# "WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY"

## THE TOP 10 STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING COMICS

Understanding that comics and graphic novels have a place in the K-12 classroom is one thing. Understanding how to teach them in a way that empowers students is quite another. This workshop provides practical teaching advice about using comics and graphic novels with struggling, reluctant, proficient, advanced, and even gifted readers and writers by looking at pedagogical strategies that maximize student engagement and build confidence with the form. The tendency in the past has been to look at how using comics and graphic novels can improve students' engagement with other literary genres, but this can only come about if students first understand the visual narrative form they're exploring. The workshop will feature a wealth of fantastic print and digital resources that teachers can start using right away in their classrooms.

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### READING FOR THE LOVE OF IT, 2016

# INTRODUCTION

## A Slight Digression: What's the Deal with Comics?

𝕴N my previous presentations at RFTLOI, I've suggested why we should teach comics and graphic novels to young people. I have written about the subject in some depth, and have a website, www.comicsineducation.com, devoted to the teaching of visual narrative in the K-12 curriculum.

This workshop is intended to show you really cool activities that can be done with comics, are inspired by them, or that use the features of visual narrative in order to help students come to terms with some really big ideas. The hope is that you'll be able to take what you've learned here and convince your colleagues not simply that they shouldn't mind you "having a go" at comics in the classroom, but that they should be actively excited about the possibilities of sharing them with their own students.

Comics and graphic novels began to take hold in K-12 education about a decade ago, when companies like Scholastic, Oxford, Rubicon, and others began producing them for students. They had been shunned by education for decades, of course, and had even at one time been considered antithetical to the growth and development of a young person. Some of these feelings are still out there but they are becoming less intensely felt as time goes on.

I've spent considerable time talking to audiences about the importance of understanding visual narrative as a form, and not simply a literary one. We have to keep in mind that unlike poetry, drama, and fiction, comics and graphic novels combine words and images in sequence. This makes the form fundamentally dissimilar to traditional literary genres and makes debates about whether or not they are "literature" rather problematic. What happens in these debates often is that both sides get worked up about whether or not comics and graphic novels should be studied in the same way as are the various literary forms mentioned above. What a ridiculous question, though, when you think about it? What's wrong with studying visual narrative?

Over the next several pages I've included some of the writing I've done on the subject of comics, my history with them, and their place in the ever-evolving field of literary and cultural studies. These articles were originally published in different forums, but when you get right down to it they make the same fundamental argument. It goes something like this:

1. Visual narrative is a literary and artistic form worthy of study. As such, it needs to be seen as part of a tradition and not merely as something without a history.
2. When young people enjoy the form as readers, adults should be careful about dissuading them from enjoying it. Such apparently well-intentioned guidance is almost always counterproductive.
3. In order to appreciate comics and graphic novels, students must learn a vocabulary that gives them access to a way of talking about the form that is meaningful.
4. Those who oppose the form as worthy of serious scholarly study have a fundamental misunderstanding of the form to begin with.
5. The study of comics and graphic novels in the K-12 classroom does not represent a threat to literary studies. Such arguments have no basis in fact.

The following should give you a sense of where I'm coming from when it comes to visual narrative…

# EVERYTHING I KNOW I LEARNED FROM COMICS

## Some Words of Advice for the Inquisitive Child

I remember the moment I learned who I was as a reader. I was at the library, taking out a copy of *Encyclopedia Brown Saves the Day* for what was probably the fifth or sixth time. When I got to the counter, the librarian—who knew me well enough—peered down at me over the rims of her spectacles and asked a question that was to have a profound impact on my life.

"You're such a good little reader, and you're in here all the time," she said, looking slightly put out. "Why don't you challenge yourself?"

The impact of this was not, as one might expect, that I decided right then and there to "put away childish things." I was ten or eleven at the time, so that wasn't happening. Instead, I remember thinking that despite her age and obvious love of books and also apparent interest in my intellectual well-being, the librarian was—in a way that was undeniable—*profoundly* wrong. I also knew that if she could have taken a look at the shelf in my room, she would have found a selection of books that showed I had no interest in joining the ranks of adolescents whose parents try to get them to read the "classics" and thereby pass a death sentence on their careers as young readers. My bookshelves growing up were lined with *Encyclopedia Brown*, *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, and that guiltiest of guilty pleasures, the *Trixie Belden* series. You can have your *Hardy Boys* and your *Nancy Drew*. Make mine the Bob-Whites of the Glen.

When I was a child, I really did speak as a child and understand as a child and think as a child, and that led me straight to books that developed my curiosity, because, of course, I had the curiosity of a child. What these books all had in common—books that incidentally led me directly to comics—was that they were, at their most fundamental level, *participatory* in nature. I could solve the mysteries right alongside Encyclopedia Brown, wonder aloud how Trixie, Honey, and the Bob-Whites were going to figure out some important riddle or clue, and actually construct my own adventures through what was (and is) the most important second-person narrative in the history of children' literature: Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time*. An important part of the participatory element in all of these books was the illustrations. In the mystery books, they allowed me to look with Encyclopedia Brown or Trixie and her friends at the vital clues that were so central to solving the mystery. In the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, I was ostensibly looking at myself on the deck of the sinking Titanic, or involved in a gunfight on the streets of Deadwood City, or being swallowed by a giant grouper when all I wanted to do was to find the lost city of Atlantis.

It's no small wonder, then, that I soon found comics, and it was a marriage of childhood curiosity and captivating sequential art that was, for lack of a better metaphor, made in heaven. Indeed, as I look back at my introduction to comics, and to the heroes and villains of the Marvel and DC Universes I had "discovered," I can't help but arrive at the statement that serves as the title of this piece: *Everything I*

*know I learned from comics*. You might be thinking that comics can't be responsible for *everything* I know. I'm not so sure, however.

Comics gave me a rich vocabulary—not just more words that I could use in an English paper or in a conversation around the dinner table, but a deeper and more profound understanding of what these words meant. After all, my learning of them was tied to a visual experience that allowed me to "see" how these words I was learning looked in the "real" world. Comics taught me the language people use when something really *really* matters—like the-fate-of-the-world-is-at-stake matters—and I could tell what a word that was describing someone's emotions meant from looking at the expression on the character's face or in their body language. I didn't think about it when I was a kid, but Scott McCloud showed it to me in no uncertain terms in his brilliant trilogy of books about comics.

Comics also taught me simple truths about morality and fairness, and about the forces at work trying either to uphold or compromise these values. I was fascinated by the commitment to truth and justice of teams like The Fantastic Four, The Avengers, and the dynamic duo of Batman and Robin, but also by the bizarre antics of The Frightful Four, the Norse god Loki, and, of course, the Clown Prince of Crime himself—characters who were equally committed to causing mayhem. Perhaps most interesting for me, though, were the characters whose motivations were not always clear—ones whose actions could appear noble or nefarious or both. I can remember developing an early fascination with these kinds of characters, even though they were sometimes at the margins, like the Foolkiller, Miracleman, and Scourge. Of additional interest to me was when I got to see the world through the eyes of characters that saw it from an entirely different perspective. I remember as particularly impactful the relationship that develops between The Thing and the alien robot Torgo in *Fantastic Four* #91, when they are forced to participate in a fight to the death on a Prohibition-Era Skrull world where they are being held captive.

Without a doubt, however, I learned my most profound lessons from a strange little series with which I developed an immediate connection—the ten issues that made up the late Steve Gerber's *Omega the Unknown*. Nearly a decade and a half before J. K. Rowling got on her train and had an image flash across her mind of a boy who doesn't know who he is, Gerber gave us James Michael Starling riding with his "parents" down a mountain road in the first issue of the series, one that would lead to their deaths, and to James' profound discovery that there was so much about himself he didn't know. Gerber drew a connection between Starling and the titular Omega that taught me everything I needed to know about the deep and abiding connections we have with one another.

Of course, I have read other things since my childhood, but my love of visual narrative developed directly into a broader appreciation of graphical text. It's no wonder that the fantasy gamebooks of series like *Dungeons and Dragons, Boot Hill,* and *Battle-Tech* soon filled my shelves (Trixie and the Bob-Whites eventually had to be boxed), since their visual appeal and participatory nature made them a logical next step in my evolution as a reader. Is it any wonder, then, that my undergraduate studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario consisted almost entirely of English and Mathematics courses, that my M.A. and Ph.D. explored, in large part, the work of Lewis Carroll, and that I developed a lifelong research and writing interest in the history and theory of games in literature and culture? Is it any surprise that I became an educator?
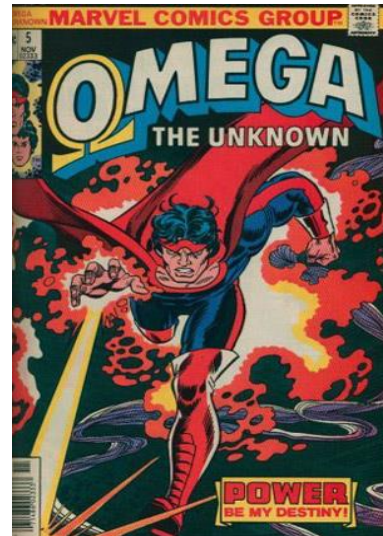
To say that everything I know I learned from comics doesn't quite go far enough as it turns out. Throughout my career, I have written more than fifty graphic novels and reviewed dozens of others. As a grown up, the kinds of comics and graphic novels I read have changed since my childhood and adolescence, but not my passion for sequential art. Indeed, it's more important than ever for me to make the form a significant part of my reading life.

After all, everything I know I learned from comics.



The above article was originally published by The Sequart Organization in the US. It is devoted to promoting comic books as a legitimate art form and to the study of popular culture.

The term "sequart" is an abbreviation of "sequential art." It is used as a term for the medium itself, independent of particulars such as genre (e.g. super-heroes) or format (e.g. comic books, graphic novels, manga, newspaper strips, illustrated text, children's picture books, and even sculpture such as the stations of the cross).

http://sequart.org/magazine/17204/everything-i-know-i-learned-from-comics-some-words-of-advice-for-the-inquisitive-child/

# CHANGING ATTITUDES

## to Comics in the Classroom

T here is no shortage of curriculum experts who have weighed in on the growing impact of comics in the K-12 classroom. Drawing upon anecdotal examples of how visual narrative has been able to engage and inspire reluctant readers, these experts have argued that comics and graphic novels can be important tools to develop basic literacy skills in young readers. Take a classroom of kids, the experts say, who find it challenging to deal with the traditional genres taught in English or Language Arts, and give them comics and graphic novels. Then, watch how their reading, writing, understanding, and engagement with literature improve.

For the most part, these experts are right. Armed with books that have significantly less text than a novel (or even, at times, a short story) and include illustrations that provide a visual anchor, reluctant readers are able to build vocabulary, use visual learning skills to read, and make connections between what is being said, perceived, and understood. Should we continue to use comics and graphic novels to develop basic literacy skills in kids who struggle with reading? We don't need experts to tell us that we'd be foolish not to.

But there's *another* issue with comics in the classroom that needs to be talked about. When it comes to using them with kids in *academic* English classrooms—specifically those classrooms preparing kids for college and university—educators have shown greater reluctance. "Sure, it's fine to use them with kids who struggle," the argument goes, "but academic kids can handle more challenging texts and, heck, who doesn't think we should be challenging kids who like reading to begin with?" This is the product of the first of two related attitudes towards comics commonly found among K-12 educators: that visual narrative is not as worthy of serious study as more "traditional" genres, and as such is only useful in developing the skills of struggling readers. These educators are often assisted by parents of high-achieving kids who want their sixteen year olds reading *The Economist* or *The Wall Street Journal* as supplemental reading rather than *Swamp Thing* or the *Finder* series.

The problem, of course, is that this attitude represents an inability to see visual narrative as a *genre*. As soon as one recognizes it as a genre, considers its origins, and traces its development, one is divested of the idea that it's somehow *not* a genre. Part of this has to do with the fact that comics and graphic novels are a combination of words and images, and that in the Western tradition, something that is *just* words or *just* images is generally understood as a more significant artistic accomplishment than something that is both (with, of course, a few notable exceptions, like the works of William Blake). However, if we're ever going to make significant inroads with comics and graphic novels in academic classrooms, we need to convince educators that visual narrative is *indeed* a genre. It's not an inferior genre or a childish genre or a genre only suitable for students who struggle with reading. On the list of *Time* magazine's *100 Greatest Novels since 1923*, *Fahrenheit 451*, a frequent visitor of academic English classrooms, doesn't make the cut. *Watchmen,* it should be noted, does.

There is a *second* reason, however, that graphic novels (outside of, let's say, *Maus, Persepolis*, and a handful of others) aren't finding their way into academic English classrooms. Sometimes educators will privately admit to me that they don't fully understand comics and would therefore be uncomfortable teaching them. Even those I've met who have spent time researching pedagogical

approaches to teaching comics and graphic novels are still a bit nervous about the enterprise. None of this should be surprising. Few educators teaching in schools right now grew up reading and studying comics in their high school English classrooms.

It's important that we take the time, however, to determine how to teach graphic novels as something more than accessible literature for struggling readers. The most obvious reason is that visual narrative is a genre worthy of study in its own right. Another, though, is that it helps to develop the specific kinds of "new" literacy skills that *all* students need in order to engage with the present millennium. In education circles, there has been a considerable focus on teaching students not simply traditional literacy skills, but a range of 21st-century literacies. These literacies are a diverse group, including critical, cultural, environmental, health, and computer/ICT literacies, to name but a few. And just as the National Reading Panel in 2000 determined the set of skills students need to access basic literacy (six skills in fact, including things like "print motivation" and "print awareness"), there are basic skills that students must develop in order to access these new literacies.

In 2010, I assigned a rather curious task to a group of twenty-two graduate students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) while teaching a course called *New Literacies: Making Multiple Meanings*. The students included K-12 educators with a range of experiences and backgrounds, as well as those working in education in a non-teaching capacity. The purpose of the activity was to determine what they saw as the basic skills needed to access "new literacies." Pairs of students were assigned a given literacy, and then came up with a thoughtful analysis of the skills that would be needed for someone to possess, for example, information literacy or health literacy. The following week, just as one might do in a middle school classroom, I had the students fill up a blackboard with the skills they came up with for their given literacy. Then we simply circled the skills that appeared over and over again. The following five were repeated multiple times:

- Self-awareness
- Metacognition
- Critical Thinking
- Navigation Skills
- Making Connections

Given that 21st-century students in our K-12 classrooms spend a considerable amount of time immersed in a visual culture outside the classroom, it seems absurd to avoid teaching visual narrative to academic students as they develop the above-mentioned skills. Having students navigate through different genres and across different platforms of learning as they critically think about and make connections between poetry, novels, short fiction, visual narrative, epistolary writing, discussion boards, blogs, and hypertext fiction seems like a no-brainer. Are students' self-awareness and metacognition really better served by avoiding comics and graphic novels in the academic English classroom? Isn't visual narrative an ideal starting point in exploring with students both the traditional "print" genres of the novel, short fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, and the world of writing that hypertext and the web has opened up for all of us?

We're in the business of preparing students for the 21st century, after all. We should therefore get busy doing it.

# "REMEMBER WHAT I SAID IN CLASS: NO COMICS!"

## (or why we shouldn't tell kids that what they like to read is dumb)

A friend of mine who volunteers at a local public elementary school recently told me about an incident he found a little strange. He was working in the library when a grade four teacher brought her class in to get books to read. The teacher was giving the kids all of those instructions teachers give when they bring students to the library: be quiet, be respectful of other people, and ask the librarian for help. As the kids were heading for the stacks, however, she threw in one final instruction:

"Remember what I said in class – *no comics*!"

My friend found it strange that the students—who routinely take out comics, graphic novels, and Japanese manga—were being instructed to avoid them. "I guess she thought they should be reading other stuff too," he said.

"No, that's not it," I replied. "She was trying to tell them that what they like to read is dumb."

I've often talked with teachers about my experiences as a young reader, and how I was encouraged to read "more challenging" books rather than the superhero comics, *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories, and Dungeons & Dragons modules that lined my bedroom shelves and eventually led me to pursue a Ph.D. in English literature.

So, it concerns me when I hear stories about teachers actively dissuading students from reading comics, because it runs counter to everything that intelligent people know about reading. If you think about what the above teacher said to her class—if you really *think* about it—you'll see that it does three things that you should never do to an aspiring reader.

1. **It tells students that what they like to read is dumb.**

Imagine that you want to build your students into powerful, lifelong readers. Is your first order of business to tell them that what they like to read is a stupid waste of time? Well, when a teacher tells students "No comics" on a visit to the library that's precisely the strategy being implemented. No doubt

that teacher is hoping to develop the students into lifelong readers, but he or she is beginning the process by shaming their reading habits.

If the teacher feels that strongly about comics, he or she might say "I would really prefer it if you chose something other than comics this time." This is still pretty terrible, but at least it allows an opportunity for the students to ask the question, "Why?"

But "No comics" means "*No* comics" and also, I think, "No discussion about comics" as well as "No discussion about why I said `No comics."

**2. It tells students that their reading habits should be determined by other people.**

A teacher who tells students what *not* to read puts them in a position that is altogether unfair. Seen as an arbiter of knowledge and an authority on what is right and what is wrong, a teacher wields tremendous power. The problem with the situation above is not simply that the students come to understand that the teacher sees comics as trivial, but that they themselves should somehow be comfortable in having their reading habits determined by other people.

There is no better way to compromise children's ability to love reading than to suggest that other people know better than they do what they should read. Kids are likely to believe you and stop reading what they like. Then, I'm afraid, they are also likely to stop reading altogether.

**3. It teaches students that a library isn't a place to discover things but only retrieve them.**

The problem with well-intentioned people, I find, is that they never think of the terrible, awful, well-intentioned things they say and do. When teachers tell students "No comics" on a visit to the school library, they teach students that a library—that great repository of possibilities filled with stories, known and unknown—is only a place to retrieve things that the teachers themselves deem acceptable.

Now someone might make the argument that a kid taking out a comic for the fifth time isn't "discovering" anything, but that represents a fundamental misunderstanding not only of children but of the act of reading.

Such an argument presupposes that a child can't discover or rediscover in the act of reading what he or she loves about the comic: its story, its characters, its beautiful artwork. It also presupposes that the child can't discover anything of value in a new comic they might find while looking for the old one. Teaching children that they can only discover things that we allow them to find is to deprive them of the very act of discovery.

About a week after my friend told me about the incident at the library, there was an update to his story. He related that the same teacher had come to the library again with her students, but without the admonition against comics. My elation was short-lived, however. As the students headed off to the stacks, the teacher once again gave them a reminder about something they had obviously talked about in class.

"No *Star Wars*," she said, as they went to go find their books.

"Oh well," I thought to myself, "I really hope they loaded up on comics."

# FIFTEEN ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING COMICS

**As featured in my presentation, "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility"**



Activity 1: Have students identify words that describe them, then choose images that describe those words, then put the images together and see if it represents them.

Usually, I have students choose ten adjectives. The cool thing that can come out of this activity is the difference between individual presenters in terms of what they take away from it. I've had students say that their collage represents them, that they're not sure, and that it absolutely doesn't.

The coolest answer I've ever gotten came from a student whose final collage was not particularly memorable in itself. When asked whether it represented him, his answer was "not particularly."

"However," he said, "if you could have seen me when I was doing this assignment. If you could have seen the way I was agonizing over what adjectives to choose, what images I should pick, and how I should arrange them, you'd learn everything about me."

That's the power of the activity, I think. It can teach young people about the role of the artist in the process of creating art.

Activity 2: Have students collectively produce their take on an ancient visual narrative.

A fuller description of a "Cave Art Activity" as an inquiry based assignment is described in Appendix A. The goal here is for students to see the power in collectively telling a story. I love what students did at Mary Ellen Henderson Public School in Virginia with this activity, because they were engaged in the process of literally leaving their mark on the school.

What I'm hoping to show students whenever I get them to look at ancient cave art is how old the tradition of visual narrative actually is. With cave paintings stretching back 20000-35000 years in the case of the Cave of Altamira in Spain, it seems to rival in its ancientness the development of oral traditions.

One cool extension of the activity involves two different classes, where students create some sort of "cave art" that bridges the two classrooms. Educators will sometimes do this with books that students have read, but artwork seems like an even cooler application of the idea.
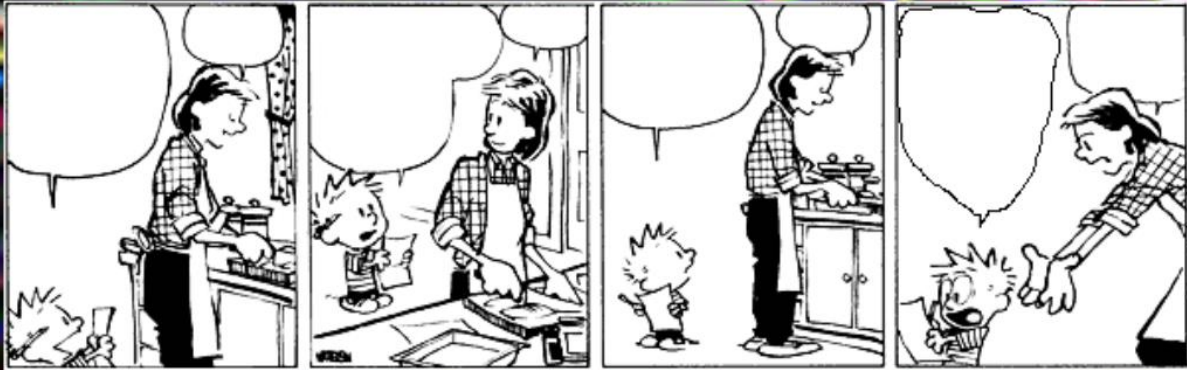
**Activity 3: Tell your story by writing the dialogue for a comic...**

...and then constructing the illustrations for existing dialogue.

The first of these two activities is good as a warm up, either as something principally intended to get students to show their humorous side or as an exercise in getting them to understand tone. The second requires a bit more time and effort, and is better suited to students who are already studying the graphic novel form.

I've used the first activity with middle schoolers, but also with kids as young as Grade 2. What I'm always amazed by is how much they want to express themselves in this way, giving voice to things that they find hilarious by putting them in the dialogue bubbles of cartoon characters. When I've done this activity with very young students, it can take fifteen or twenty minutes for each of them to show me what they've written and to make sure I love it.

I always do.

The ultimate extension of these activities, of course, is for students to create their own comics, but it's so important that they are given opportunities to experiment with these simpler activities. We might like to think that kids these days come ready-made to express themselves with the visual, but they actually need a lot of practice with simpler writing and drawing activities in order to be able to put together something as complex as a graphic story.

**Activity 4:** Have students compare a comic written in a language other than English to its English translation.

JE NE SAVAIS PAS TROP QUOI PENSER DU FOULARD. MOI J'ÉTAIS TRÈS CROYANTE MAIS MOI ET MES PARENTS ENSEMBLE ÉTIONS TRÈS MODERNE ET AVANT GARDE.

I REALLY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK ABOUT THE VEIL. DEEP DOWN I WAS VERY RELIGIOUS BUT AS A FAMILY WE WERE VERY MODERN AND AVANT-GARDE.
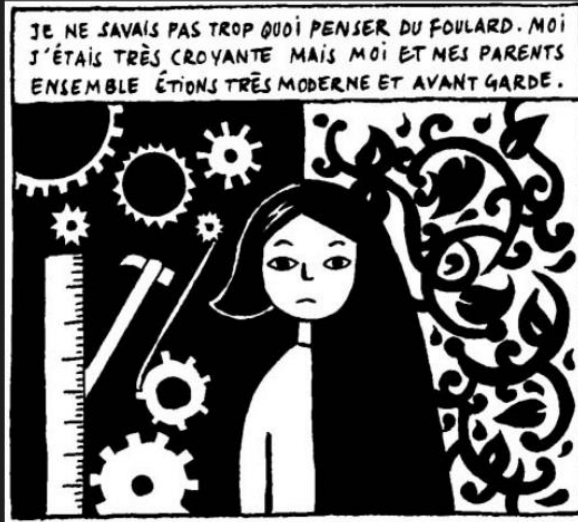
In this example, from *Persepolis*, the original French is close to the English translation, but the two are not identical.

This is a great activity for so many reasons, not the least of which is that it teaches students what happens when works of literature are translated from one language to another. If teachers are actively engaged in teaching works in translation, graphic novels are a great place to start, both because the text is accompanied by a visual backdrop and because there is far less text than in a novel or work of drama.

What my own students have discovered in engaging in these activities is that sometimes a character in a graphic novel will use a particular manner of speaking, sentence type, or syntactical arrangement that won't just change in translation, but will reveal something about the differences between how the character will be received in one text and the other.

Going from the French of a bande dessinee to English is one thing, but looking at the choices made in translating a manga graphic novel from Japanese to English can be quite another. Not only are their issues with translation to deal with, but manga carries with it both visual and textual features that are inherent to Japanese storytelling in a visual medium and that don't immediately make sense to a western reader.

With the exposure to manga through its explosion in North America over the past two decades, young people are developing a better understanding of these features, but it's crucial for someone teaching the form to be aware of them as well.

After all, when it comes to comics, we need to be as prepared as some of our students will be!
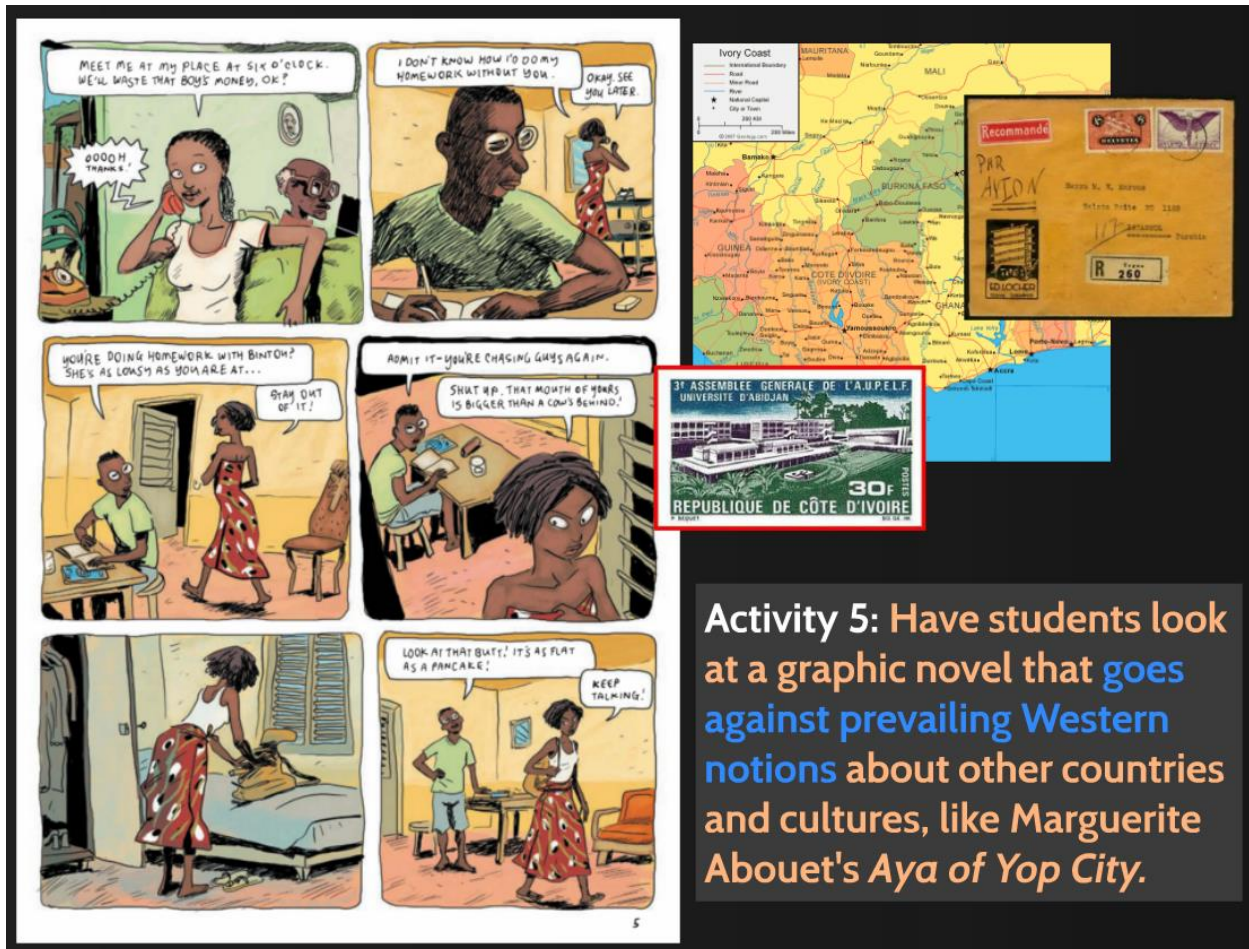
Activity 5: Have students look at a graphic novel that goes against prevailing Western notions about other countries and cultures, like Marguerite Abouet's *Aya of Yop City.*

There are plenty of Western narratives about life in other countries and cultures, and so it's important that we spend time with students exploring narratives that are a product of those other countries and cultures. It's what Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche calls the "danger of a single story" in her brilliant Ted Talk about our cultural assumptions as they apply to the books we read.

What I've found with graphic novels, however, is that they often manage—the good ones, anyways—to avoid some of the cultural bias that creeps into the text-only memoirs, travel writings, and works of fiction that shed a Western light on non-Western countries.

The reason, I think, has to do with the medium. So many contemporary graphic memoirs or works of travel writing, like those of Guy Delisle or Joe Sacco, have this way of using their visual canvas to show us how things are There is a kind of honesty that is the product of how these stories—because they are illustrated—can't hide the reality of what they are showing despite what particular perspectives their authors might have.

There are a substantial number of graphic novels being written -- of which *Persepolis* and *Aya* are simply very well-known examples-- that give us insight into what is happening in other parts of the world *by people who are living in these other parts of the world.*

We should be reading these graphic novels with our students and encouraging them to seek out others.

This, I think, is an especially useful activity once the student has become very familiar with the form and with the fundamental similarities and differences between how different traditions use the textual and the visual.

We should be surprised when we find similarities, however, since in the case of Japanese and North American comics, their connections go back several decades. For example, the exaggerated physical features of certain manga characters, like the enlarging of the eyes, has its origins in manga only after being borrowed from American comics.

If you think about the portrayal of certain Disney characters in the comics of the 1930s, for instance, or a classic cartoon icon like Betty Boop, these are the things that inspired some of the proportionalities we see in contemporary Japanese comics.

For this activity, I'm trying to get students to see the relationship between words and images in comics. I also want them to see how translations deal with taking these relationships in one comic tradition and realizing them in another.

In the example given above, the focus is on the unobtrusiveness of the narration. Students studying A Distant Neighborhood often remark on how the English translation manages to preserve this unobtrusiveness, either by trying to incorporate narration outside of caption boxes and blending into the natural background, or using oversized dialogue bubbles whose white space "diminishes" the text.

Learning literary terminology is not every student's cup of tea, but visual narrative can be a useful ally in the process. One of the best ways to teach literary and rhetorical devices is to use the panels of comics and graphic novels, with their limited textual fields, to show students basic and even complex figures of speech, repetition, and omission.

Because graphic novelists deploy words with less frequency (or perhaps greater intermittency) than those who write fiction, great care must be taken with maximizing the text that is used. How does one get the most out of text when there isn't much to begin with? It's precisely the same sort of question that a poet must ask himself or herself.

Indeed, pulp comics are a great place to start, especially with younger students, because they often use far more literary features than their creators even realize. The above panel, for instance, not only uses basic repetition (conduplicatio) but also anaphora (i.e. "It never does! It never will!") and epistrophe (i.e. "My baby…safe! Yes, safe!"). Figures of repetition are used for emphasis, and so, in combination with all of the exclamation marks, we can see how the dramatic tension in the scene is heightened.

Some educators assume that students can only get a proper dose of literary and rhetorical figures from the classics, but this is a false assumption. Comics, with their limited text and accompanying illustrations, are a great place to start.
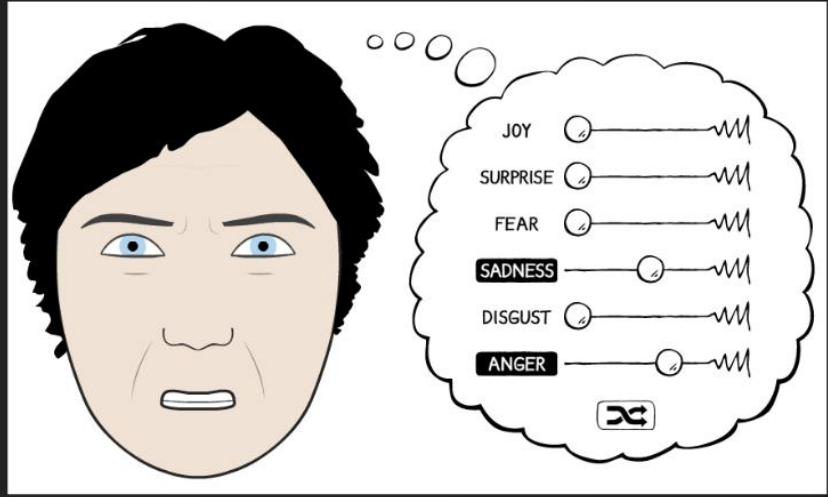
## Activity 8: Have kids figure out the emotions of their favorite superheroes by using the Grimace Project.
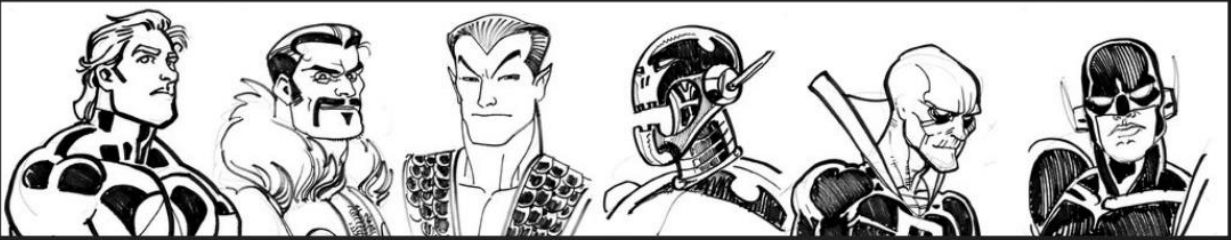


I use the Grimace Project when teaching Theory of Knowledge, an epistemology course in the International Baccalaureate program that asks students a fundamental question: "How do we know what we know?" Emotion is not only important as a way of feeling, but as a way of knowing and of acquiring knowledge.

Because of their subject matter, superhero comics give young people valuable insight into basic human emotions that, as Scott McCloud observes, we all seem to share: joy, surprise, fear, sadness, disgust, and anger. What this activity does is to have students attempt to replicate facial expressions of their favorite superheroes, beginning with ones that are relatively straightforward and then moving to ones that are more complicated. The interesting questions that this activity raises is what the differences are between these basic and complex human emotions. It also gets us thinking about the different gradations of emotion, as McCloud once again shows us in *Making Comics*.
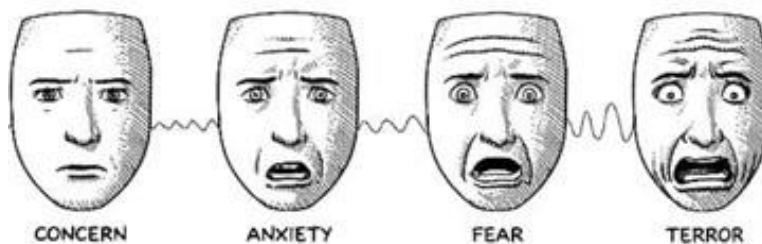
**Activity 9:** Get students to "exercise" this vocabulary by identifying a filmic shot in both a comic and its adaptation.

Establishing shot (and a long shot)

Medium long shot

This is from the film and comic book versions of *Watchmen*. The latter was written by Alan Moore.

Comics are such an important medium with which to explore film, not simply because they strike us as something akin to storyboarding—which they aren't—but because their analysis relies on a lot of filmic language. One thing that is especially fascinating is exploring both the book and film versions of graphic novels, like *Persepolis, A History of Violence, 300, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, From Hell,* or, as in the case above, *Watchmen*.

*Persepolis*, as a film, is very well done, not because it's an animated version of a cartoon but because it does things in a filmic way that interprets what the graphic novel does in a graphic novel way. Some films find the transition challenging because they go out of their way to mirror the comic.

The issues with the film versions of *300* and *Watchmen* attest to this fact. Although visually stunning, Snyder's decision in *300* to go with a film that almost tries to map the graphic novel shot for shot left the film reviewers with mixed feelings about it.

The *Watchmen* film was even less successful, since the comic's great strength was how it served to comment on the history of the form. As numerous commentators have suggested, in order for the Watchmen to replicate this, it would have had to pay to homage and to play with the history of film as a form, not comics.

**Activity 10:** Even cooler is teaching students the language of certain kinds of critical theory, and having them apply this language to comics.

Lips are parted connoting desire despite aggressive pose

Gaze is extra-diegetic and focused on the viewer

Costume's design accentuates the figure's physical characteristics.
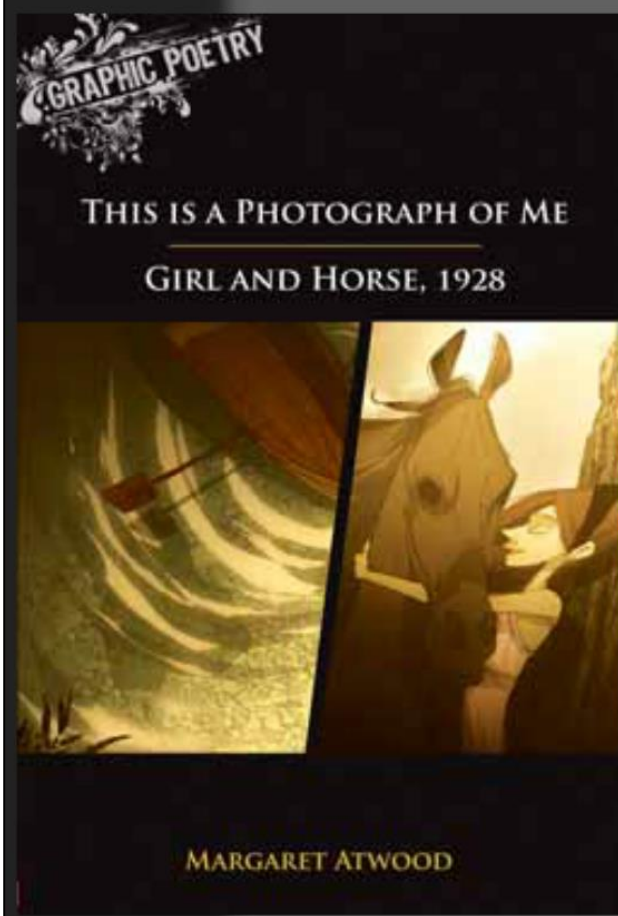
Proportions are distorted, unrealistic.

The assumed male spectator is placed in the role of assailant.

Okay, I wouldn't spring something like Gaze Theory on students before Grade 11, because they need to have a level of maturity and a sophistication of thought in order to wrestle with many of its ideas. I didn't study the Gaze until I was doing my Ph.D., but I'd maintain that what I learned about visual media and narrative cinema from the likes of Laura Mulvey and John Berger made it the most useful graduate course that I pursued during my postsecondary education.

There is a whole lexicon that goes with Gaze Theory and one of the best online resources is Daniel Chandler's "Notes on the Gaze" (http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/gaze/). However, if you'd like a quick primer on the subject and are getting ready to teach comics, visual art, advertising, or film to senior students, you can check out "The Language of the Gaze" on my website (http://www.comicsineducation.com/the-language-of-the-gaze.html).

There are lots of ways to go with the Gaze when it's applied to comics, some obvious and others less so. Looking at misogyny in superhero comics is not a novel idea, but using the Gaze as a lens through which to view it is analytically empowering for students. However, I've had students (like David, who I cite in the presentation) who have looked at how things like the extra-diegetic gaze can be used not to objectify, but to allow the reader/viewer to identify with the subject or subjects in question.

The Gaze is a challenging branch of theory, but with the right students it can yield some amazing results.

**GRAPHIC POETRY**

**THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME**

**GIRL AND HORSE, 1928**

**MARGARET ATWOOD**

Rather than inhibiting a students' imagination, graphic poetry can have the opposite effect by showing students that poetry can, indeed, come alive.

**Activity 11**: Have students read a graphic poem. Then, have them creae a work of visual art that depicts their enduring understanding of that poem.

I had a student do this a couple of years ago after they wanted to take a look at a graphic adaptation of Margaret Atwood's poetry before creating their own.

There are so many ways to go with such an activity. One of the best is for the student not simply to replicate a panel from the graphic poem, or even create a "lost panel" or panel sequence from the poem (a very cool idea in its own right!) but to be inspired by the visual and interpret the poem as a whole.

This is what my student, Kersti, did in her take on Atwood's "Flying inside Your Own Body." Her interpretation hinges on the fact that her painting actually…well…hinges! With her interpretation on the outside of the "reality" of female experience—the terror of waking to discover that you're no longer flying inside your own body—she disguised the fact that she had hidden her interpretation of the first part of the poem on the inside.

This project wouldn't have come about, however, without Kersti having read the *Graphic Poetry* book featuring Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me" and "Girl and Horse, 1928." This gave her the idea that exploring the visual wasn't simply "interesting" but was, in fact, encouraged.

Other cool things to with graphic poetry are to look at how the visual reinforces, supports, undermines, or cuts against the various literary and figurative devices in the graphic poem. How is the illustrator capturing these in his or her illustrations, or is something different being done that provides some other kind of "reading" of the language the poem presents.

To find out more about Graphic Poetry, you can find it discussed on my website at http://www.comicsineducation.com/graphic-poetry.html.
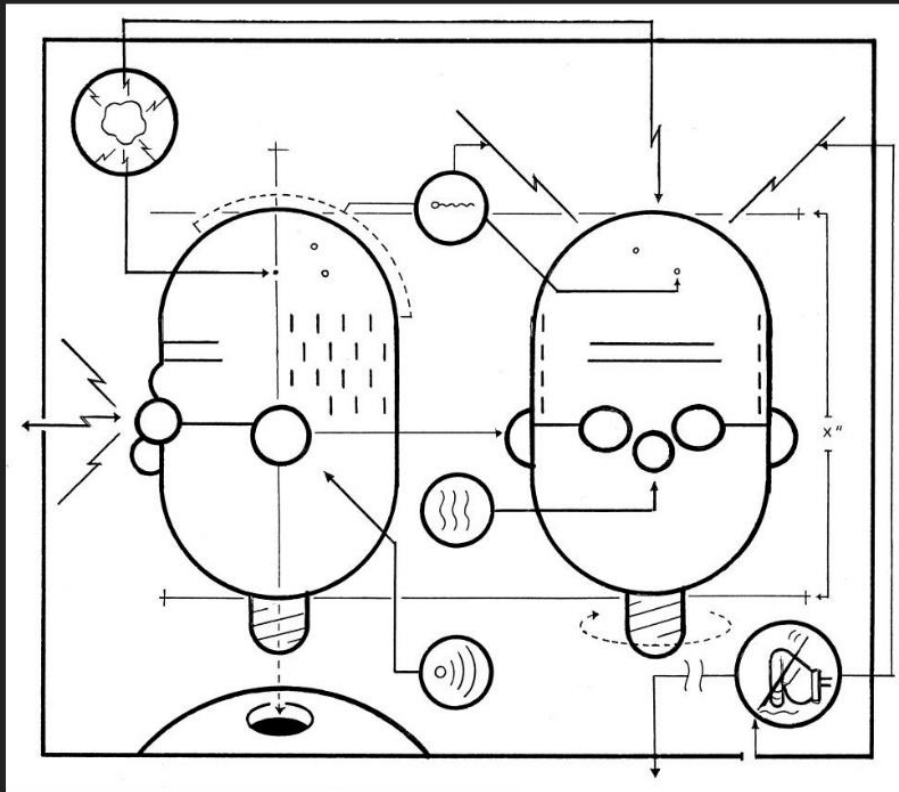
# Activity 12 -- Superhero Self-Portrait

This activity is simple enough. Students are given two minutes to create a self-portrait in which they show themselves to be superheroes. No stick figures allowed. Instead, the students use geometric shapes to realize their creations, with the hope that they see how without much thought on their part they can create something that is, when they get right down to it, a comic.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| *SUPERHERO NAME:* | *SUPERHERO NAME:* | *SUPERHERO NAME:* |
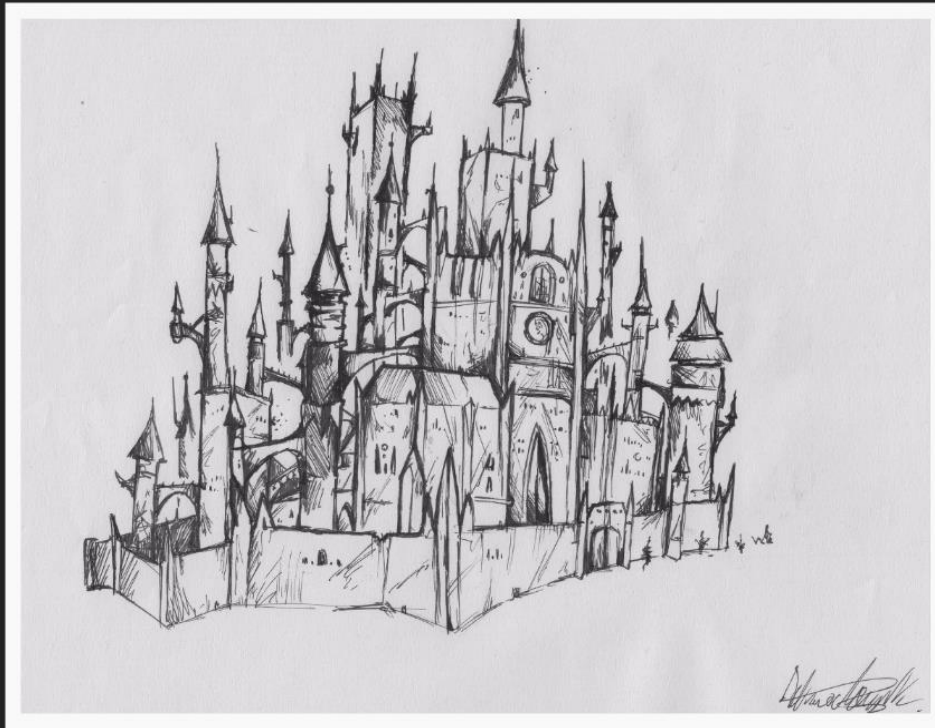
## Activity 13 -- Drawing a Castle

Two minutes to draw the first castle, one minute for the next—then thirty and fifteen seconds respectively. This shows students that when under time constraints they can still create a basic form.

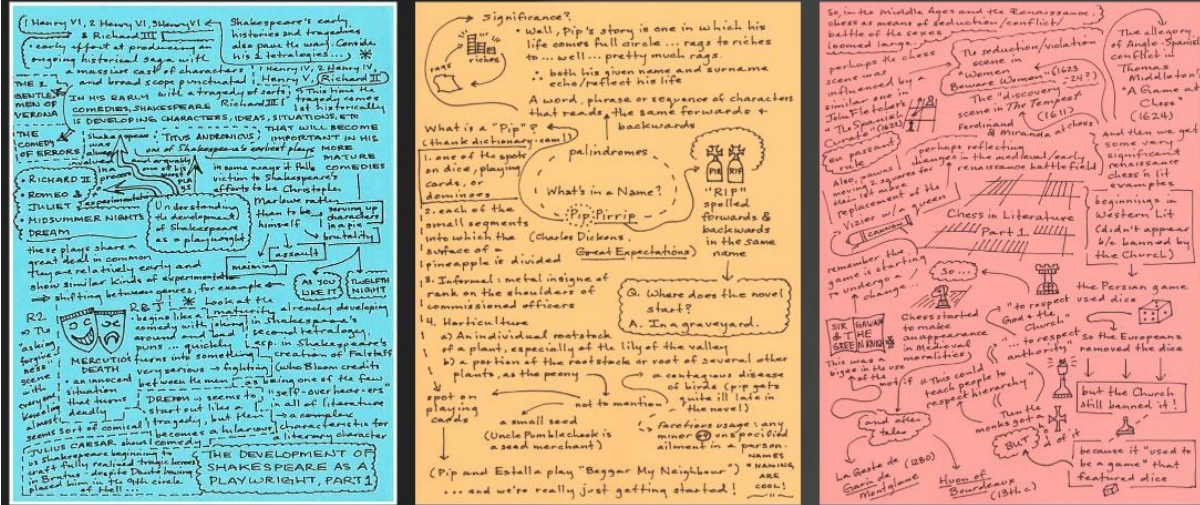| TWO MINUTES | ONE MINUTE |
|---|---|
| THRTY SECONDS | FIFTEEN SECONDS |

## Activity 14 -- The Monster Comic

Students use squiggles and closed shapes to create comic book monsters.

| | |
|---|---|
| | |
| MONSTER'S NAME: | MONSTER'S NAME |

## Activity 15: Give students a theme, idea, chapter, question, or lines of prose, poetry, or drama and let them think visually!

### What they'll give you back is nothing short of amazing!

This activity is awesome and it will yield dividends for your students, especially because it frees them from having to think linearly and instead allows them to open up their mind to different possibilities.
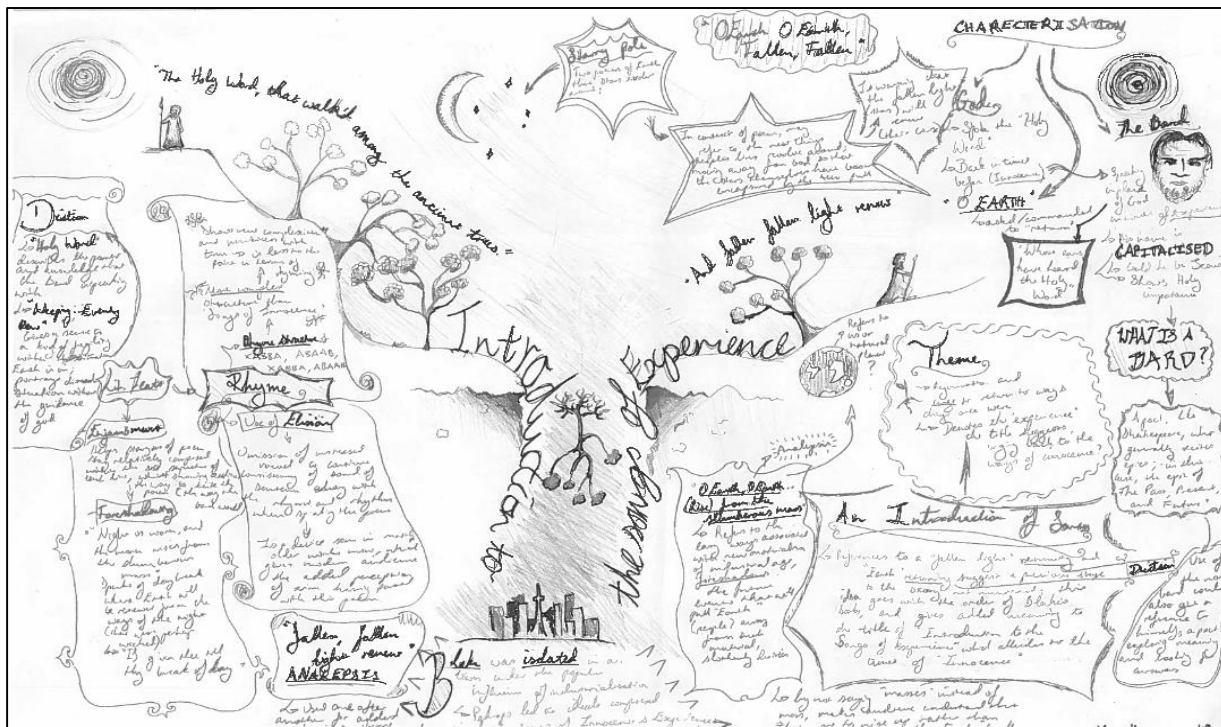
# APPENDIX A – "CAVE" ART



**Description:** Students create a piece of visual art that shows a day in their life in the manner of a cave drawing. It is up to the individual student to determine how much or how little they represent, how much of their canvas they apportion to a particular moment or event, and how they use colour, shape, and form to represent their activities or experiences. Once they have completed the piece of visual art, students then produce a written reflection in which they try to explain not simply what they have represented, but the process by which they came to represent it.

**Skills:**   Self Awareness, Critical Thinking, Metacognition

**Purpose:** By the end of the activity, students should come to understand something about how they have represented themselves and their activities and experiences, how they have chosen to budget their visual space to this end, how they have gone about deciding what to include and what not to include, and what their piece of visual art does and does not say about them.

**Critical Thinking Questions:**

- Does my work of art tell a story?
- Does it represent me? Does it only represent some of the things that I do?

- When someone else looks at my work of art, will they understand something about me? What sorts of questions might they ask me?
- Is there a question that my work of art raises that is difficult for me to answer?
- How is my work of visual art similar to or different from a single panel graphic story or visual narrative?
- What are the limitations of this work of art in showing other people who I am?

**Metacognition Questions:**

- What were the steps I took in putting my work of art together?
- Was there anything I wanted to show but decided not to? Was there anything I didn't want to show but decided to anyways?
- Was there anything that I might have embellished, misrepresented, took artistic license with in representing by day-to-day activities and experiences in this work of art?
- What was the most difficult part of putting together this work of art? What did I struggle with?
- What do I think is the most successful part of my piece artistically? What do I think is the most successful part of my piece in terms of representing who I am?

**How Can Visual Narrative Foster Inquiry in This Activity?**

Because students are creating a product that is ostensibly about them, that they generally care about, and that they are given a fair bit of freedom to put together, they tend to do a good job reflecting on what they have produced. However, the real power of the activity for me derives from what I learned this year from a student who was giving a presentation after engaging in a very similar activity. When asked to what extent the final amalgamation of images represented him, the student replied that he didn't think it much represented him at all. "However," he said, "if people could have seen the process I went through deciding what to include and what not to include—how I put everything together—they would have learned *everything* about me." Visual narrative and visual storytelling show us *so much* about what a writer and illustrator are thinking, feeling, seeing, and trying to articulate—what they value as a story and what they want us to see and experience.
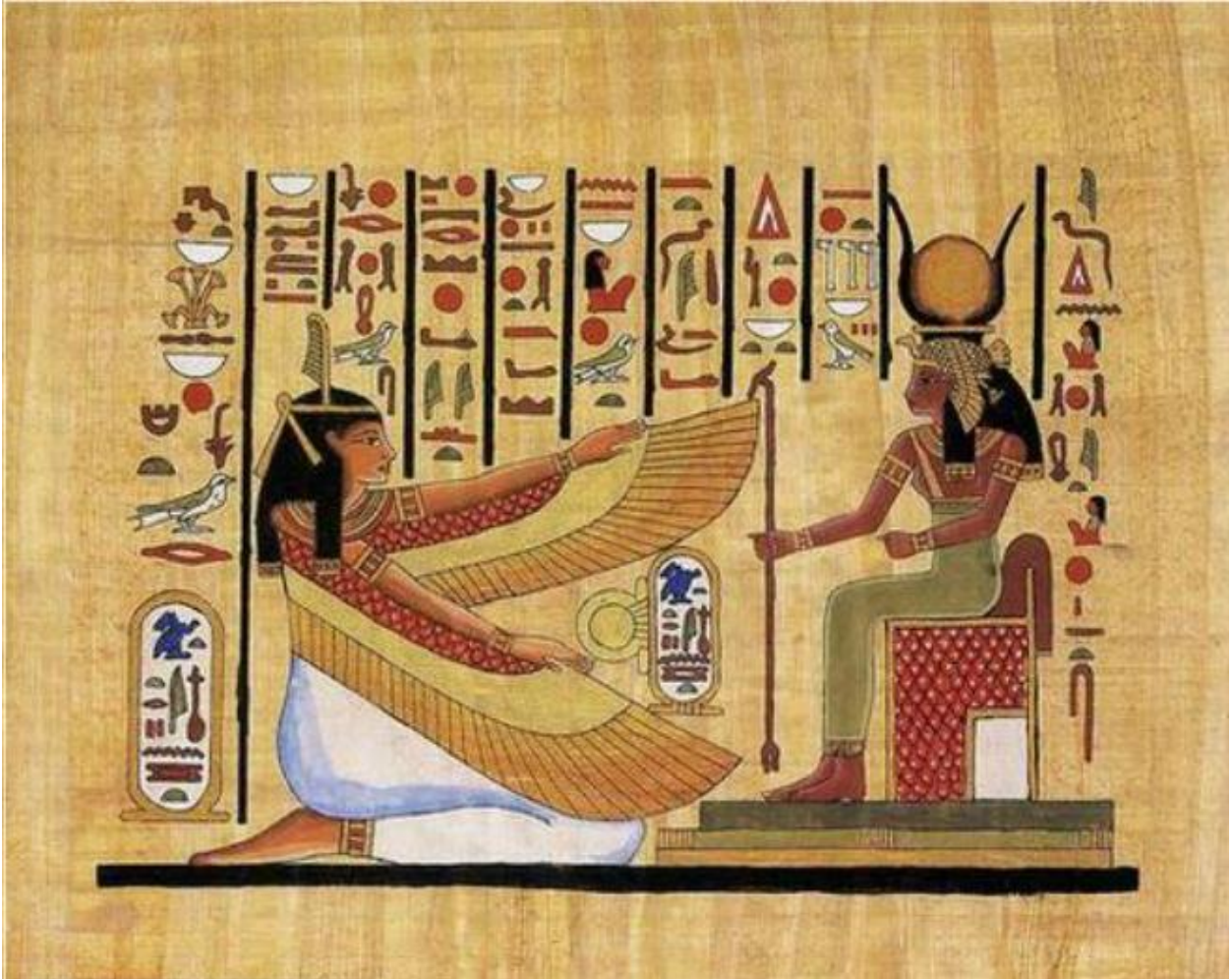
**Recommended Read for the Teacher**
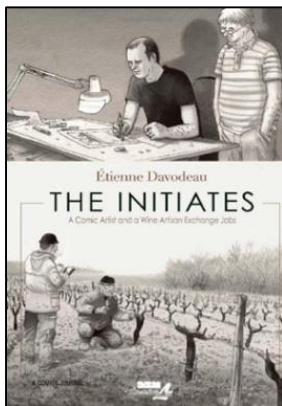


*The Initiates: A Comic Artist and a Wine Artisan Exchange Jobs,* by Etienne Davodeau, Translated by Joe Johnson

In this critically acclaimed graphic novel, Etienne Davodeau recalls the experience of learning the craft of wine making in the Loire Valley from vintner, Richard Leroy. At the same time, Davodeau gets Leroy to learn the art of creating and publishing graphic novels. The story is brilliantly told, and from it we come away with a genuine understanding of how much people from different backgrounds and occupations can learn from one another by seeing what actually goes into what they do.

IT'S A LOT MORE INVIGORATING THAN YOUR DRAFTING TABLE, EH?

HA HA HA!

HOW LONG HAVE YOUR GRAPEVINES BEEN HERE?

THEY WERE PLANTED DURING THE SIXTIES.

SO THEY'RE OUR CONTEMPORARIES.

?
WELL, YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT!

WE'RE THE SAME AGE.

HA HA HA!

I'D NEVER THOUGHT OF THAT!

# APPENDIX B – WORD AND IMAGE



**Description:** Students create a visual representation of an historical figure, famous scientist or thinker, literary character or individual related to the discipline they are studying and use symbolic elements in order to convey something about that character's personality, mindset, nature, or temperament. Once they have done this, they write a reflection that explains how these symbolic elements help us to better understand the character in question.

**Skills:**   Critical Thinking, Metacognition, Making Connections

**Purpose:** By the end of the activity, students should understand something about how symbolic language can help us understand the visual representation of a character or individual, how symbolic language is similar to and different from orthographic language, and how words and images can have a genuinely emotive power in a given context.

**Critical Thinking Questions:**

- Would my project be as effective if the symbolic language I've used was replaced with orthographic language (a statement, for instance, that says something similar about the character or individual)?
- Does the final work represent my own attitude towards the individual I have represented? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What are some things that a symbolic, visual language can do that a written language cannot? What about the reverse?
- What would be the most difficult question for me to answer about my work?

**Metacognition Questions:**

- Why did I choose the particular symbols I have used in representing the personality, nature, or temperament of the character or individual I have chosen to represent?
- To what extent were my choices based on creating something that worked as a piece of art? To what extent were they based on creating something that represented the character or individual in question?
- If I were someone else, would it be easy for me to recognize what the symbolism is trying to suggest about the character or individual?
- What was the most interesting part of putting this composition together?
- What can I learn from the other projects that I have seen?

**How Can Visual Narrative Foster Inquiry in This Activity?**

Some critics have argued that graphic novels derive their power from a rather unique quality—their lack of photographic realism. When looking at a photograph, for instance, we are acutely aware that we are *only* looking at a photograph. We are not witnessing the events taking place or the people affected by them in real time, because the photograph tells us that these things have already happened. In a graphic novel or story, however, things are not so clear. We are more likely to accept that when we see little Marji in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, we are actually looking at a "real person." The cartoonish nature of the representation has the opposite effect we think it might. Because it's obviously a cartoon, our minds don't wrestle with the question of whether it's the actual character or only his or her representation. So, we don't tell ourselves that this line drawing isn't really Marjane Satrapi. We just accept that it is.

**Recommended Read for the Teacher**



*Persepolis,* by Marjane Satrapi

Satrapi's autobiographical tale of her experiences during the Iranian Revolution is a profound work on many levels, not the least of which is her ability to use word, image, and symbol to express the transformative events to which she bore witness. Indeed, the strength of Satrapi's visual narrative is her ability to infuse her panels with symbolic touches that no realistic photograph has the same power to express.
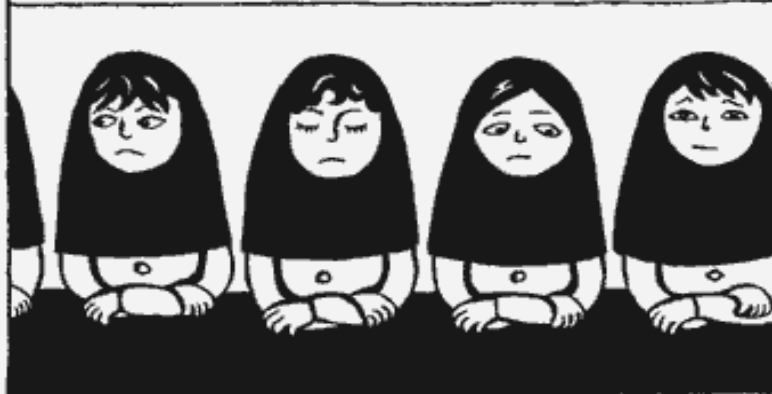
# APPENDIX C – VISUAL NOTE-TAKING



**Description:** Students use a combination of words and images in order to create a visual narrative of a process, sequence, set of instructions, or procedure related to their study within a specific discipline. The instructor can have them create this to show the steps they have taken in a lab, to organize how they will prepare for a set of exams, to reflect on a strategy used in a particular sport or physical activity, or even to explore how they might handle and unfamiliar task.

**Skills:** Self Awareness, Critical Thinking, Navigation Skills

**Purpose:** By the end of the activity, students should recognize the extent to which using a combination of words and images can help them to think in non-linear ways about a given task. There is much to be said when it comes to note-taking of breaking things down into a series of written steps, bullet points, or explanations, but going from the intricate web of ideas in a student's head to the linear is not always easy. The visual note-taking, process description or instruction writing allows them not just to think outside the box, but to put the box aside and just to think.

**Critical Thinking Questions:**

- When I am encouraged to explain my thoughts both with words *and* images, do I find this easy? Do I have a tendency to want to only words or only use images?
- If I am trying to explain a process or a set of steps with words and images, what benefits do I see in using both?
- How are other students organizing their ideas on the page? What can I learn from this?
- Could I see myself using this activity in other areas of my studies or in my daily life?
- Has the activity helped me to clarify what I am trying to express? Has the visual nature of it helped me to "see" something that I might have otherwise ignored?

**Navigation Skills**

- Could I give this process, procedure, or set of instructions to someone and could they follow it?
- What might my classmates indicate are the strengths and weaknesses of my visual note-taking?
- How could I transfer these visual note-taking skills to a laptop, an iPad, or some other piece of technology? Would I be able to accomplish something similar given the right program or app?
- Do I consider the visual note-taking to be an end product in itself, or does it just allow me to get my information together so that I can create accurate and detailed notes, instructions, or procedures as written text?
- Does anyone else take notes, or describe processes or procedures in this way?
- Would there be an advantage to do visual note-taking collaboratively?

**How Can Visual Narrative Foster Inquiry in This Activity?**

This activity is thinking and inquiry in their purest form—allowing the student to make sense of something without being restricted by the linearity of formal sentence mechanics. If a picture tells a thousand words, and there are a thousand words in the student's head, do I really want to have them write them all down? The inspiration for the activity comes from the Bayeux Tapestry, a 70 m long woven fabric showing the Battle of Hastings and both what led up to it and what followed. This remarkable medieval comic doesn't just give us insight into 11th century Anglo-Norman relations, but what the weavers perceived worthy of inclusion, and what they felt they needed to explain or refrain from explaining.

**Recommended Read for the Teacher**
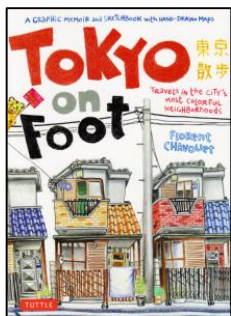


*Tokyo on Foot,* by Florent Chavouet,

In *Tokyo on Foot*, Chavouet draws Tokyo as he moves through it. He doesn't draw it as an exotic place full of Buddhist temples or a crazy place full of karaoke bars. He draws it as a real place with real people—in short, he draws it as it is. His remarkable clarity with which he takes us through Tokyo shows us the power of visual note-taking: that it can allow us to see much more clearly than we can necessarily describe them in words.

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# APPENDIX D – WORDLESS NARRATIVE



**Description:** Students create a storyboard or visual narrative that does not contain text. The exercise has wide application, whether in having students block a scene from a work of drama, visually relate the progress of a character's story from a work of fiction, or visually represent the story of a particular historical moment. The exercise is similar to Activity 3: Visual Note-Taking, but the student is not permitted to use words in order to communicate his or her ideas.

**Skills:** Critical Thinking, Navigation Skills, Making Connections

**Purpose:** By the end of the activity, students should perceive the challenges of communicating without words, translating the written or verbal into the visual, and developing a narrative that is comprehensible to their audience when said narrative must be interpreted in the absence of explanation. The aim of the exercise is to develop the student's communication skills and transliteracy: the ability to demonstrate literacy across a range of platforms or mediums of expression by making meaningful connections between them.

**Critical Thinking Questions:**

- What is my visual narrative forced to leave out for the sake of economy?
- Do I gain anything from not being able to represent every moment of what I am trying to depict?
- Would someone looking at my visual narrative be able to understand it? If they had a question, what would their question be?
- Is there something that I now understand about what I'm representing that I didn't understand before I drew it?
- Is there something about the way in which I drew or represented this visual narrative that says something about how I feel towards the subject?

**Making Connections:**

- Am I better able to represent my narrative in pictures or in words? Why?
- Is there any illustration that would benefit from having some clarifying text associated with it?
- In each panel, is it easier for me to show my audience what I mean with a picture or would it be easier to simply explain it?
- What is the usefulness of being able to communicate in images alone as opposed to words alone or words and images?
- Is there a way for me to better understand how I can translate my ability to write to my ability to visually represent ideas and vice versa?

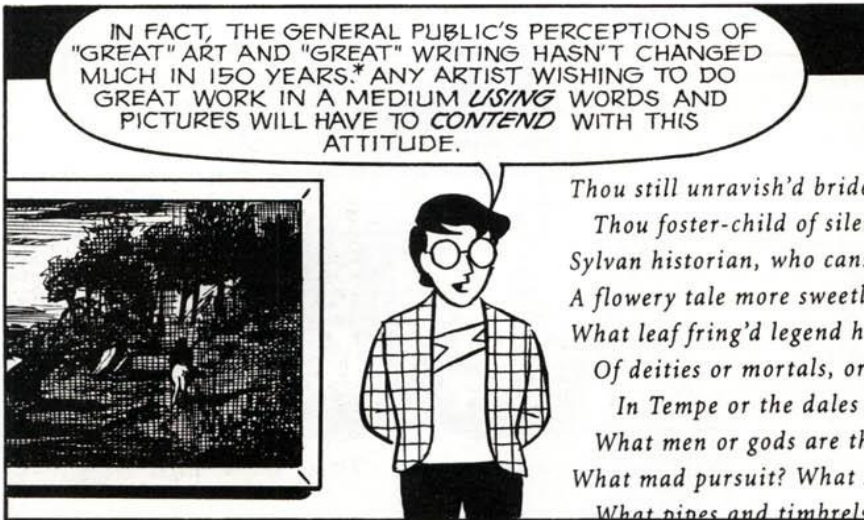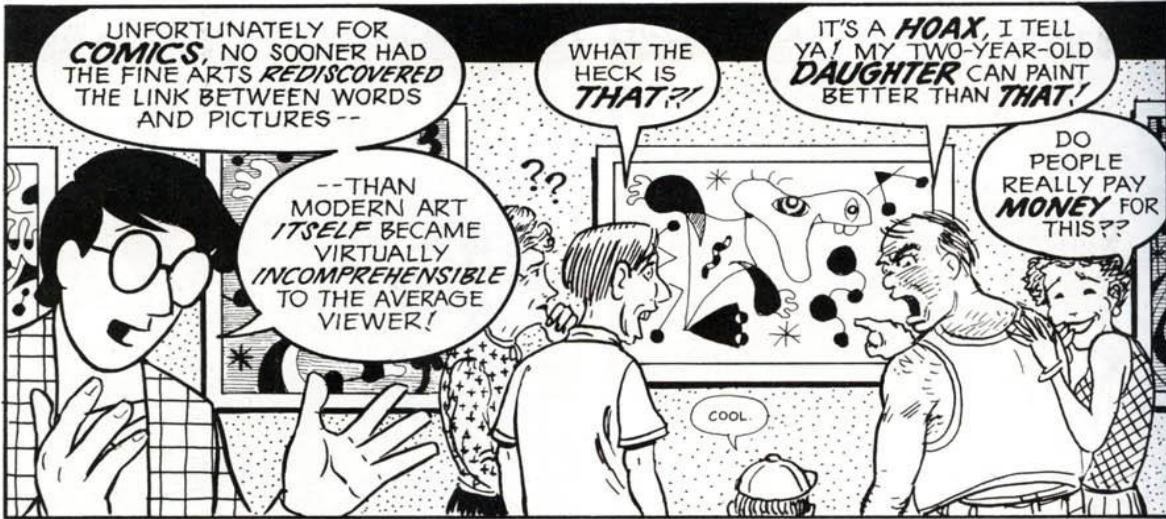**How Can Visual Narrative Foster Inquiry in This Activity?**

As in the previous activity, students will have a dizzying range of questions that they will have to ask themselves at the outset of the activity: "How do I represent this scene from a play or short story without needing pages and pages of illustration?" or "How can I best capture the most important features of a historical battle in a way that a person examining it can understand?" My inspiration for this activity comes from Hogarth's "A Rake's Progress," which Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* cites, along with hieroglyphics, cave art, etc. as a forerunner to the comics of today. I've always been impressed by the fact that little or no text (other than the naming of the individual paintings), the audience has little difficulty perceiving what is happening to the rake. As our global village shrinks and our students are immersed even further into a principally visual culture, being able to communicate with the visual takes on an increasing importance.

**Recommended Read for the Teacher**
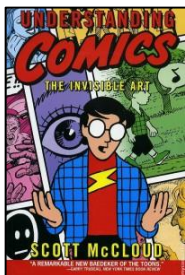


*Understanding Comics*, by Scott McCloud

This is the de facto Bible for understanding the fine art of visual narrative. In *Understanding Comics,* McCloud shows us that comics are a genre worthy of consideration, with a fascinating history that can be traced back to our own pre-history. Like the great Will Eisner, McCloud is generally considered to be among the most important writers about comics from within the tradition.

UNFORTUNATELY FOR **COMICS**, NO SOONER HAD THE FINE ARTS *REDISCOVERED* THE LINK BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES--

WHAT THE HECK IS *THAT?!*

IT'S A *HOAX*, I TELL YA! MY TWO-YEAR-OLD *DAUGHTER* CAN PAINT BETTER THAN *THAT!*

--THAN MODERN ART *ITSELF* BECAME VIRTUALLY *INCOMPREHENSIBLE* TO THE AVERAGE VIEWER!

DO PEOPLE REALLY PAY *MONEY* FOR THIS??

COOL.

IN FACT, THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS OF "GREAT" ART AND "GREAT" WRITING HASN'T CHANGED MUCH IN 150 YEARS.* ANY ARTIST WISHING TO DO GREAT WORK IN A MEDIUM *USING* WORDS AND PICTURES WILL HAVE TO *CONTEND* WITH THIS ATTITUDE.

Thou still unravish'd bride
Thou foster-child of siler
Sylvan historian, who cans
A flowery tale more sweetl
What leaf fring'd legend he
Of deities or mortals, or
In Tempe or the dales
What men or gods are th
What mad pursuit? What s
What pipes and timbrels

IN OTHERS *AND* IN *THEMSELVES...*

...BECAUSE, DEEP DOWN INSIDE, MANY COMICS CREATORS STILL MEASURE ART AND WRITING BY *DIFFERENT STANDARDS* AND ACT ON THE FAITH THAT "*GREAT*" ART AND "*GREAT*" WRITING WILL COMBINE HARMONIOUSLY BY VIRTUE OF *QUALITY ALONE.*

•FACE

TWO EYES, ONE NOSE, ONE MOUTH.

Thy youth's proud livery, so gaz'd on now...

* NOT AS MUCH AS WE LIKE TO *THINK* IT HAS, ANYWAY.

**150**

# APPENDIX E – GRAPHIC POETRY



**Description:** Students read, examine, and create graphic poems, and consider both the implications of using the visual in connection with poetry, and whether an artist or poet/artist can visually represent the intricacies of literal and figurative language. The hope is that students will recognize the beauty of graphic poetry and thereby develop a greater fondness for and appreciation of poetry proper.

**Skills:**   Self Awareness, Metacognition, Critical Thinking, Navigation Skills, Making Connections

**Purpose:** By the end of the activity, students should see that there is something to be gained and something to be lost in marrying a poem with its graphic illustration. What is gained is a visual context that the reader can use to help him or her understand what is actually happening in a poem. What is also gained is the recognition of what art can and cannot do with pictures in order to mimic or represent the figurative. What is lost, perhaps, is precisely what is lost when the curtain rises for the presentation of play and we see the gradual unfolding of the directorial decisions that will define how the performance in front of us will interpret the stage directions and dialogue of the playwright.

### Critical Thinking Questions

- When I read a graphic poem, how do the illustrations make my experience different? Are there certain poems that illustration would help me understand better than others?
- Does graphic poetry have to be more than just an illustrated poem? Can it be less?
- Does graphic poetry detract from the poem by providing a visual interpretation that might not be in accordance with the reader's?

### Self Awareness and Metacognition Questions

- When I read graphic poetry, do I actually enjoy the experience? Do I personally prefer this experience to the one of just reading a poem itself?
- When I write and illustrate a graphic poem, how do I decide what kinds of illustrations I will make? How do I decide where the text goes on a page, and whether I use comment bubbles, thought bubbles, narrative boxes, or something different altogether?

### Navigation Skills and Making Connections

- If I were to create an animated poem in which the visual illustration actually moves and breathes, would that change the visual narrative I would construct?
- How can the visual component of a graphic poem echo the poem's use of literary devices and figurative language, like metaphor and repetition?
- How is graphic poetry like a play in performance or the filmed version of a novel? Does it have similar advantages and drawbacks?

### How Can Visual Narrative Foster Inquiry in This Activity?

Reading graphic poetry can help students to make sense of some of the complexities of the poems they examine, even if those complexities are what is literally "happening" in a given work. In my experience, though, a student is far more likely to want to bring their critical thinking and inquiry skills to bear on a poem that they believe they understand than one they don't. As students move through the process of reading, analyzing, and creating graphic poetry, it is essential that teachers encourage students to develop an ongoing dialogue with the work they are studying.

### Recommended Read for the Teacher

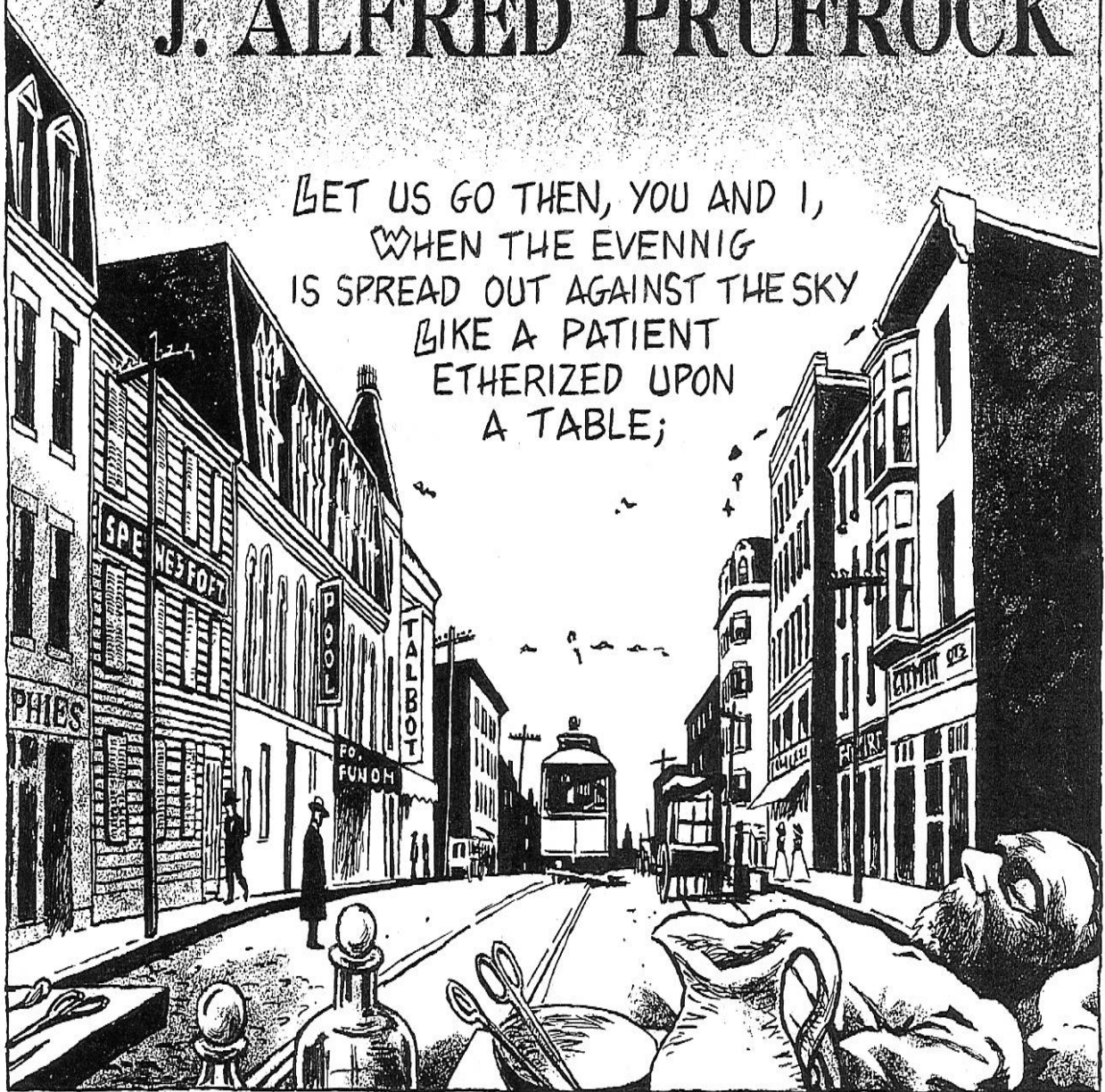*The Graphic Canon, Volumes 1-3,* Edited by Russ Kick
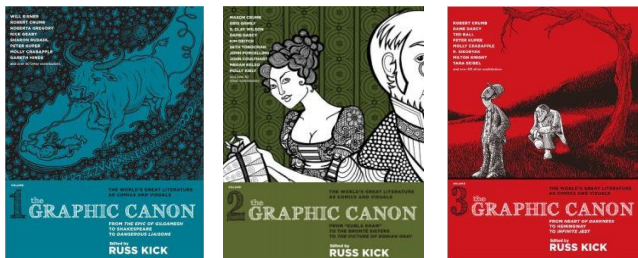


This three volume set takes classic works of literature in poetry and prose and shows what award-winning artists can do with great writing. It is a must-read for anyone who appreciates the beauty, power and potential of a visual literary canon.

# INQUIRY-BUILDING GRAPHICA (K-8)

Teachers are always looking for resources that can help them develop inquiry-based learning in their students. What follows are some possibilities for educators that are ideal for a K-8 audience. One advantage of these series is that their content is appropriate for young learners and they've been designed specifically with children's development as readers in mind. When bringing trade publications into the classroom, it's always a priority to read the work thoroughly. A great recommendation from a colleague might turn out to have content that wouldn't work with a junior or middle school audience.

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**BOLDPRINT KIDS GRAPHIC READERS (K-3)**      **www.boldprintkidsgraphicreaders.com**
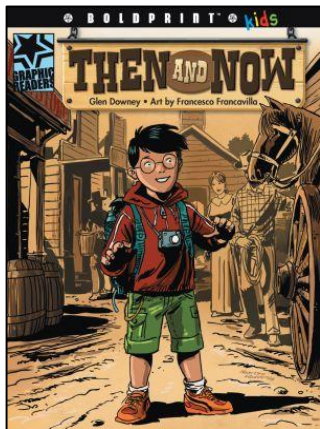


**BOLDPRINT** Kids Graphic Readers are engaging, Canadian, leveled little books that are great for early literacy instruction and building the minds of inquiring learners. They allow beginning readers Level A through R the opportunity to interact with this popular and motivating format, and offer teachers the opportunity to easily integrate these fun and functional books into their existing literacy program.

Winner of the 2010 TAA "Texty" Textbook Excellence Award

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**BOLDPRINT KIDS GRAPHIC READERS (4-6)**      **www.boldprintgraphicnovels.com**
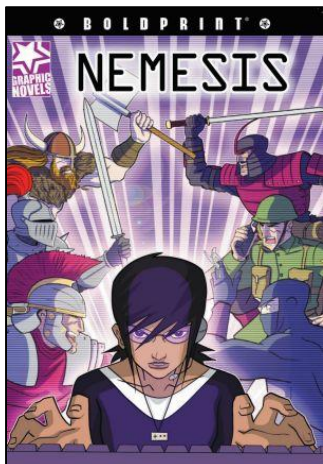


Based on titles from the Boldprint Kids series, BOLDPRINT Graphic Novels are action-packed and uniquely Canadian. They are great for Literacy and Language Arts Instruction, and developing inquiring minds. Leveled to support junior and intermediate guided reading, these graphic novels combine engaging topics and breathtaking illustrations to support a specific reading strategy. Moreover, each graphic novel also includes questions and activities in Arts, Media, Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening.
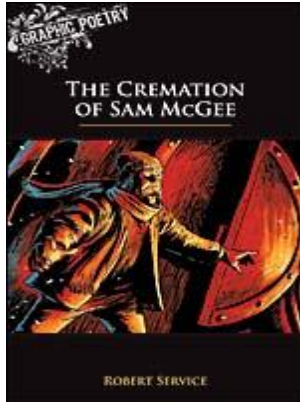
Winner of the 2010 TAA "Texty" Textbook Excellence Award and the 2011 Teachers' Choice Award for the classroom

**GRAPHIC POETRY (6-9)**

The books of the Graphic Poetry series combine the wit and artistry of classic poems with the rich and vivid imagination of contemporary artists. The high-quality illustrations, in a variety of styles throughout the series, bring curriculum-linked poems to life while helping students develop critical skills necessary to achieve a deeper understanding of challenging concepts such as imagery, figurative language, tone, and mood. (Grade 6 reading level)

Winner of the 2010 TAA "Texty" Textbook Excellence Award and the 2011 Teachers' Choice Award for the classroom

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**TIMELINE (5-9)**          www.timelineseries.com
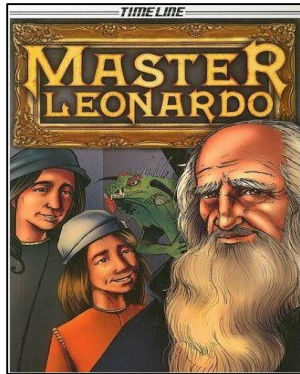
With adventures that take place throughout history—and into the future—*Timeline* is packed with heroes and villains that will capture the imaginations of both boys and girls. Your students will love them because they are cool and you'll love them because they are motivational and packed with non-fiction learning. Each title features a young male or female protagonist who is set in a particular historical context. They interact with both real and fictional characters in the narrative that unfolds. A number of these graphic novels are available under the *Treetops Graphic Novels* brand through the Oxford Reading Tree program.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

**ON THESE AND OTHER RESOURCES,**

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**or on Twitter @GlenDowney**

# GRAPHIC NOVELS – THE BEST OF THE BEST

The list below provides an overview of some of the best graphic novels of the past 40+ years.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1972 | Buddha | Osamu Tetsuka |
| 1978 | *A Contract with God* | Will Eisner |
| 1985 | *Comics and Sequential Art* | Will Eisner |
| 1986 | *The Dark Knight Returns* | Frank Miller |
| 1986 | *Watchmen* | Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons |
| 1986 | *Maus* | Art Spiegelman |
| 1989 | *Sandman* | Neil Gaiman |
| 1993 | *Ghost World* | Daniel Clowes |
| 1994 | *Understanding Comics* | Scott McCloud |
| 1995 | *V for Vendetta* | Alan Moore and David Lloyd |
| 1995 | *Out from Boneville* | Jeff Smith |
| 1996 | *Fax From Sarajevo* | Joe Kubert |
| 1996 | *Finder* | Carla Speed McNeil |
| 1996 | *Adolf: A Tale of the 20$^{th}$ Century* | Osamu Tezuka |
| 1997 | *Astro City* | Kurt Busiek |
| 1999 | *300* | Frank Miller |
| 1999 | *Good-bye, Chunky Rice* | Craig Thompson |
| 1999 | *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* | Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill |
| 2000 | *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* | Chris Ware |
| 2000 | *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* | Jean-Phillipe Stassen |
| 2002 | *The Greatest of Maryls* | Lynda Barry |
| 2003 | *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography* | Chester Brown |
| 2004 | *A History of Violence* | John Wagner |
| 2005 | *Blankets* | Craig Thompson |
| 2005 | *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* | Marjane Satrapi |
| 2006 | *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* | Alison Bechdel |
| 2006 | *American Born Chinese* | Gene Luen Yang |
| 2007 | *The Arrival* | Shaun Tan |
| 2008 | *A Drifting Life* | Yoshihiro Tatsumi |
| 2008 | *Omega: The Unknown* | Jonathan Lethem |
| 2008 | *What It Is* | Lynda Barry |
| 2009 | *Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth* | Doxiadis and Papadmitriou |
| 2009 | *Footnotes in Gaza* | Joe Sacco |
| 2010 | *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* | Sarah Glidden |
| 2010 | *X'ed Out* | Charles Burns |
| 2011 | *Infinite Kung-Fu* | Kagan McLeod |
| 2011 | *The Silence of Our Friends* | Long, Demonakos, and Powell |
| 2011 | *Habibi* | Craig Thompson |
| 2011 | *Garden* | Yuichi Yokayama |
| 2012 | *Building Stories* | Chris Ware |
| 2013 | *The Initiates* | Etienne Davodeau |
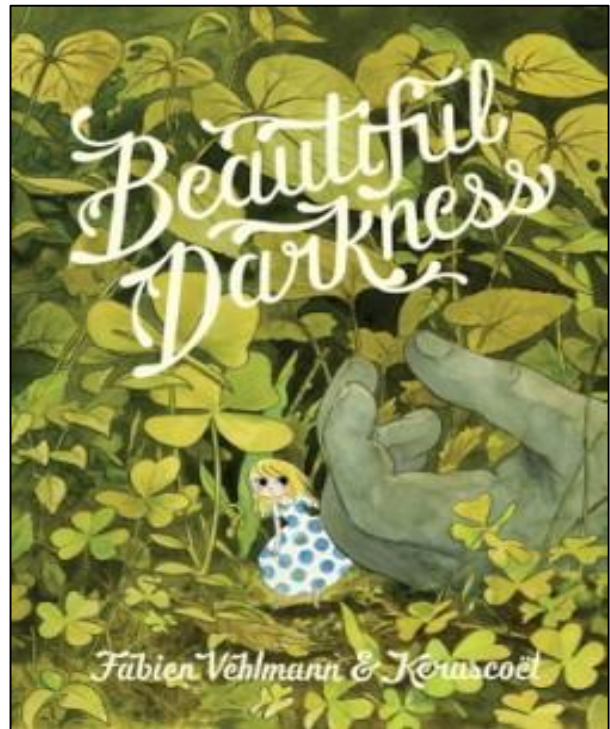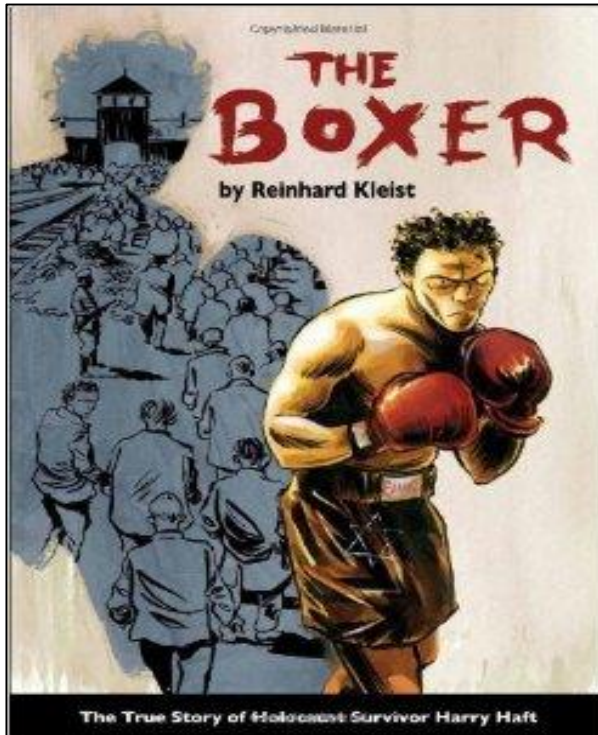
For the past five years, I've served as a judge on the PW Comics World Critics Poll. For those new to the graphic novel genre, we're smack in the middle of a Golden Age. There is currently so much great literature being produced that it's hard to keep track of it. Although many of these graphic novels would not be ones you would use with your young students, they are the beginnings of some essential reading you'll want to do to see what's currently being offered in the world of visual narrative.

- "Hark a Vagrant Tops 2011 PW Comics World Critics' Poll"
  http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/50137-hark-a-vagrant-tops-2011-pw-comics-world-critic-s-poll.html
- "Ware's Building Stories Tops PW Comics World's 2012 Graphic Novel Critics Poll"
  http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/55420-ware-s-building-stories-tops-pw-comics-world-s-2012-graphic-novel-critics-poll.html
- "Yang Tops 2013 PW Comics World Critics Poll with 'Boxers and Saints'
  http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/60338-yang-tops-2013-pw-comics-world-critics-poll-with-boxers-and-saints.html
- "`This One Summer' Tops PW Comics World's 2014 Critics Poll"
  http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/65081-this-one-summer-tops-pw-comics-world-s-2014-critics-poll.html
- "The Sculptor Tops PW's 10 Annual Graphic Novel Critics Poll
  http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/69024-the-sculptor-tops-pw-s-10th-annual-graphic-novel-critics-poll.html

**10. Nimona, by Noelle Stevenson**

It generates more wry humour from the interplay between its form and content than most other graphic novels can muster.

**9. March, Book 2, John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell**

Lewis, Aydin, and Powell are able to show the continued determination of the nonviolence movement to overcome hatred and oppression, even as these forces grow ever more menacing.

**8. The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage, Sydney Padua**

This delightfully fictionalized account of the relationship between Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage demonstrates the immensity of Padua's research and the wit and allusiveness of her prose.

**7. Hitler, by Shigeru Mizuki**

Mizuki shows a deft balance of dialogue and narration while revealing, in painstaking detail, how a madman can come within a hair's breadth of ruling the world.

**6. Supermutant Magic Academy, Jillian Tamaki**

Tamaki has this ability to play with the conventions of the teenagers-with-superpowers genre and weave this into a dark but funny story that is brilliant in its own right.

**5. Step Aside, Pops, Kate Beaton**

As good, or better, than *Hark! A Vagrant, Step Aside, Pops* reaches into the strange corners of history only to skewer it with the wit we've comic to expect from one of the world's most talented cartoonists.

**4. Pablo, by Julie Birmant and Clement Ouberie**

Beautiful, engaging, with a powerful narrative by Birmant and the sort of stunning visual canvas that we've come to expect from Ouberie, Pablo is one of the year's best.

**3. Killing and Dying, Adrian Tomine**

Tomine has been compared to Alice Munro, and likely because of his profound understanding of how real, living, breathing human beings relate to one another. His collection of short stories here is a remarkable achievement.

**2. The Sculptor, Scott McCloud**

When someone like Scott McCloud spends 20 years on a graphic novel, it's a good sign to begin with. But McCloud's exploration of life, death, love, and the role of the artist make this an exemplary work.

**1. Unflattening, Nik Sousanis**

A doctoral thesis on comics, epistemology, and the role of the perceptual process in reading might not seem a likely candidate for graphic novel of the year, except that it happens to be the most important contribution to the theory of visual narrative since *Understanding Comics.*

## 2014

**10. *The Park,* by Oscar Zarate**

The way the confrontation that begins the story escalates feels like it could only ever happen in real life and not in a work of graphic fiction.

**9. *Casanova: Luxuria,* by Matt Fraction, Gabriel Ba and Fabio Moon**

Only Fraction is going to write a graphic novel so complex that God has to appear in the margins to tell us what the hell is going on.

**8. *Ant Colony,* by Michael DeForge**

This story, about a disintegrating ant colony, is a touchstone for the year in graphic storytelling in teaching us what we can learn about ourselves (from--you guessed it--ants).

**7. *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*, by Anya Ulinich**

Its greatness rests in what it says about *how we become who we are* and *how we try to be who we want*.

**6. *Beautiful Darkness*, by Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoet**

The juxtaposition of its glorious artwork and nightmarish sensibilities make this graphic novel nothing short of profound. Indeed, it gets at something that lies deep within the human psyche.

**5. *Andre the Giant*, by Box Brown**

A fascinating look at a beloved and much misunderstood figure whose story is captured perfectly in the simplicity of Box Brown's visual canvas.

**4. *Nobrow 9: It's Oh So Quiet,* by Various Artists (Nobrow Press)**

The stunning artwork in this collection of stories is a product of the liberating nature of the mandated four-color palette. The inventiveness of these artists is found in everything from the simplest panel arrangements to the most complex sequences.

**3. *Kill My Mother*, by Jules Feiffer**

This graphic novel by Feiffer is, for lack of a better term, an experience--a complex, compelling, indeed fascinating tale of hidden secrets, dual identities, mystery, and murder.

**2.** *Hoax: Psychosis Blues*, **by Ravi Thornton**

A moving graphic memoir by Thornton who examines the impact of her late brother's schizophrenia. Illustrated by a number of artists, it is remarkable in how it shows the progress of the relationship between brother and sister, post-diagnosis.

**1.** *The Boxer: The True Story of Holocaust Survivor Harry Haft*, **by Reinhard Kleist**

This is a tremendous achievement by Kleist -- a haunting graphic novel about the Holocaust whose frightening lines and angles form the perfect visual landscape.

## 2013

**10.** *Hyperbole and a Half*, **by Allie Brosh**

This semi-graphic collection of essays based on Brosh's blog shows that we can find humour, insight, inspiration and, indeed, beauty on the most rudimentary canvas… which perhaps suggests it's not so very rudimentary after all.

**9.** *Beirut 1990: Snapshots of a Civil War*, **by Bruno and Sylvain Ricard**

This story's moments of beauty and terror can't be unraveled any more easily than the sound of a mortar can be separated from the deafening silence that follows it. Originally published in French in 2004, it shows us the paradoxes of Beirut from a vantage point that makes this graphic novel both poignant and profoundly impactful.

**8.** *The Black Beetle, Volume 1: No Way Out*, **by Francesco Francavilla**

The neo-pulp comic of the year, it shows that Francavilla has *great* skill as a writer to go with his *crazy* skill as an artist. The book is visually stunning, narratively engaging, and, quite simply, a damn fine read.

**7.** *Wake Up Percy Gloom*, **by Cathy Malkasian**

Malkasian marries a charming narrative with dazzling illustrations to give us an absurdist tale that is, nevertheless, the year's most beautiful love story.

**6.** *Nemo: Heart of Ice*, **by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill**

This graphic novel has two remarkable features: a brilliant, non-linear narrative technique by Moore that makes readers think they are caught in the same time loop as the protagonists, and a staggering visual landscape that reaches its zenith in a two page spread depicting Megapatagonia, where animal creatures talk backwards French. The latter is the single most stunning illustration of the year.

**5.** *When David Lost His Voice*, **by Judith Vanistendael, translated by Nora Mahoney**

Vanistendael presents readers with a visual narrative—replete with gorgeous, dynamic, and emotive illustrations—that examines the very different ways in which people come to terms with the impending loss of a loved one.

**4. *Django Unchained*, adapted by Reginald Hudlin, based on the film by Quentin Tarantino**

The graphic novel adaptation of Tarantino's film is pace perfect, with illustrations whose gorgeousness and brutality speak volumes about the darkest period in American history.

**3. *Marble Season*, by Gilbert Hernandez**

Hernandez gives us a brilliant, semi-autobiographical account of his childhood that is, uncannily, a memoir of childhood itself.

**2. *Boxers & Saints*, by Gene Luen Yang**

Focusing on the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the 20th century, *Boxers & Saints* is, hands down, the most visually stunning graphic novel of the year. It is a touchstone for this year in graphic storytelling.

**1. *The Initiates: A Comic Artist and a Wine Artisan Exchange Jobs,* by Etienne Davodeau**

Published for the first time in English in 2013, this graphic novel is exquisitely drawn, paced, and conceived. Telling the story of a graphic novelist and winemaker who decide to teach one another their respective crafts, *The Initiates* speaks volumes about how we can foster genuine relationships with other human beings.

# 2012

**12. *Barrack Hussein Obama,* by Steven Weissman**

Sometimes the greatness of a graphic novel is that it's too bizarre for words. That's clear even before Obama turns into a giant bird and flies his daughters to an island where he promptly becomes an egg.

**11. *Dim Sum Warriors,* by Colin Goh and Yen Yen Woo, illustrated by Soo Lee**

Regardless of whether you enjoy a good Dim Sum, you've got to love it when Chinese Finger Food becomes the inspiration for one of the most amusing graphic novels of the year.

**10. *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, by Alison Bechdel**

When all is said and done, it's a must-read for grown up children looking to understand their parents and, it goes without saying, *themselves*.

**9. *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*, by Mary M. Talbot and Bryan Talbot**

Talbot and Talbot construct a powerful visual narrative about gender, family, and identity that takes a close look at 20th-century sexual politics on the home front.

**8. *The Graphic Canon, Volume 2,* Edited by Russ Kick**

There is something to be said for a graphic anthology that makes every single person who sees it gasp, or marvel at it, or both… It's usually both.

**7. *Swamp Thing #10,* by Scott Snyder and Francesco Francavilla**

Snyder's unique ability to choose the right narrative strategy to build tension and the wonderfully arresting quality of Francavilla's illustrations make this the best single issue of a comic in 2012.

**6. *Wizzywig,* by Ed Piskor**

Piskor not only gives us a treatise on hacking, phone-phreaking, and high-tech hijinks, but a fascinating look at the brilliant mind and indomitable spirit of a hacker.

**5. *Tangles*, by Sarah Leavitt**

It is a story of uncompromising honesty and raw intimacy that leaves a lasting impression on us about the ravages of Alzheimer's.

**4. *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City*, by Guy Delisle**

There is nothing that can replace writing about lived experience, and this is the year's best at doing just that. It's exemplary in showing those small details about a place that are so crucial to understanding it.

**3. *100 Months,* by John Hicklenton**

In his final graphic novel, Hicklenton gives us a darkly illustrated scripture whose beauty and brutality represent the year's most illuminating work on the nature of the sublime.

**2. *Sailor Twain, or the Mermaid in the Hudson*, by Mark Siegel**

Like no other graphic novel this year, *Sailor Twain* has an eerie beauty about it that makes the reader feel they are not merely its witnesses but its passengers.

**1. *Building Stories*, by Chris Ware**

It is arguably the most original example of how meaning is constructed through words and images since Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies.* That makes it the graphic novel of the year.

## 2011

**10. *Finder, Volume 9: Voice*, by Carla Speed McNeil**

It's fitting to begin and end this Top 10 list with McNeil. *Voice* is warm, funny, strange, and brilliant.

**9. *The Grave Doug Freshley*, by Josh Hechinger and mpMann**

Such a cool idea for a story…and the illustrations by mpMann make for a perfect marriage. It was so easy for the ending to be predictable, and yet instead it was original and satisfying.

**8. *Who is Jake Ellis?* by Nathan Edmonson**

It's *The Bourne Identity* and *The Secret Sharer* all in one package – nuff said.

**7. *Evelyn Evelyn*, by Amanda Palmer and Jason Webley**

On every top ten list should be a title that is, for lack of a better word, just plain weird! It doesn't hurt in this case that the story is magnificently illustrated.

**6. *1-800-Mice,* by Mattew Thurber**

The strength of this GN is Thurber's use of many interesting visual techniques, and his ability to allow us to navigate his maze of interconnected characters and narratives.

**5. *The Man Who Grew His Beard,* Olivier Schrauwen**

This graphic novel is exceptionally inventive, with each story being very different from the one before.

**4. *Mid-Life,* by Joe Ollmann**

What makes this graphic novel so exemplary is that everything it says is completely and utterly true. This should be required reading for every dude turning 40.

**3. *Infinite Kung-Fu,* by Kagan Mcleod**

There is a lot that can be said about *Infinite Kung-Fu*. When it comes right down to it, though, you just have to say, "Wow, what a story…"

**2. *Garden,* by Yuichi Yokoyama**

The world of incongruities that Yokoyama creates in *Garden* is *so* bizarre and *so* completely captivating.

**1. *The Finder Library, Vol. 1 (and 2!),* by Carla Speed McNeil**

Carla Speed McNeil is maybe the most talented sci-fi writer in the graphic novel medium. This collection, featuring the fortunes of the enigmatic Jaeger, is the strongest evidence of this.

# LET'S KEEP THE DIALOGUE (BUBBLES) GOING

Conferences like this are great. They give us some time to re-energize and think about all the wonderful things we can be doing with our students. However, once we leave the conference and get back to the day-to-day business of teaching kids, we can sometimes forget about how energized we were and all the great plans and good intentions we had. But why not keep the conversation going? If you have any questions about comics in the classroom, are interested in sharing resources, want advice about books to use, or how you might incorporate a particular lesson about comics and graphic novels, please don't hesitate to contact me. I'm available in a variety of different print and electronic forms (we all are, these days) so please don't hesitate to get in touch. If you're interested in having someone who writes, reviews, and talks about comics come and visit your faculty or students, just let me know. You can get a hold of me in the following ways:

| | |
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