Comics Come of Age

Comics have gone from “scourge of the classroom” to legitimate teaching tools. They are the focus of research studies at major universities. They win prestigious literary awards: the Pulitzer Prize (Maus, by Art Spiegelman), the Printz Award (American Born Chinese, by Gene Luen Yang) and the Geisel Award (Benny and Penny in the Big No-No!, by Geoffrey Hayes) with a few National Book Award finalists for good measure (Stitches, by David Small, and American Born Chinese... again). They form the centerpiece of an entire pavilion at the American Library Association’s annual conference. They even rate their very own New York Times best-seller list. Most important, the new Common Core State Standards (www.corestandards.org) now explicitly recommend their use in the classroom.

Comics are coming to your classroom, library, and home—if they aren’t there already—and this guide will help you make the most of them!

Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Illustrated Novels ... Oh My!

Let’s begin by defining our terms. Comic books, graphic novels, and illustrated novels all belong to the larger medium known as “sequential art” or just plain “comics.” The term “sequential art” was originated by pioneering cartoonist Will Eisner and has been described as a series of images arranged in a sequence to convey information. This expansive definition encompasses an enormous variety of storytelling techniques, going all the way back to hieroglyphics and cave drawings.

However, with the modern proliferation of the sequential art medium, definitions of its various formats have become a bit more specific:

- **Comic Strips** — Short form sequential art, often humorous and typically found in newspapers or as online “web comics.”
- **Comic Books** — Sequential art in pamphlet or magazine format.
- **Graphic Novels** — Long-form sequential art akin to a novel in length and narrative complexity. The term is applied to works of both fiction and nonfiction.
- **Illustrated Novels** — A hybrid of sequential art and prose. Differ from picture books in that the images and text are wholly interdependent rather than merely complementary. Examples include the Diary of a Wimpy Kid (by Jeff Kinney) and Big Nate (by Lincoln Peirce) series.

Words + Pictures = A Game Changer for the Classroom

**KIDS LIKE THEM! THEY REALLY, REALLY LIKE THEM!**

When given a choice, kids—especially boys and reluctant readers—often gravitate toward the comic format over traditional text. Illustrated novels such as Big Nate and Diary of a Wimpy Kid dominate the sales charts with graphic novels such as Scholastic’s Geronimo Stilton and Drama (by Raina Telgemeier) following close behind. Comic books and graphic novels are among the most popular kids’ ebook categories as well.

This trend holds equally true in libraries. Librarians have found that once a graphic novel collection reaches a certain critical mass, it often becomes the highest circulating collection in the library, with the average graphic novel out-circulating...
“Our study combats naysayers who accuse graphic works of dumming down education.”

—PROFESSOR JEREMY SHORT, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

STUDIES SAY: “COMICS ARE GREAT!”

Kids may love comics, but is that necessarily a good thing? A relatively new but rapidly growing body of clinical research points to yes.

A 2011 engagement/efficacy study by professors Jay Hosler (Juniata College) and K.B. Boomer (Bucknell University) found a statistically significant improvement in students’ content knowledge regarding evolution and their attitudes toward biology in general after the science graphic novel *Optical Allusions* was introduced into their classroom.

In 2012, business professors Jeremy Short and Aaron McKenny of the University of Oklahoma found that the comic format improves content retention rates compared to traditional textbook materials. The researchers gave two groups of students two different books—one a graphic novel and the other a traditional textbook—on the same subject. The students using the graphic novel showed a significant improvement in content retention over the students using the traditional textbook. “Our study combats naysayers who accuse graphic works of dumming down education,” says Professor Short. “Not only do we find that graphic novels are on par with traditional textbooks in regard to key learning outcomes—they are actually superior in some cases!”

REACHING RELUCTANT READERS

While comics can improve educational outcomes for all students, the format has proven especially effective in meeting the needs of struggling readers, special-needs students, and English-language learners. Because these students rely largely on visual literacies to build their schema for print-text reading and writing, comics...
are the ideal tool for developing them into better and more enthusiastic readers. The format plays to their strengths, thereby helping level the classroom playing field in a meaningful way.

COMICS CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE
Stepping outside the classroom, we find that educational comics are all around us. From furniture assembly instructions to airplane safety manuals, comics play a largely invisible but utterly essential role in our everyday lives, especially in cases of (literal) life and death. Case in point: the aforementioned Will Eisner spent a substantial portion of his career working for the U.S. Army developing comic-format maintenance and safety manuals.

Military efficiency studies found that Eisner’s comics out-performed traditional manuals while countless G.I.s personally credited Eisner and his comics for helping them make it back home alive and in one piece from warzones around the world.

Making Comics Work in Your Classroom

COMICS AND THE COMMON CORE

The Common Core Standards are purposefully designed to be format/medium agnostic. All classroom materials, including comics, are referred to simply as “texts,” an explicit admission that all media formats—when used properly—have their place in the twenty-first-century classroom. On this new media stage, print-text literacy and image literacy are costars, sharing the spotlight in equal measure.

“In my early years of teaching middle school, comic books were on the back reading shelf for the kids who had finished their ‘real reading,’” reminisces pedagogical expert and author Lynette Brent. “Though with a wide variety of topics from classic literature to standards-based content, today’s graphic novels aren’t ‘extra reading,’ but are instead a powerful core to best-practices teaching.”

WRITING WITH PICTURES

Literacy scholars are already calling our era “the greatest communication revolution of all time,” surpassing even the fifteenth century, which saw the invention of the printing press. Modern technology enables images to be integrated with text in unprecedented ways, including everything from emoticons to PowerPoint. Modern writers must be fluent in both words and images in order to effectively communicate. Working with the comic format enables students to develop visual and textual literacy proficiencies at the same time.

CONTENT AREA EDUCATION WITH COMICS

Comics have been shown to improve reader engagement while enhancing both comprehension and retention. This holds true no matter the content area: math, science, social studies, or language arts. Comics have incredible potential as a learning multiplier for students everywhere. But that potential will only be realized with the help of parents, teachers, and librarians who understand the value of the comic format and know how to use it to its fullest potential.
RESOURCES

**Manga High**, by Dr. Michael Bitz (Harvard Education Press)
*When Commas Meet Kryptonite*, by Dr. Michael Bitz (Teacher’s College)

Dr. Bitz’s two texts give proven advice for teachers and librarians who want to implement comic books and graphic novels into the curriculum, with a special emphasis on writing and composition.

**Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels**, by Dr. James Carter (NCTE)

The first informational and educational text to solely address teaching comics and graphic novels in secondary settings; it remains highly relevant today.

**Comics and Sequential Art**, by Will Eisner (Poorhouse Press)
**Graphic Storytelling**, by Will Eisner (Poorhouse Press)

Along with coining the terms “graphic novel” and “sequential art,” Eisner also wrote these two seminal texts on comics aesthetics, pedagogy, and process.

**Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art**, by Scott McCloud (HarperCollins)

Presented in comic format, this is the foundational text for defining and—as the title says—understanding comics.

**A Parent’s Guide to the Best Kids’ Comics: Choosing Titles Your Children Will Love**, by Snow Wildsmith and Scott Robins (Krause Publications)

Two librarians review over 100 graphic novels with another 750 additional title recommendations for children from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade.

**Teaching Graphic Novels**, by Dr. Katie Monnin (Maupin House)
**Teaching Early Reader Comics and Graphic Novels**, by Dr. Katie Monnin (Maupin House)

Dr. Monnin’s texts cover teaching with comic books and graphic novels in various K–12 settings. Additional resources, including copy-friendly handouts for home, classroom and library use can be found at: maupinhouse.com/index.php/authors/katie-monnin.html.

**ONLINE RESOURCES**

**No Flying, No Tights**, by Robin Brenner
www.noflyingnotights.com

A rich resource full of comic book and graphic novel reviews.

**The Secret Origin of Good Readers**, by Robyn A. Hill
www.night-flight.com/secretorigin/

Provides a variety of resources for anyone interested in comic books and/or graphic novels: reviews, links, articles, and downloadable lesson plans.

**SANE (Sequential Art and Narrative in Education) Journal**
www.sanejournal.net

Research-based resources on how to teach comics and graphic novels to K–12 students.

**Reading with Pictures**
www.readingwithpictures.org

A nonprofit organization dedicated to getting comics into schools and getting school into comics. Contains resources for educators, academics and librarians—including comprehensive collections of lesson plans, research papers, recommended reading lists, and much more.