

Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Determining the Criteria for Graphic Novels with
Literary Merit

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Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Determining the Criteria for Graphic Novels with Literary Merit

This article describes a rubric by which graphic texts can be evaluated for literary merit.

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hat does the image shown in Figure 1 look like to you? Many readers answer that question with “a comic book” or maybe “a comic strip.” Others suggest “a cartoon” or more general still, “a drawing.”

Likely there are a few of you who have seen these frames before, and you correctly responded, “a graphic novel.”

The panel shown in Figure 1 is taken from *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, a graphic novel finalist for the 2006 National Book Award for Young Adult (YA) Literature and winner of awards from

Publishers Weekly, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, NPR, and *Time* magazine. However, this article is more concerned with educators’ responses to graphic novels than those of publishers and national organizations.

Graphic novels such as this one are entering mainstream literary discourse after spending decades as “alternative comix.” Illuminated adaptations of foundational documents such as Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and the Constitution of the United States have been published in the last decade, and powerful original pieces such as *American Born Chinese* are being inked, painted, drawn, and crafted every year to engage the 21st-century reader and expand the educational possibilities of an American medium. This article asks: What are the elements of a good graphic novel?

FIGURE 1. An excerpt from *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang



From *AMERICAN BORN CHINESE* © 2006 by Gene Yuen Lang. Reprinted by permission of First Second Books. All rights reserved.

Why Graphic Novels Matter

The reader’s more immediate question might be, “What are graphic novels?” Even once that question is answered, another is begged: “Why are they worthwhile literacy tools?” The answers to these questions are logical precedents to the research question, “What are the elements of a good graphic novel?” This literature review will support the following answer to these questions:

Because graphic novels are an important literary mode with a complex history and practice,

And provide struggling readers of all kinds with a visual (but equally rigorous) reading experience,

English teachers must determine the criteria for quality examples of this mode to provide the highest quality texts possible to every student.

What Are Graphic Novels?

Understanding the place of the graphic novel in today's literary landscape necessitates a history lesson.

The History and Evolution of the Graphic Novel

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, comic books grew from ten-cent repackaged collections of Sunday funnies and "pulp magazines" into a massive industry. *Action Comics #1* hit newsstands in June 1938 and introduced the first superhero, a strangely dressed alien character with amazing powers—Superman. Over the next decade iconic characters such as Batman and the Justice League sold millions of copies and gained massive popularity with kids at home and soldiers overseas. This was the "Golden Age" of comic books. However, the postwar, Red Scare, hyper-conservative social crackdown hit the comic book industry hard and started the stigma that permeates the industry today.

Matt Bors of the *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* wrote and illustrated a compelling timeline of the post-war period (see Figure 2). In 1953, noted psychia-

trist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he argued that "all the negative effects of crime comics on children in the intellectual, emotional and volitional spheres are intensified by the harm done in the perceptual sphere. Comic books are death on reading" (121). Wertham was "the senior psychiatrist for the Department of Hospitals in New York City where he studied violent behavior and the effect mass media has on us" (Bors 16).

Wertham's incendiary book caused the US Senate to investigate the possible connection between comic books and antisocial behavior, the Senate concluded, according to the interim report published in 1955, that "[d]elinquency is the product of many related causal factors. But it can scarcely be questioned that the impact of these media [comics] does constitute a significant factor in the total problem" ("Juvenile Delinquency"). Thankfully, "[t]he subcommittee flatly rejects all suggestions of governmental censorship as being totally out of keeping with our basic American concepts of a free press operating in a free land for a free people."

However, they insisted that a strict industry review board be created to censor controversial material in comics. The Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America was adopted in 1954, and all published comics had to meet its standards (see Figure 3). As a result, many comic book artists and writers, disillusioned by the draconian standards and their strangled creativity, left the mainstream comics industry over the next decade.

Mauricio Castro and Alicia C. Decker continue the story, summarizing the comic book industry's development over the second half of the 20th century as part of their case study on the introduction of comic books in the postsecondary history classroom. "The comics industry has seen a flourishing of new, independent voices and an increase in the maturity of much of its subject matter in the past four decades" (171). Unbridled by the mainstream industry's preference of children's publications, many comic book artists and writers were able to innovate and create unprecedented, mature graphic works. These "alternative comix" became today's graphic novels—independently bound texts instead of serial paperbacks. One of these radical comic book innovators was Will Eisner.

FIGURE 2. An excerpt from Matt Bors's comic about the Wertham Era comic books and juvenile delinquency

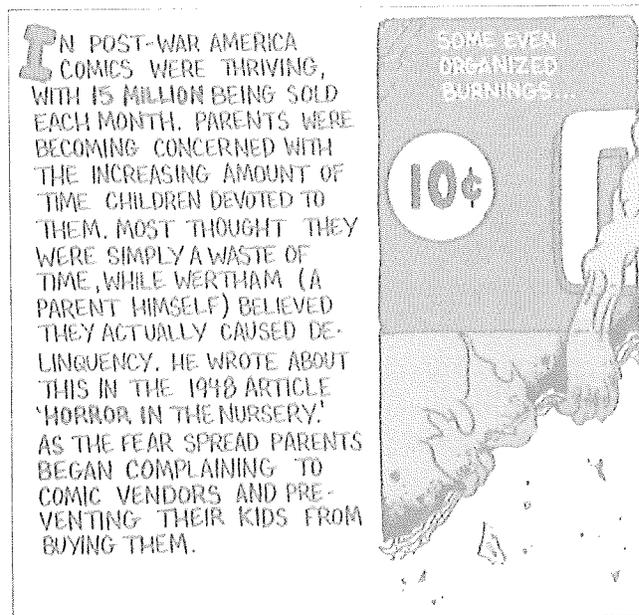


FIGURE 3. Parts A and B of the Comics Code of 1954

CODE FOR EDITORIAL MATTER

General standards—Part A

- (1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
- (2) No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
- (3) Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
- (4) If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.
- (5) Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.
- (6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.
- (7) Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.
- (8) No unique or unusual methods of concealing weapons shall be shown.
- (9) Instances of law-enforcement officers dying as a result of a criminal's activities should be discouraged.
- (10) The crime of kidnapping shall never be portrayed in any detail, nor shall any profit accrue to the abductor or kidnaper. The criminal or the kidnaper must be punished in every case.
- (11) The letters of the word "crime" on a comics-magazine cover shall never be appreciably greater in dimension than the other words contained in the title. The word "crime" shall never appear alone on a cover.
- (12) Restraint in the use of the word "crime" in titles or subtitles shall be exercised.

General standards—Part B

- (1) No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
- (2) All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
- (3) All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
- (4) Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
- (5) Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited.

The Graphic Novel in Theory

Will Eisner worked for decades as an industry-leading graphic artist, and he explains in his guide *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* that comics are, at their most basic, "a form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story." Importantly, sequential art is defined by Eisner as "images deployed in a specific order" (xvii). The difference between comics and illustrations is that sequential art requires a fundamentally different kind of reading. In traditional text, illustrations can serve to support, explain, or contradict the text (Werner). In graphic novels, images *are* the text.

An example will illustrate the literacy of sequential art.

Romeo and Juliet: The War (Work et al.) is a sci-fi adaptation of the Shakespeare play written in part by Stan Lee, a foundational writer at Marvel Comics responsible for characters like The Avengers, the Fantastic Four, and Spider-man. Figure 4 depicts the fight between Mercutio (a bionic soldier, or "Montague," in black) and Tybalt (from a genetically modified clan who only wear white, the Capulets) that leads to Mercutio's death. Analyzing the action drawn between these panels will exemplify the imaginative work comic reading requires.

When reading the panels in Figure 4, I might describe what happened as follows: "Mercutio pulls back his fist as Tybalt charged at him, ready to meet

FIGURE 4. An example of panel transitions from *Romeo and Juliet: The War*



him with a huge punch. However, right as Mercutio swings, Tybalt jumps and twists in midair, landing behind Mercutio, who is left standing, arm outstretched.”

However, when considered carefully, it is not obvious how I pieced this series of actions together. Comic artist Wiley Miller explains, “between the first and second panels there are inferences about the characters” (qtd. in Cleaver 30). “Unless comics readers can recognize the imagery or supply the necessary events that the arrangement of panels imply, no communication is achieved”—clearly, cognitive work is required to read comics (Eisner 71). The first panel (the leftmost sidebar—most graphic novels do still read from left to right and from top to bottom, despite the prevalence of some Eastern imports) shows Mercutio standing ready with legs and white boots descending from the top of the image. What are we to make of that image, as it stands by itself? It does not convey a narrative until it is arranged next to the inset of Mercutio with his fist pulled back and the larger panel of Tybalt’s dodging jump. In the last panel, three Tybalts are drawn in the same frame. Are there literally three of him? Of course not; the reader must be able to decode this as movement.

Why Are Graphic Novels an Important Literacy Tool?

This is a form of visual comprehension to which even film, the usual referent, can’t compare. An inferential leap must be made, and the conventions of action and movement must be correctly read to visualize the action. This is called *visual literacy*.

What Is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy might broadly be defined as all of the skills and knowledge needed to decode images and understand, at least on a literal level, the contents of the image (Benson; Callow; Mbelani; Stengel). Although Wertham famously argued that comics were a “retooling for illiteracy” (171), the 21st-century’s image-soaked media-scape necessitates a redefinition of “literacy” (Connors; Norman; Unsworth). Jon Callow explains:

The rapidly changing nature of texts and literacy practices in our local, global and virtual commu-

nities has given rise to the term “New Times” (Luke & Elkins, 1998). The cultural, economic and social changes of these “New Times” have radically changed previously held definitions of literacy, born of the Twentieth Century. Luke argues that these changes present new challenges for students who will be confronted with complex “multiliteracies” (New London Group, 2000). (qtd. in Callow: 7)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) actually requires visual literacy instruction from all future language arts instructors. They expect that “candidates are knowledgeable about language; literature; oral, visual, and written literacy; print and non-print media” (NCTE 5). However, many teachers do not have enough training in visual literacy to implement graphic novels effectively; “[teachers] struggled with defining just what graphic novels are (‘like a comic book or video game’), how they connect to anime, TV serials, and other media, and if they can include nonfiction” (Cooper, Nesmith, and Schwarz 4). American educators are actually behind many other countries in adapting to the new literacy needs of 21st-century students. Madeyandile Mbelani in South Africa engaged in a “reflective practice” study of her pedagogy to “improve [her] performance in teaching visual literacy” (101). In fact, the National State Curriculum (NCS) in South Africa includes teaching visual literacy as part of English “First Additional Language (FAL)” instruction (101).

Much of the current research in visual literacy education comes from outside the United States. “Over the past ten years, literacy approaches, particularly in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, have generally moved towards more semiotic, socio-critical and textually focused theoretical traditions” (Callow 6); in other words, these countries have broadened their definitions of literacy to include nonprint texts, non-canonical texts, and how individuals make meaning from texts instead of how texts impose their meaning on individuals. This “semiotic” literacy theory reflects the inferential process in comics-reading, connecting progressive literacy practices to graphic novels. More immediately, engaging in visual literacy pedagogy has benefits for “digital natives,” English language learners (ELLs), and struggling readers.

*The Role of Visual Literacy
in a Globalized Education*

In a philosophical essay on the benefits of literature in the globalized world, Suzanne S. Choo explains that “cultural globalization . . . describes the creation of a transnational or global imagination as a result of exchanges of knowledge, capital, and technology from people and groups around the world” (54). One need only observe the meteoric rise of South Korea’s “Gangnam Style” to the top of US pop music charts to verify the effects of globalization on culture. In Caroline Pelletier’s study on students’ visual literacy about computer games—another growing medium for further study—she explains that “globalization is sustaining ever-greater levels of cultural and linguistic diversity” (41). Adapting the language arts classroom for 21st-century digital natives is crucial because of the “nature of contemporary texts, which increasingly combine modes and media, making definitions of literacy based on verbal language alone increasingly inadequate” (41).

Kathryn Grushka, a visual artist and educator, explains what 21st-century Web-based cultural transmission means for students: “new literacy skills will depend on students developing the strategic abilities to work effectively across many new information platforms dominated by this paradigm from text to imaging and multi-modal practices in learning” (3). Graphic novels are just one tool US educators can use to build these multiliteracies.

Graphic novels also support a global culture in two ways: graphic novels are deeply multicultural texts, and they have a visual focus that reflects the image-saturated Internet, the transmitter for global culture.

Eisner explains in his comprehensive guide that after World War II, “French, Italian, Spanish, German, Mexican, Scandinavian, Japanese, and a host of other artists and writers create comics to satisfy their own readers with stories, art and icons that reflect their own national culture” (74). *Romeo and Juliet: The War*, for example, was written by Americans and illustrated by a renowned Singaporean artist, Skan Srisuwan (see Figure 4). Similarly, there is an international Orthodox Jewish graphic novel community to connect modern Jewish children from across the globe to their

heritage, led by Jews from the US comic book industry who take their knowledge abroad (Roth). Importantly, popular graphic texts such as Marjane Satrapi’s touching memoir of her life in Iran, *Persepolis*, and *American Born Chinese* represent alternative perspectives too rarely found in the language arts curriculum. Not only do these texts perfectly suit cultural globalization, but students from other cultures coming into US schools can find their experiences authentically and respectfully portrayed in the classroom.

Struggling Readers and Graphic Novels

Students who enter the language arts classroom with linguistic as well as cultural hurdles can still be supported by graphic novels. In her reflective practice on visual literacy, Mbelani focuses on how “the curriculum [of FAL] includes the teaching and assessment of visual literacy” (801). If a modern English language acquisition curriculum teaches and assesses visual literacy, it must be recognized as an important part of the language. More immediately, the ability of sequential art to reinforce and scaffold text gives students who might still be learning English syntax and vocabulary another route by which to comprehend the text.

Previous research has corroborated the educational value of graphic novels. In a recent issue of Scholastic’s *Instructor* magazine, Samantha Cleaver encourages educators to consider including graphic novels because “comics, including classics such as Superman but also their generally more complex, nuanced cousins, graphic novels, are . . . regarded as educational tools by savvy teachers” (29). Cleaver interviews an art teacher who included comics in her curriculum and believes that “if we show kids how the written word actually has a visual component to it . . . I think they’ll become much better writers” (30). In fact, reading comprehension experts often suggest teaching students to visualize what they’re reading, and even draw pictures of it, to increase comprehension and retention (Beers). “Comic books can be a great way to pique reluctant readers’ interest and challenge those students who are fluent in more traditional literature,” Cleaver explains (29). She also summarizes many of the digital literacy and globalization arguments for including graphic novels in the curriculum: “Kids

are at ease with combining visual and text information” (30).

In an interview for a recent senior thesis project at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, English Professor Donna Richardson explains that comic book readers “are absorbing a huge amount of information (most of it accurate) about costumes, mores, and geography” of the setting of the text (in Stengel 7). William Stengel goes on to describe in his senior thesis the United States’ attempts to increase literacy abroad using graphic novels, the results of which were published in *Fotonovelas and Comic Books: The Use of Popular Graphic Media in Development*:

This research analyzes the introduction of graphic media, such as comic books, into developing areas of third-world nations such as Mexico, Korea, and South Africa, as well as the impact of this media on reading ability and frequency. This work shows an increase in literacy rates when government-produced comic books were introduced. (Stengel 7)

Struggling readers at home and abroad can benefit from educators who use graphic novels as

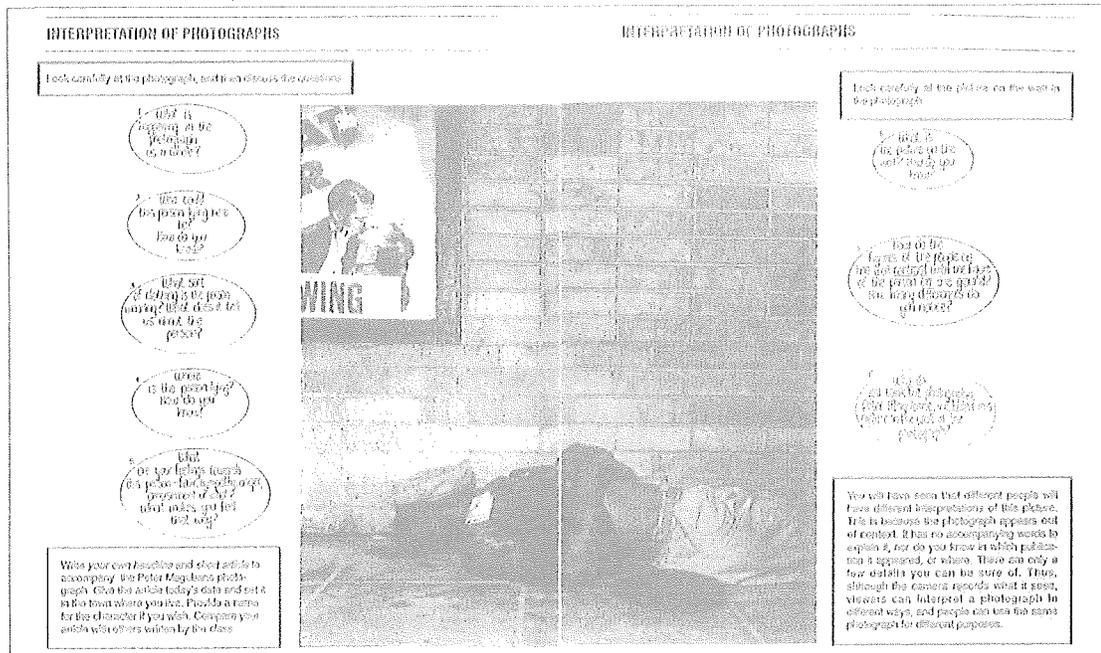
a tool to increase engagement, comprehension, and visual literacy skills. What is not clear, however, is how teachers can best implement these engaging literacy tools.

In a review of visual literacy educational tools, Denise Newfield explains “media education and visual literacy, two closely related educational fields, which developed as a response to the ubiquity of visual representation in the contemporary communications landscape” (81).

Newfield evaluates the development of visual literacy tools in media education, which she claims promote “critical visual literacy” by using updated workbooks that include more critical questions and socially relevant analysis of current events (see Figure 5).

This social criticism is similar to what many graphic novels accomplish; often written by fringe members of society who began writing “alternative comix,” many modern graphic novels include taboo subject matter and frank narratives about issues of race or sexual orientation. William Gaudelli did similar research on how American secondary

FIGURE 5. Workbook page that encourages critical literacy



From Denise Newfield, “From Visual Literacy to Critical Visual Literacy: An Analysis of Educational Materials.” *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 10.1(2011): 89.

students interpret “democratic images” and found that prejudices and issues of social justice are projected by students onto the images they critique. So clearly, promoting visual literacy has important sociopolitical consequences as well—by fostering critical visual literacy, educators are encouraging students to be engaged, discerning citizens.

More academically, some educators are using graphic novels to teach important literary elements such as mood, tone, setting, and style (Dallacqua). Ashley Dallacqua argues that visuals are used in many other educational disciplines with little issue, so why not include them in language arts? Sampled literary analysis of three graphic novels from three different critical lenses supports the argument that language arts classrooms could benefit from graphic texts (Ripley). Other content-area teachers have already begun including “trade books for other content areas, and the notion of integrating children’s literature across the curriculum, whether through thematic units or other approaches, has become a standard idea” (Cooper, Nesmith, and Schwarz 1). Ironically, resistant language arts educators are falling behind teachers of other content areas in literacy instruction.

The Purpose of This Article

Previous research has yet to confirm that all graphic novels are equally beneficial, and forward-thinking literacy educators must be determined to provide only the highest quality of texts to their students. Sandi Cooper, Suzanne Nesmith, and Gretchen Schwarz continue to try to develop criteria for graphic novels to be included in the math and science curriculum because “all graphic novels are not appropriate for all teachers, nor are these appropriate in all classrooms and for all content areas” (1).

This article continues Cooper, Nesmith, and Schwarz’s work. In their research, they worked directly with current K–12 educators, giving them visual literacy tools and collecting honest feedback on its implementation. I will do something similar to develop an easy-to-use tool for all educators to evaluate the educational value and literary merit of graphic novels. They explain that “concerns relevant to both the content and literary value are valid because, as with children’s literature across the curriculum, graphic novels across the curriculum are

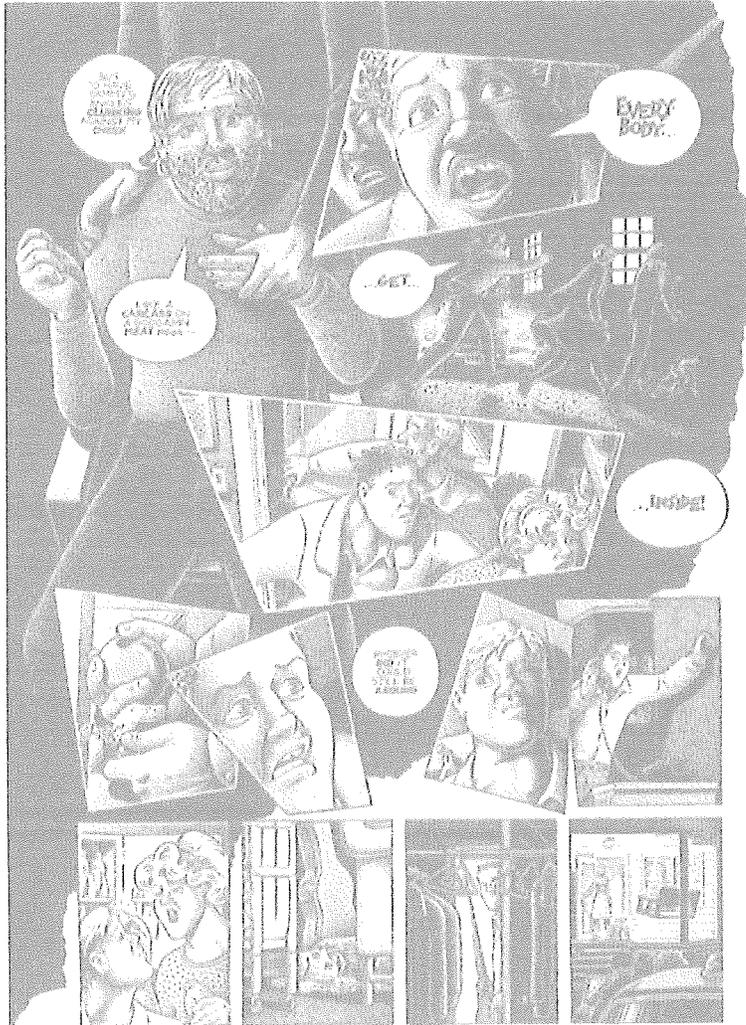
not all the best resources for teachers or students,” a strong statement that supports the creation of this tool (1). The history and theory behind visual texts and their usefulness for English language learners, struggling readers, gifted/talented students, and multicultural students in all content areas will be considered in the evaluation tool.

Results of Initial Graphic Novel Study

A grounded coding of observations of eleven award-winning graphic novels (see sidebar for annotated bibliography entries) revealed significant similarities between these wildly different pieces. Common characteristics included (1) *detailed settings*; (2) *form that functions*, or formatting that delivers narrative information; (3) *authentic dialogue*; and (4) *expressive characters* (whether representational or caricatured). These characteristics all trend toward one central purpose: providing narrative information to the reader nonverbally. *Expressive characters* (regardless of style) deliver important information about motivation, character, and plot without expository dialogue. *Detailed settings* reveal context for the narrative and the characters within it, as well as provide material with which to infer information about the wider world in which the narrative takes place. *Form that functions* allows the structure of the page (for example, asymmetrical and irregular frames—see Figure 6) to inform the tone of the scene (chaotic, in the case of Figure 6). Finally, *authentic dialogue* (one of the few clear commonalities between novels) maintains a genuine sense of character and setting while seamlessly furthering the plot without awkward and fourth-wall-breaking narration. Memoirs are an important exception to this rule, as a character in the text is expected to also be the author and therefore capable of captioning his or her own perspective. Simply put: *The more information conveyed to the reader nonverbally, the better the graphic novel.* Table 1 demonstrates the process by which a grounded coding of observations led to these common characteristics.

Although the small sample size of my co-researcher’s observations prevented a statistical support of interrater reliability, all of these coded “traits” emerge from her observations as well; not once do her observations include or exclude *Persepolis* from a category in which my observations have

FIGURE 6. An example of "form that functions" in graphic novels, from *Stuck Rubber Baby* by Howard Cruse



not already. I have highlighted her observations in bold in Table 2.

Creating a Rubric for Literary Merit in Graphic Novels

Once the four common characteristics of graphic novels of merit were identified, I had to create a rubric that could be used to evaluate their presence or absence in a novel. For rubric creation guidelines, I turned to W. James Popham. "It is my conviction that, based on discussions with many teachers who

have used a variety of scoring rubrics, that teachers who create a skill-focused scoring rubric . . . will almost always devise a better instructional sequence than will teachers who don't," Popham wrote, explaining the superiority of what he calls "skill-focused rubrics" over "hypergeneral" or "task-specific" ones (184–85). He creates five distinct rules for creating superior rubrics that I adapted for use when creating my own "Graphic Novel Rubric":

Rule 1: Make sure the criterion to be assessed is significant.

Rule 2: Make sure all of the rubric's evaluative criteria can be addressed while reading.

Rule 3: Employ as few evaluative criteria as possible.

Rule 4: Provide a succinct label for each evaluative criterion.

Rule 5: Match the length of the rubric to your own tolerance for detail.

I had to alter Rule 2 to suit this project, which originally designated "during instruction" as the time to address all evaluative criteria. All the other rules are directly from Popham's guide, replacing only the word "skill" with "criterion"—the object under evaluation in this case (185–86).

The Structure of the Rubric

Accounting for ease of use by teachers unfamiliar with the project and the mode became increasingly important as I was creating the rubric, reproduced below. Because the rubric's audience is likely most

TABLE 1. An Example of the Observations Collected on One Text

<i>Fun Home</i> by Alison Bechdel	SAMPLE DATA COLLECTION CHART				
	Character	Setting	Plot	Theme	Style
Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cartoon characters alternating with drawn portraits (p. 47) - static facial expressions characterize parents (p. 50) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - detailed background (p. 41) - book titles in piles included to further characterization and exposition (p. 76) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many silent frames reinforce relationships (p. 220) - repeated frames give alternate perspectives (p. 162) - maps, diagrams clarify relationship between plot points (p. 140) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - separation made physical through window silhouettes (p. 86) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - photos, handwriting, etc. carefully reproduced in pen (p. 85)
Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - letters and diary entries provide authentic text (p. 48) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - captions on objects subvert or clarify immediate conclusions (p. 16) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - narration boxes intermingle with Alison voice (p. 17) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - authorial voice full of allusion (p. 48) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - literary: metaphors, simile, allusion, etc.

familiar with verbal literacy, it was designed as a series of questions to be answered while reading using a scale, allowing for more reflection and interior monologue than a simpler rubric designed as a table with boxes to be checked off. Also, as a consideration for the intended audience's likely unfamiliarity with the mode, the rubric is interwoven with "reading guide" segments to support comprehension and proficient literacy, even from first-time graphic novel readers. Finally, a conversion table at the bottom of the rubric converts the scores from each section into a final "letter grade" for the merit of the novel, which should stand as a familiar benchmark of excellence to every K–12 teacher.

The necessary reading guide became Section I of the rubric (see Figure 7). Section II focused on prereading strategies that would facilitate the evaluation, such as establishing an expected mood and previewing the art style and panel structure. Then, Section III of the rubric focuses on scale on each of the emergent characteristics of a quality graphic novel, as shown in Table 3.

Finally, Section IV "debriefed" the reader, asking the reader to answer post-reading questions to begin the grading process; this section also included teacher-specific questions about the appro-

priateness of the difficulty and content of the novel for the classroom. Although these considerations are not directly related to the quality of a novel, including the answers to these questions in the final evaluation will help teachers balance the needs of their class with the genuine quality of the text, and create a more accurate evaluation. For example, an A-quality graphic novel that is highly inappropriate for one teacher's classroom should not be recommended as highly by the rubric as a B-grade text that aligns well with the class' needs and objectives. Including this section also gives the classroom teacher more agency over the recommendation of the graphic novel—the teacher might be unfamiliar with the mode, but he or she is still an expert in the field, and this rubric should reflect that.

Discussion

This research was written by a literacy teacher for literacy teachers in the K–12 classroom (i.e., all teachers in the K–12 classroom). Despite design flaws, time constraints, and the uncertain footing of a new researcher in a new field, I hope this rubric finds its way into the hands of classroom teachers who really need it. This study begins the arduous process of assimilating a disenfranchised and

TABLE 2. Results of Grounded Coding of Graphic Novel Data

Trait (% of Population; n=11)	"Observations"—Author of Text Observed
Authentic Language (100%)	"authentic dialogue"—Burns "natural dialogue"—Farmer "accents and speech patterns differentiated characters"—Moore "youth dialect"—Miller "letters and diaries provide authentic text"—Bechdel "short colloquial dialogue"—Kon "moments of humor make characters three-dimensional"—Satrapi "dialogue is very short and somewhat childlike—appropriate for a young narrator"—Satrapi "natural dialogue"—Powell "dialect"—Cruse "'authentic' disjointed dialogue"—Clowes "colloquialisms . . . neologisms"—Barry
Show Instead of Tell ("Form Functions") (72%)	"overlapping speech bubbles . . . varying frame size"—Cruse "costume change reveals embarrassment"—Clowes "repeated frames give alternate perspectives"—Bechdel "'babies for dummies' book"—Kon "hallucination and 'real' plot points intermixed"—Powell "segments in 'screen' frame"—Miller "visualization of plot points"—Satrapi "the story of the movie being burned down is truncated and visually non-violent"—Satrapi "show degeneration instead of telling"—Farmer
Comic Style Characters (45%)	"caricatured character designs"—Satrapi "the xtremists all look alike—dark beard that covers their mouth/expression"—Satrapi "comic-style character portraits"—Cruse "cartoon characters"—Bechdel "cartoonish character design"—Barry "simplistic emotional faces"—Farmer
Realistic Characters (45%)	"variety of facial expressions"—Miller "detailed, realistic character drawings"—Moore "drawn portraits"—Bechdel "detailed portraits"—Powell "detailed character changes"—Farmer
Black and White Pen (63%)	"dense, delicate cross-hatching"—Cruse "carefully reproduced in pen"—Bechdel "black and white pen drawing"—Kon "stark inked drawings"—Powell "really dark ink drawings"—Burns "black and white pen"—Satrapi "virtually no shading techniques only lights and darks"—Satrapi "thick rolling ball pen ink style"—Miller
Detailed Settings (72%)	"some complex backgrounds"—Cruse "time period revealed in details"—Clowes "very detailed background"—Bechdel "buildings, vehicles detailed"—Kon "time period revealed in scenery details"—Powell "detailed backgrounds"—Miller "extremely detailed backgrounds"—Farmer "detailed map of London"—Moore

TABLE 3. Rubric Creation Based on Characteristics of Good Graphic Novels

GRAPHIC NOVEL TRAIT	RUBRIC QUESTIONS
Expressive Characters	III-A
Detailed Settings	III-B
Authentic Language	III-C
"Form Functions"	III-D

FIGURE 7. The final draft of the rubric

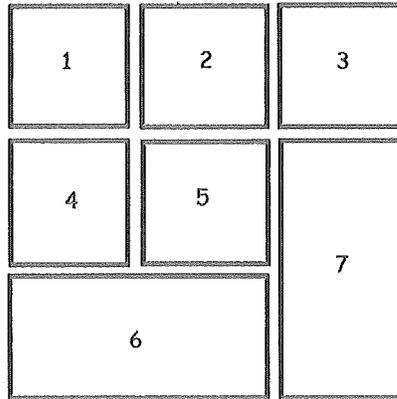
Rubric of Literary Merit in Graphic Novels, 2.0

Title of Graphic Novel: _____

Author: _____

I. How to Read a Graphic Novel

- A. In order to accurately gauge the literary merit of a graphic novel, you will have to read it differently than you would traditional text. **Read the text and images as two distinct elements. In each panel, read the text first and then read the image.** If you try to read graphic novels without considering *how* you're reading, you will tend to jump between the speech bubbles, and pass over the rich textual information embedded in the images.
- B. You might be confused about what order in which to read the panels on a page. In general, you read left-to-right, top-to-bottom, just like in English text. Here is a diagram to illustrate:



Section
Totals:

___ II. Before Reading (15 points)

Pre-read by skimming through the text, and answer the following questions:

- A. Opening to a random page, can you tell how the panels flow together?
impossible to tell —————▶ **natural flow**
 1 2 3 4 5
- B. What kind of art style is being used? Is it easy to tell at a glance what is happening in the images, or do they require more time to figure out?
indistinct/muddy —————▶ **striking and clear**
 1 2 3 4 5
- C. Based on first impressions, do the colors, art style, or other artistic elements evoke a certain mood? If so, write it down for comparison later.
no mood/sterile representation —————▶ **evocative, distinct mood**
 1 2 3 4 5

Initial Mood: _____

continued

FIGURE 7. *continued*

— III. During Reading (20 points)

While reading, remember: *read the images and text as separate, equally important elements.* Answer the following questions:

- A. How much emotion/reaction is carried by the character's facial expressions, gestures, etc.? How easy is it to tell what a character is thinking/feeling *without* reading the text?
zero expression —————▶ **clear/complex facial expressions**
 1 2 3 4 5
- B. How much information about the time and space of the setting comes from the images? Do you rely on the text to *tell* you where and when you are, or do the images do that?
setting is nondescript —————▶ **shown complex/vivid details of the setting**
 1 2 3 4 5
- C. Does the dialogue (or narration) sound "authentic"? Does the dialogue match the emotion presented by the images (e.g., do characters sound mad when they ought to)?
unnatural dialogue —————▶ **very authentic, nuanced dialogue**
 1 2 3 4 5
- D. Look at the structure of the panels. Does "form follow function"? Does the shape, color, size, etc. of panels and boxes tell you anything more about the emotion or importance of the scene they depict, or are they generic?
panels are generic or confusing —————▶ **form of panels intentional**
 1 2 3 4 5

— IV. After Reading (15 points)

- A. Reflect on the themes which emerged throughout the work. Do those themes match the mood evoked by the images during the Pre-Reading?
no clear theme —————▶ **theme integrated seamlessly into art**
 1 2 3 4 5
- B. How grade-appropriate is the piece in terms of text complexity or thematic maturity?
entirely inappropriate —————▶ **perfectly suited to my class**
 1 2 3 4 5
- C. Overall, how fitting is the text, its format, or your knowledge of the text's content for your learning goals?

II, III, and IV Totaled: **entirely inappropriate** —————▶ **this text strongly supports my learning goals**
 1 2 3 4 5

— V. Conclusion

Add up the points scored (out of 50) and multiply by 2. Your text is an "X" level text based on the following chart:

- 90 - 100% = A
- 80 - 89% = B
- 70 - 79% = C
- 60 - 69% = D
- 50 - 59% = E
- <50% = F

Graphic Novel Title: _____
Class (Grade/Level): _____
Rubric Grade: _____

This grading scale should give you a better idea about the fitness of a graphic novel for your class. Of course, you should always trust your own judgment about the fitness of the images and text for your students; I merely hope this guide gives you another tool to support the inclusion of graphic texts in your classroom.

I hope this rubric encourages you to include more graphic novels in your teaching, now that you have an easy way to ensure their merit! Thank you!

potentially life-changing mode into common use. Graphic novels have the unique ability to bridge the narrative texts we as educators rely on to deliver much of our content and the image-soaked paradigm in which our students encounter these texts.

Please consider this rubric one more tool you can use to choose the best possible texts for your students. The title of this article is "Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words?" I firmly believe that, if just one of these tables, figures, diagrams, or rubrics helps a teacher to reach a student struggling to read, then that one picture was more than worth the approximately 6,000 words in this article. 🍷

Appendix: Annotated Bibliography

Barry, Lynda. *One! Hundred! Demons!* Seattle: Sasquatch, 2002. Print.

An artist's memoir is inspired by a Zen scroll depicting 100 demons. In this case, the "demons" represent conflicted and repressed memories, each a "demon" that, through depiction in grotesque mixed media, is dealt with. Lynda Barry reminisces about playing in the street, her first kiss, her first joint, and her first loss, all of which leave behind "demons" to be exorcised.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Mariner, 2007. Print.

This graphic novel memoir focuses on the author's relationship with her father. A gay man closeted by the society in which he grew up, Bechdel's father demands perfection and control over his house where he cannot find it in his private life. He moves the family into a refurbished Victorian home after taking over his father's funeral home, which Bechdel nicknames "Fun Home." The perfected exteriors of the funeral home's "clients," the Victorian fixer-upper, and Bechdel's father all are reflected in the anxiety and obsessive-compulsion she experiences growing up.

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*. New York: Pantheon, 2005. Print.

In an average American suburb in the 1970s, a strange disease is spreading. Teenagers are especially prone to a new STD whose only symptom is horrible bodily mutation. Chris, a successful high school student, catches it unintentionally from Rob. Keith, a kid lost in the crowd, contracts "The Bug" from a forward college girl he meets while trying to buy drugs. The social impact on these two is the focus of

the book. Ultimately, many of the infected build a camp in the woods outside town, a place to escape the disgrace and ostracism caused by their disease.

Clowes, Daniel. *Ghost World*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005. Print.

In an unnamed 1970s American suburb, two friends try to grow up and merge into the "adult world" but don't entirely know how. Most of this book depicts the trivial hanging-out of aimless teenagers, who ultimately discover that even garage sales of old toys and college applications do not magically make them "adults" or allow them to enter the "ghost world" that they can sometimes see in the "adults" around them. Washed-out, water-colored frames perfectly depict the blandness of the teens' current existence and probable future.

Cruse, Howard. *Stuck Rubber Baby*. New ed. New York: Vertigo, 2010. Print.

Stuck Rubber Baby is the semi-autobiographical account of Howard Cruse's entrance into adulthood and his homosexuality amidst the heated Civil Rights Movement in his Southern hometown. Toland Polk, the protagonist and a decidedly common southern white man in the 60s, must navigate extremely complicated relationships that cross gender, race, and sexual orientation with little guidance. During this tumultuous period of self-discovery in the hyper-conservative American South, Toland is swept away from his simple life as a gas attendant into the open demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement and the underground resistance of the LGBTQ community.

Farmer, Joyce. *Special Exits*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2010. Print.

Another memoir, this one follows an elderly couple through the last few years of their lives, carefully depicting the slow loss of independence and cognitive ability. Written and told from the perspective of the couple's daughter, no details of the aging process are spared—the Farmers suffer bedsores, memory loss, and guilt over their dependence. They are also subjected to timely concerns such as car trouble and the Rodney King riots in their neighborhood in South LA. On the other hand, throughout Rachel Farmer's and then Lars Farmer's decline, they maintained a positive attitude, humor, and love for one another. Joyce Farmer lovingly and inspiringly tells the story of her parents' special exit here.

Otomo, Katsuhiro, and Satoshi, Kon. *Akira*. Vol 1. Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 2000. Print.

Akira takes place in a post-apocalyptic Japan. Thirty years after a cataclysmic attack on the Tokyo Olympic stadium, Kaneda and Tetsuo are bike-gang members who run into trouble in and outside of school. After Tetsuo accidentally becomes involved in a secret government super-soldier project called Akira, Kaneda fights alongside a resistance movement to uncover the secret of Akira and save his friend Tetsuo. Tetsuo's run-in with the Akira project has given him telekinetic powers while leaving him mentally unstable. The fight between the government, Kaneda, and Tetsuo's own plans ends in disaster.

Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics, 1997. Print.

After a decade in retirement, the possible return of the Joker brings Bruce Wayne back to his cape and cowl. Although the Joker is defeated, Batman finds the entire city has succumbed to helplessness in the face of a new, vicious gang. After the city is released from enslavement by the gangs, the federal government begins to pin the city's capture on Batman, who they claim attracts the insane villains he defeats. The White House sends Superman, their secret operative, to remove Batman. The Dark Knight uses every tool at his disposal to fight Superman to the death. This graphic novel has recently been adapted into a movie called *Dark Knight Rises*.

Moore, Alan, and Eddie Campbell. *From Hell*. Marietta: Top Shelf, 2000. Print.

From Hell is an in-depth conspiracy-theorized interpretation of the "Jack the Ripper" murders. After a prince in disguise admits to fathering an illegitimate heir, the queen demands that anyone who knows the lineage of the child be killed. In this version, the untimely deaths of four East End prostitutes are the work of Doctor Gull, a Masonic visionary who uses a royal cover-up as a means to instill fear and maintain control over women in society. The sharply cross-hatched art reveals the grime and crime of the depressed East End and the gruesome murders in detail.

Powell, Nate. *Swallow Me Whole*. Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2008. Print.

Nate Powell tells another story of troubled lower-middle-class teens struggling with the quiet panic of adolescence. Ruth and Perry struggle to cope with undiagnosed mental illness that manifests as an

obsession with talking to insects and a hallucinated pencil wizard, respectively. Both siblings find trouble with authority figures and peers at school. Ruth, like Perry, discovers a commander in a stuffed frog that tells her to steal it from her job at a museum, which lands her in hot water. Eventually, the lines between mind and world blur, as Ruth's anxiety-induced, insect-swarm hallucinations completely bury their house.

Satrapı, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon, 2007. Print.

Marjane Satrapı has written and drawn a simple, straightforward account of her childhood in revolutionary Iran. She recounts, in light-hearted two-dimensional caricature, her family's political resistance and her own fence-sitting between hyper-conservative schooling and public life and her own liberal, Western upbringing. Her parents eventually think it best to send her to school outside the country, where she must find herself among Eastern European punk anarchists and globe-trotting hippies. In the end, she returns to Iran, works out her identity there, and goes on to reconcile her conflicted relationship with her home.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Graphic novels are an increasingly popular format for stories told in a range of genres. While learning to read graphic novels takes practice, their artistic and literary merit makes the effort more than worthwhile. Tune in to the ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode "An Introduction to Graphic Novels" to hear some background about graphic novels as well as specific recommendations of fantasy epics, memoirs, biographies, and adventure thriller stories, all presented in the form of a graphic novel. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/introduction-graphic-novels-30326.html>