picture, including appropriate transition words. Have students read their paragraph to a partner, then write an additional paragraph explaining the differences and similarities between their own local culture and the culture shown in the picture.

## EXTENSIONS

### Culture Investigations

Have students research the cultural aspects of one detail in the picture. For Picture 1, students might research Mardi Gras traditions

or extracurricular music programs at American secondary schools (also called “high schools”). For Picture 2, students might research typical American houses or beliefs about raising children. Picture 3 suggests topics such as street-side musicians and entertainment, while topics related to Picture 4 include Halloween, pumpkins and jack-o-lanterns, and autumn traditions. Students can present their research to the class in an oral presentation. Or they could write a short paragraph about what they learned, and these paragraphs could be displayed with the picture in the classroom or on a class blog or website.

### Enter the Picture

Have each student take on the role of a person in the picture. Tell students to imagine what the person is seeing, doing, and thinking. Have them write a journal entry from that person’s point of view. Ask students to read their journal entry out loud, and have the class guess which person’s point of view is being described.

This activity was written by **Tabitha Kidwell**, a doctoral candidate in Applied Linguistics and Language Education at the University of Maryland. She has taught language and trained teachers on five continents. Her research focuses on how to integrate culture within language classes.

# APPENDIX

## Finding Pictures

If you have limited access to the Internet, newspapers and magazines can be good sources of pictures, even if they are from your own community. If your school library has picture dictionaries, they often include pictures of interesting scenes. If you have a chance to travel to another country or a different cultural context within your own country, take pictures of scenes that are interesting or curious to you.

If you have Internet access, the following websites are good sources of pictures:

- Pixabay.com – Offers over 1 million copyright-free images and videos
- Photosforclass.com – Has only images that are appropriate for schools and automatically includes any required citations when you download images
- Foter.com – Shares images that are in the public domain and free for all to use. Search or browse by categories like *food*, *sports*, and *education*.
- Unsplash.com – Publishes images by photographers who chose to share them for free
- The “What’s Going On in This Picture?” column, *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/column/learning-whats-going-on-in-this-picture>) – Every Monday, *The New York Times* shares an interesting, caption-free picture for students to analyze and discuss; the newspaper reveals the photo’s original caption on Thursday.
- Your Shot community, National Geographic (<http://yourshot.nationalgeographic.com>) – This site lets photographers share their pictures with others. Search categories include *culture*, *people*, and *places*. Be sure to give credit to the photographer who took the picture.