

ADVENTURES IN

GRAPHICA

USING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS
TO TEACH COMPREHENSION, 2-6

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CHAPTER ONE

YOU GOT COMICS?

“Bradley.”

“Bradley, I need you to focus.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Right, Mr. Thompson.”

Feeling my frustration mounting and steeling myself for yet another exhaustive tutoring session with Bradley, I mustered up my calmest, most encouraging teacher voice and repeated, “What were you thinking when you slowed down at that last hard part?”

He was tired. I was tired. The entire universe was tired.

We’ve all had one. You know you have. That one student you just can’t seem to reach. You keep slugging away, sometimes seemingly beyond hope—and despite the temptation to give up, you remind yourself that this is why you’re in this profession. This is what you were meant to do. So, you do what countless educators have done before you. You carry on. You keep at it. You plug away.

Bradley and I weren’t strangers. In fact, we’d spent a lot of time together. One might say we were old pals. Now in fourth grade, Bradley had been on my radar since first grade, and, despite my most heroic efforts and some great classroom teachers along the way, I’d never seen him motivated to read.

Yes, we’ve all had one—and Bradley was mine.

As I regained my determination, I redirected Bradley’s attention once again. But something felt off. Bradley’s inattentiveness seemed different

than usual; he wasn't drifting off to his regular dream world. He was intent. And focused. And staring at the cabinet behind my desk.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, and once again calling on the serenity of my inner teacher, I asked, "Bradley, what are you looking at? What's got you so distracted today?"

Without looking away from the cabinet, Bradley simply pointed his chin toward the lower shelf and asked, "Is that a comic book?"

• • •

In hindsight, I truly had no idea what I would do with that comic book. I've always been a visual person, and even though I wasn't a comic book reader as a child, I was routinely drawn to them. My family couldn't afford extras like comics when I was younger, but a kid in my neighborhood had tons of them. I loved those rare rainy days when we couldn't play outside—those were the days we got to go over to his house and dig through his comics. Even now, as an adult, I can't resist the lure of a comic book store. Somehow, just being among comics makes me feel like a kid again.

So it's no wonder that, as an adult, I've made a habit of ducking into comic book stores, and this visit was no different than the others. I went to the mall that weekend to purchase a birthday gift and ended up in the comic book store, looking around. That's it. Just looking. I never actually bought them. I just loved digging through them. Besides, the idea of taking up comics as an adult made me feel a bit odd. Admittedly, I was uneasy. Here was a medium I'd longed to understand since childhood, but discomfort kept me from really diving into it.

Then I saw it: one single shelf of comic books set aside for elementary readers. The teacher in me took over. I thumbed excitedly through several of the options and—hastily choosing an issue—made my way to the counter, paid for it, and ducked out of the store.

I wasn't really sure what I had, but somehow I felt its potential. I remembered how much I wanted to read comics as a youngster and thought that maybe, just maybe, I could find a way to use them in an instructional way. Pleased with my purchase, I pored over it while I grabbed a quick bite to eat at the food court.

I was enthralled, but unsure of exactly how I would use my delightful discovery. I vowed that, when I had some extra time, I would give it another look from an instructional viewpoint. But you know how it is. Upon returning to work the following Monday, duty and my hectic schedule called—so I put my little comic book on the shelf in my office, where it sat for three weeks, collecting dust.

Until Bradley found it.

• • •

“You mean that? That up on the shelf?”

“Yeah!”

“Yes, that’s a comic book. I didn’t know you read comic books, Bradley.” What I *knew*, in fact, was that Bradley didn’t read much of anything.

“Well . . . I don’t . . . I mean, I want to . . . I . . . well . . . can I read that one?”

Now, in my entire history of working with Bradley, I’d never once seen him ask to read something. It wasn’t for lack of trying on my part. Here was one of those moments where everything just clicks—a teachable moment, if you will, and I’m never one to pass up a teachable moment. I immediately scrapped the plans for the day’s lesson and got the comic book down for him.

A side of Bradley I had never seen before emerged. He actively read and discussed the text, the pictures, and the story line. He was excited! I was excited! And the universe? Well, I like to think the universe was excited for us, too. We had so much fun reading together that I almost didn’t notice that Bradley was ten minutes late for lunch.

“Wow, Bradley, our time’s up. I’ve kept you too long again, and you’re late for lunch.”

Then something downright fantastic happened: Bradley asked if he could take the comic book to lunch with him. I was beside myself! “Of course you can take it to lunch with you! Just promise to bring it back tomorrow, so we can talk some more about it.” We said our good-byes as I ushered him toward the cafeteria and then floated to the lounge to heat up my Hot Pocket thinking all the while to myself: Yeah, there’s something to this . . . now I just have to figure out what it is.

But before I could figure it out, something even more amazing was about to happen.

Before I continue, you should know that I’m a literacy coach for a K-5 Title 1 school in a suburb of Houston, Texas. (At the time, I was also the campus testing coordinator for our state reading test.) Needless to say, if you’re a struggling reader and you’re on my campus, you’ll eventually get to know me—usually sooner than later.

It seems Bradley showed his class the comic book during lunch, and it caused quite a stir. By the end of the day, three of my struggling fourth-grade readers had somehow risked certain fury from their teachers by ditching their classes to make their way down to my office.

Each one without a scheduled lesson.

Each one covert and clandestine.

Each one asking, “You got comics?”

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF GRAPHICA

So, it all started with a struggling reader and a comic book, and I’ve been hooked ever since. Seeing the potential of this medium firsthand drove me to pursue an action research plan of my own: I absorbed any piece of information I could find about using comics in the classroom.

It wasn’t easy. The Internet is littered with useful resources, but the search itself can be confusing and overwhelming—not to mention time consuming. Most of the books in my professional library barely mentioned comics, if they mentioned them at all, and I had difficulty finding appropriate comics to use in the classroom. When I did hit a gold mine of resources for the medium, the lessons and information often were geared toward high school or middle school learners, and I had to really tweak them or move on to another resource. Along the way, I found some useful resources and some not-so-useful ones. I had to feel my way much of the time and get creative, but I was driven.

Eventually, I settled on a fairly decent pile of ideas, pointers, and resources. Part of the information I’ve collected is a product of my own meager creativity combined with my working knowledge of best practices in literacy. Part of it is a culmination of my search for resources on using graphica with elementary students. Part of it is just good old trial and error. In the past few years, I’ve hit the road and become known as “that comic-book guy,” as I’ve shared my insights in workshops, presentations, and classrooms. Along the way, I’ve discovered teacher after teacher just itching to get their hands on this information.

My intent in writing this book is threefold. Initially, I want to give you some background information on the world of comics by offering some theory, research, and support for using them. Then I want to share with you some opportunities to apply graphica to what we already know is good teaching. Finally, I want to offer some resources to use when you leave this book and continue your own learning. Throughout the book, I will share my own journey through personal anecdotes, research, and connections to the topics at hand. Along the way, I’ll offer hints and suggestions that I’ve found helpful. Ultimately, I hope to leave you with a better understanding of the considerable power to teach and motivate students that can be found in this wonderful and exciting medium.

SHORING UP SEMANTICS

I've noticed that a lot of people seem confused when I mention that I use comics in my teaching. It isn't unusual for teachers, peers, and friends to bombard me with quizzical faces and comments like, "Are they comics? Graphic novels? Cartoons? I'm confused!" One workshop participant even stopped me, mid-sentence, during one of my presentations to ask for clarification by demanding, "What exactly are you talking about here?"

You may be feeling this way, too. You might think that you can never be completely sure you're 'saying it right'—and you wouldn't be alone. For instance, many comics diehards wouldn't hesitate to criticize my use of the term *graphica* (even my computer's insufferable spell-checker won't recognize it!). And, just as there are folks who would think we are talking about comedians when we refer to *comics*, there are just as many out there who would think we are referring to something far more sinister when we use the term *graphic*.

What's worse, most sources I've turned to only seem to add to the confusion. Depending on who or what I consulted in my research, their definitions may or may not have matched up. Even when I did find some similarities in terminology, certain nuances remained unclear. I was, however, relieved to learn that it wasn't just me who was confused.

You might find this hard to believe, but many researchers and professionals don't seem to agree completely on how best to define this medium. Offerings range from the vague to the extremely detailed, as we see from the following contributions:

- Sequential art in book form (Gorman 2003, xii)
- Tell a story with words and drawings and have an identifiable beginning, middle, and end (Cary 2004, 10)
- Stories told in both pictorial and word form (Foster 2004, 30)
- Arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea (Eisner 1985, 5)
- Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (McCloud 1993, 8)

So then, how do we describe a medium that seems so difficult to nail down? Perhaps a true definition for *graphica* is such a slippery beast because it is an ever-evolving medium with a wide range of possibilities. Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, argues (after taking about twenty pages to define the medium!) that "our attempts to define comics are

THE EVIL COMIC BOOK

If, at this point, you're concerned about the lingering feeling that comics are bad for kids, you wouldn't be alone—but have no fear! Though this common misconception has strong roots in the history of American culture, it has long since been debunked. For more information about how comics acquired such a negative connotation, and how research and time have led to its deconstruction, see Appendix A, "The History of *Graphica*," and Chapter 3, "A Word About the Research."

**THERE'S A FIRST TIME
FOR EVERYTHING**

If you've never had a personal reading experience with *graphica*, and you are looking for a great place to start, I suggest that you pick up a copy of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. In this engaging memoir, Spiegelman retells his father's experiences surviving the Holocaust. The author peppers the graphic novel with vignettes of interactions between him and his father, giving the reader an extra layer of story line that offers connections to themes such as family struggles, generation gaps, and adult children dealing with aging parents who are products of their past.

an on-going process which won't end anytime soon" (1993, 23). In addition, the authors of *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide* mentions that "no one has ever developed a word that encompasses the rich and unique nature of comics all at once" (Lyga and Lyga 2004, 15).

I believe we can incorporate aspects from all of the various descriptions out there to create a working definition that suits our purposes. This would give us a common vocabulary and ensure that we are all on the same page. You'll notice that, within the descriptions just mentioned, the intent is essentially the same. So, without further adieu (drumroll, please . . .), I present to you my definition of *graphica* assembled by merging comments from the available research and scholarly writings:

Graphica *noun* A medium of literature that integrates pictures and words and arranges them cumulatively to tell a story or convey information; often presented in comic strip, periodical, or book form; also known as comics.

Whew! That's certainly a mouthful, but I think it will do for now. If you dissect it, you'll observe that I included a few extras. Specifically, I added the idea of *graphica* being literature and also highlighted its cumulative nature and its integration of pictures and words. There's a method to my madness here. Up until this point, these aspects generally have been ignored. However, I think that these three additions are vital to the very purpose of this book. As you continue to explore *graphica*, you will begin to see that it does, indeed, have literary merit. In subsequent chapters, we'll discuss how the pictures and the words in *graphica* merge to produce a unique reading experience. Additionally, we'll explore how the cumulative nature of the medium correlates with comprehension strategies. Finally, you'll notice that I included the idea that *graphica* is also known as comics—in this book, I will use the terms interchangeably.

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN MEDIUM AND GENRE

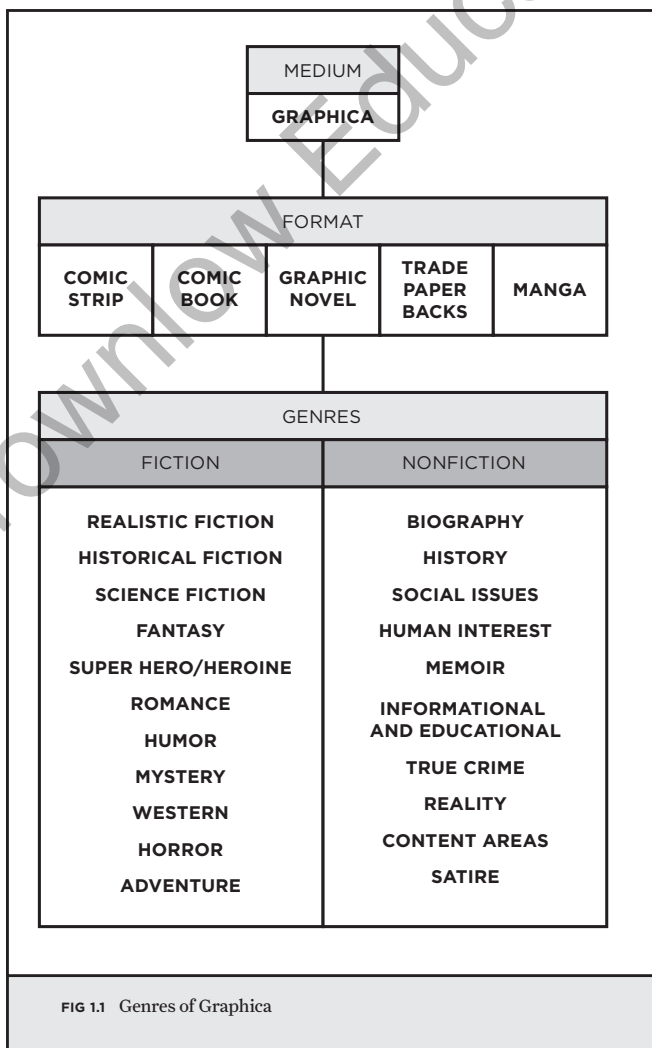
Now that we have a working definition of the medium, let's turn our attention to the different ways it can manifest itself.

In order to do this, we need to review the *medium-format-genre* hierarchy. Essentially, the *medium* we are talking about is *graphica*, but it uses many different *formats*. Additionally, these formats are available in many differ-

ent *genres* (ALSC Research and Development Committee 2006, 49; Brenner 2006).

In my early inexperience, as I first started working with *graphica*, I took to calling it a genre. As my awareness grew, I corrected this misinterpretation. I came to understand that *graphica* is actually a medium in which a multitude of genres are available. This can be confusing, so it might be helpful to imagine this idea using the analogy of television. The medium is television, but the formats—such as news, sitcoms, movies, commercials, public service announcements, and so forth—vary greatly. The genres covered in these formats can be anything from nonfiction to horror to biography to realistic fiction and more.

Comics work in much the same way (see Figure 1.1). You may think I'm playing with semantics here, but I've come to understand that, whether we're contemplating *graphica* or any other resource, it is especially important for us to make this distinction clear in our classroom discussions of genre. For example, many students and adults assume that *graphica* is only available in fiction. In truth, it comes in just as many different genres as other media our students read, like picture books, magazines, and chapter books. If we were to believe this assumption, we would miss out on everything that *graphica* can add to the regular genre studies we do throughout the school year. In addition to all the other wonderful ways comics can be used instructionally, they can offer great visual examples of the various genres students will encounter in traditional texts.



FOCUSING ON FORMATS

Now, let's take a closer look at the various formats in which the medium of graphica is available. The more common formats are comic books, graphic novels, trade paperbacks, manga, and comic strips (see Figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2
Characteristics of Different Formats of Graphica

Medium	Format	Characteristic	Example
Graphica or Comics	Comic Strip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three to eight panels • Newspaper “funnies” • Recent rise in availability online 	<i>Peanuts</i>
Graphica or Comics	Comic Book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Periodical issues • Thin—durability similar to magazines • Story generally continues from issue to issue 	<i>Spider-Man</i>
Graphica or Comics	Graphic Novel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book length • Sturdier durability • Story line starts and ends within same text • Can be anthology of previously printed comic books 	<i>Maus</i>
Graphica or Comics	Trade Paperback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anthology of previously printed comic books or story lines 	<i>Spider-Man Team Up</i>
Graphica or Comics	Manga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japanese-style graphic novels • Stylized drawings • Simplified features and outlines • Some read from back to front 	<i>Dragon Ball Z</i>

COMIC STRIPS

Most of us are quite familiar with comic strips. You probably see them in your daily newspaper, but they can appear just about anywhere—including, more recently, online. They generally include three to eight frames that follow a quick, short story line.