

## Notes from a Traveling Author – October/November 2007 Lynne Berry

As I visit schools, I notice that young students struggle with *description*.

In one of my books, about three-quarters of the way through, I read the line, "But Cat was busy, spooking Sprite." I immediately hear a chorus of voices: "Who's Sprite? What's a sprite?" I say to the children, "Let's see if we can figure out who Sprite is by examining the pictures. To 'spook' means to startle or to frighten. Look at the pictures. Which character do you see being spooked by Cat?"

The children are good at identifying the correct character: "Up there! Up there!" But when I say, "Identify the character by describing him in *words*," they struggle. Even with prompts (e.g., "what does his nose look like?"), they often continue to struggle with a *verbal* description (e.g., they gesture with their hands to physically indicate a long nose with a curl on the end). It seems so clear to me to say things like, "He has a long nose with a curl on the end. He has wings. He has funny little feet with curled-up toes. He has a long tail. He has big hands." But this is not so clear to the children.

If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that describing something seen requires a transfer of visual information (in the right brain) to verbal information (in the left brain). Regardless of the neural pathways, transfer of visual information to verbal information is, of course, a skill critical to strong writing! And, of course, the reverse transfer, verbal information to visual, happens on the reader's side of a piece of writing; we always encourage children to "make a picture in your mind" as they read. To develop both strong readers and writers, therefore, we need to encourage children to strengthen the information highways in the brain that allow for fluid conversion of visual information to verbal, and vice versa.

The next time you read a picture book to a group, stop along the way and ask the students to describe a character visible in the illustrations. See what happens—and please let me know if you have better information on the brain pathways involved! Meanwhile, in the spirit of strengthening verbal-to-visual and visual-to-verbal pathways, I have posted an illustration contest for kids on my website; please visit [www.lynnberry.com/contest.htm](http://www.lynnberry.com/contest.htm) if you'd like more information about how your students can enter the contest.