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# What Is a Graphic Novel?

A novel is a book-length work of fiction. It is rich with character and setting. It has dialogue and plot. It offers vivid language and sensory details. It also includes conflict and resolution. Sometimes, a novel even includes illustrations.

Graphic novels *always* include illustrations. Pictures presented in a framework on each page tell the story. Graphic novels may be stories that take place in the present. They may be adaptations of classic stories, which become shorter, but keep the basic plot. They can explore myths and legends. They can examine famous figures from history. They can even tell fairytales. Regardless of the subject matter, graphic novels include characters, setting, dialogue, descriptive language and a plot that offers conflict and resolution.

The first widely-known graphic novel is titled *Maus*. It was written by Art Spiegelman. He told the story of his father's experience during the Holocaust. In *Maus*, he used animals instead of people to tell the story. Like *Maus*, today's graphic novels are book-length stories told in a frame-by-frame format on each page.

## Graphic Novels Versus Comic Books

How is a graphic novel different from a comic book? The first comic books were published in the early 1900s. They included stories about superheroes such as Batman and Superman. Later comic books told stories about teenagers, such as *Archie and Friends*. Detective comic books like *Dick Tracy* were also popular. Most comic books offer serial stories—that is, each book contains part of a story, but you must read the next book to find out what happens.

Graphic novels usually offer a stand-alone piece of literature—that is, a full story. The word “literature” refers to a piece that is skilfully written. The graphic novels you’ll be reading for *Using Graphic Novels in the Classroom* represent literature. Whether they are historical, classic or contemporary, the writing in these books is well crafted.

Think you understand the difference between graphic novels and comic books? Take the true-false quiz below to find out.

- |   |      |       |
|---|------|-------|
| 1. A short version of <i>Moby Dick</i> with pictures is a comic book. | True | False |
| 2. A graphic novel can be one chapter of a longer story.              | True | False |
| 3. Superman is a comic book character.                                | True | False |
| 4. The writing in graphic novels is often well crafted and skilful.   | True | False |
| 5. Comic books are often short versions of classic literature.        | True | False |
| 6. Graphic novels and comic strips use pictures to help tell a story. | True | False |

# Point of View

*Point of view* explains who narrates a story. It can also tell who observes a particular scene at any given moment. Here are four common points of view in a novel:

**First-person limited**—This narrator refers to himself or herself as “I”. This person only knows what is happening in his or her own brain.

**First-person omniscient**—Omniscient means “knowing all”. This narrator refers to himself or herself as “I”, but he or she knows what every other character is thinking, too!

You can usually tell when a narrator is speaking from a first-person point of view. The graphic artist features images of this narrator more than other characters. This first person narrator is often drawn in great detail, while minor characters are less detailed or may be merely silhouettes. The first-person narrator is often the only character in a panel, with close-ups on his or her face.

**Third-person limited**—This narrator follows one character around and knows what is going on in only that person’s head. The narrator refers to that character by name or as “he” or “she”.

Graphic artists drawing a third-person limited point of view will focus on one character more than the others. The character will appear often in panels, frequently with close-ups on his or her face. The narration will be in a box.

**Third-person omniscient**—This narrator follows all of the characters in a story around and knows what everyone is thinking. The narrator refers to each character by name or as “he” and “she”.

Graphic artists drawing this point of view will give equal space to each character. There may be close-ups of each character in a panel, at some point in the book. There may also frequently be long-shots of the entire group of characters.

**Directions:** Choose one page from the graphic novel you are reading. Sketch one panel in the box below. Beside it, note which point of view is shown in the panel. Explain how you know which point of view is being shown.



Point of View: \_\_\_\_\_

Explanation: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Now, on a separate piece of paper, draw the same panel from a different perspective. If the panel from your book is drawn from a third-person perspective, choose one character and draw the panel from a first-person perspective instead. If the panel is drawn from a first-person perspective, draw the scene from a third-person narrator’s perspective. You may choose either a limited or omniscient point-of-view.

# Plot Pyramid

*Plot structure* refers to the action in a novel. It is often charted on a pyramid, made up of the parts below.

**Directions:** Study the five parts of the plot. Then read the sample that illustrates the plot pyramid structure.

The first part of the novel is the **introduction**. It introduces characters and setting. It may tell readers what the main character wants. It may also introduce one or more conflicts suffered by a main character or characters.

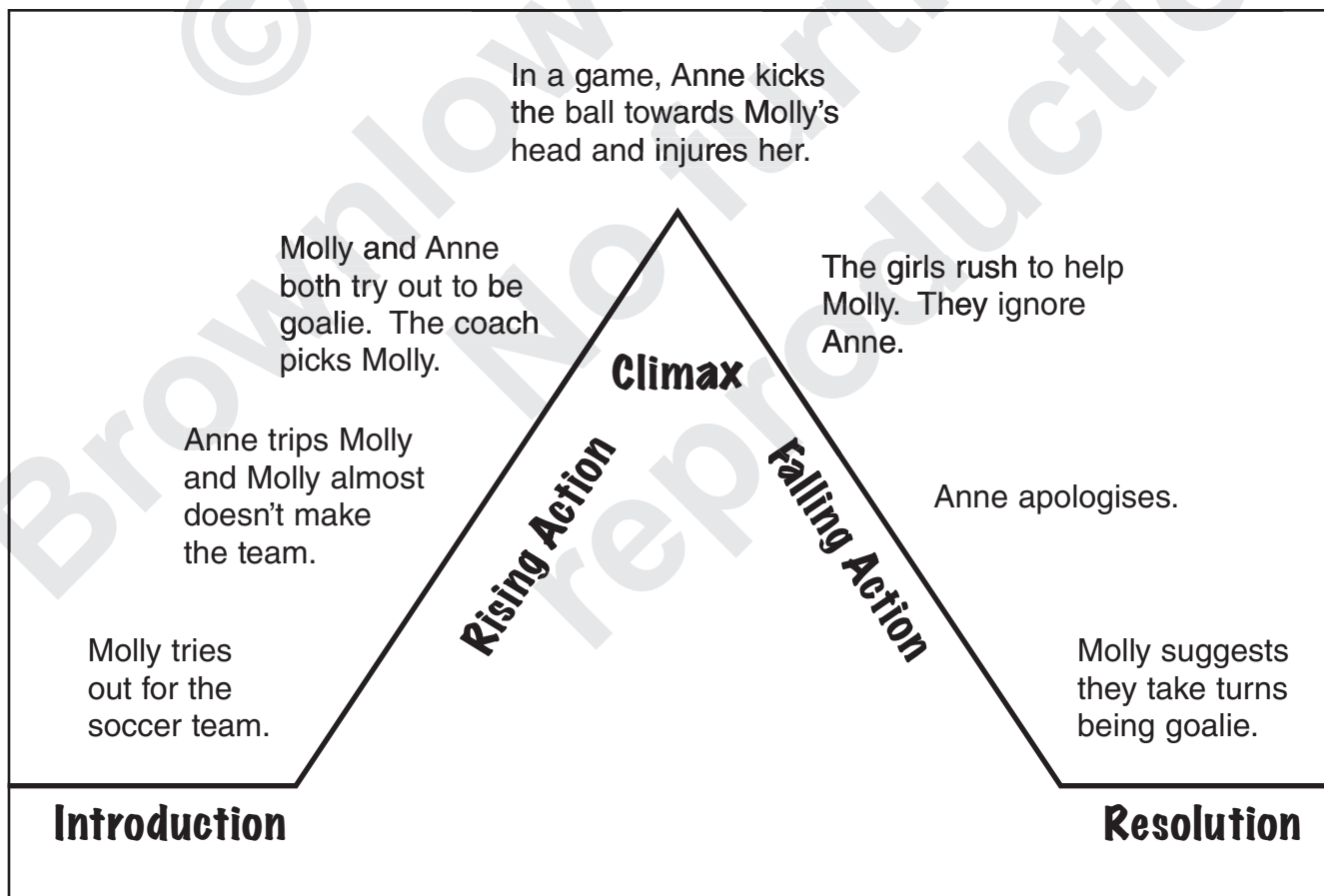
The second part of the novel introduces the **rising action**. It explores at least one problem experienced by a main character or characters. It explains why these characters cannot yet get what they want.

The **climax** is the most exciting part of the novel. It's a turning point for a main character or characters. The conflict is most powerful during the climax of a story. Readers aren't sure whether the characters will actually get what they want.

Near the end of the book, there is **falling action**. The characters begin to settle down. They may still have problems, but they are beginning to be resolved.

**Resolution** appears at the end of the novel, in which some characters get what they want, and some don't.

**Plot Chart**



# Graphic Short Story Plot

Many novelists—both traditional and graphic—plot out the story before they write it. They chart the plot on the computer or on a big piece of paper so that they know what happens to the characters at every point in the story.

**Directions:** Refer to the plot chart on page 32. Then, plot your own story in the boxes on the graphic chart below.

