Students, publishers, and educators have embraced comics for their engaging format and high-interest storylines. Comics are not just popular choices for independent reading, however. Comics can be used in the classroom to support literacy instruction. Comics have been found to foster multimodal literacy, support English language learning, and motivate reluctant readers. The layout of comics makes visible the meaning-making strategies deployed by proficient readers. These strategies include sustained comprehension, visualization, and making inferences. Comics also provide opportunities for readers to explore literacy concepts such as setting and characterization, and literary devices such as foreshadowing, point of view, and flashback. This paper provides a framework for educators to select high-quality comics that can be used to scaffold these and other literacy lessons for K-8 learners. It includes an annotated bibliography of print and digital curriculum guides to integrate comics in the classroom.

Headings:

- Comic books, strips, etc. in education
- Graphic Novels
- Literacy education
- Visual Literacy
- Reading instruction
USING COMICS TO PROMOTE LITERACY IN THE K-8 CLASSROOM

by
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Comics: An Introduction

After years of opposition, comics in all their forms have been accepted and even embraced in libraries and classrooms across the United States. Whether a teacher offers collections of Garfield and Nate the Great comic strips to students in her classroom, or a librarian collects Jeff Smith’s Bone series and promotes Raina Telgemeier’s Smile, students in elementary and middle schools have access to comics in a wider variety of genres than ever before. As comics have gained popularity as an engaging choice for independent reading, they have also become a more acceptable option for formal literacy instruction. Educators have introduced comics into lesson plans because comics are attractive to many reluctant readers and because they offer format-specific benefits when teaching literacy and the language arts. In an era of digital learning and multimodal literacy, comics have come into their own. This paper summarizes the newly ascendant arguments in favor of using comics to promote literacy in elementary and middle school. It proposes a framework for evaluating comic books for their literary and instructional merit. It closes with a brief annotated bibliography of newly published curriculum resources and lesson guides, in both print and digital formats. This bibliography is designed to help educators find resources and support as they integrate comics into their own lesson plans for students in grades K through 8.

In their quest for mainstream acceptance, comic-book creators and researchers have developed a number of definitions for their format. Educators who wish to explore these definitions in greater detail will find ample discussion of the topic in the resources
listed in the annotated bibliography below. For the purposes of this paper, I adopt the basic definition developed by Scott McLeod in 1993, in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*: “Comics are juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” (9). A decade later, Michele Gorman streamlined McLeod’s definition for a classroom audience: a comic, she wrote, was “a fusion of images and words that form a cohesive narrative told in a frame-by-frame format.” (1) This fusion can occur in a number of settings, the most prominent being comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, and web comics (Thompson, 7-10). But comics must be seen as a format, not a genre: comics are defined by their use of text and pictures working together, not by the subjects their authors address. Today, besides the familiar funny pages and superhero stories, comic storytellers choose subjects ranging from high fantasy to historical fiction to scientific biography.

Comics have been especially popular in two genres in the United States for decades: comic strips, or "the funnies," and superhero comics, especially those published by DC and Marvel. Bound volumes of Peanuts, Garfield, and Calvin & Hobbes comic strips have long been popular in public and school libraries. Superhero comics have posed greater challenges for librarians and teachers, because the storylines have been more controversial and the materials on which they were printed were often not durable enough for library and school use. Until recently, then, children bought superhero comics for themselves, and indeed, this sense of “child-centered” consumption contributed to the genre’s popularity. Because comic strips and superhero comics have been so popular,
many students who read comics expect humor, action, and characters that appear not just in books but also on TV and in the toy aisle.

The funny pages and superhero comics have always had company on the comic shelf. Tintin and Asterix comics, first published in Europe but popular in English translation in the United States, have been available for all the years that DC and Marvel have dominated the public concept of the format. Many children find Asterix comics (Figure 1) especially inviting, because of their comic wordplay, humorous situations, and the creators’ use of arrows and other cues to assist readers new to the comic format.

![Asterix and Caesar’s Gift](image)

**Figure 1. Asterix and Caesar’s Gift** by Rene Goscinny and Albert Uderzo.
In the 1990s, Scholastic published Jeff Smith’s *Bone* series (Figure 2) in collected volumes. With Art Spiegelman and Will Eisner among his antecedents in the adult-comic realm, it was Smith’s series that popularized the long-form narrative comic for younger readers.

![Figure 2. Rock Jaw: Master of the Eastern Border (Bone, Vol. 5) by Jeff Smith](image)

Now, new series such as the Babymouse comics (Figure 3) rank among the highest-circulating titles for young readers in any format. Unlike superhero comics and the *Bone* series, however, Babymouse uses fantasy only for the main character’s dream.
sequences. These comics expand on a long picture-book tradition of placing talking animals in human settings, and raises topics highly relevant to children: sibling rivalry, school stress, and the quest for popularity.

Figure 3. Babymouse: Queen of the World by Jennifer L. Holm and Matthew Holm.

Comics as Picture Books

Books with pictures are foundational texts in literacy instruction. For emergent readers, picture books are the primary vehicle for developing concepts about print; with or without text, pictures spark talk, which is the basis for early literacy. Children and second-language learners of every age use pictures to create narratives; the illustrations become signs and symbols in the story. Even wordless picture books develop comprehension, and support children’s attempts at storytelling. (Crawford & Hade, 67-68). Authors and illustrators craft relationships between words and pictures to shape their story’s “setting, characterization, point of view, and temporality.” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 226). Elementary-school teachers therefore choose picture books for small-group
instruction and whole-class read-alouds whose language and content will sustain meaningful conversation. They look for stories that will “capture students’ interests, stretch them as readers, and reflect the diverse backgrounds of the children in the classroom and in the world.” (Flint, 201-202)

Although educators have not traditionally thought of comics as a form of picture book, picture-book authors and illustrators have been borrowing comic conventions for their work for years. Although the page turn continues to be the major engine of movement in the storytelling rhythms of comic books, illustrators now use panels on a single page to convey a sense of activity. In *Comic Adventures of Boots* (Figure 4), picture-book author Satoshi Kitamura uses a series of large and small panels to convey physical movement and a rapid-fire discussion between a hungry cat and his potential avian prey:
Notice that Kitamura borrowed not only panels but also word bubbles from the toolbox of comic creation.

Children’s first exposure to words is through conversation and dialogue, and for that reason, dialogue has been a key feature of books designed for emergent and transitional readers. (Flint, 43). More and more picture-book authors have, like Kitamura, used word bubbles to portray dialogue on the picture page. Mo Willems, for example,
created an entire series of picture books featuring a stubborn pigeon. Almost every piece of text in these best-selling, award-winning books is presented in word-bubbles, through which the character talks to himself and the reader. In this excerpt from *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Figure 5), the pigeon’s vocal tone and emotional state are conveyed through the creative use of font, text size, and word-bubble shape.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 5. Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! by Mo Willems.*

Mo Willems’ award-winning Elephant & Piggie Early Reader series (Figure 6) also relies heavily on the comic grammar of word bubbles to scaffold early literacy. Willems uses text size and word-bubble shape to convey emotion and volume to beginning readers.
This comic-book technique works beautifully in picture books and early readers alike.

In comics, texts and images must always work together to propel the narrative. In picture books, texts and images interact across a spectrum. Nikolajeva and Scott propose that as picture books move along this spectrum, they become more complex and offer more scope for meaning-making and reader engagement. They propose a framework for analyzing the interaction of words and pictures that moves from simple to increasingly complex:

Figure 6. *There is a Bird on Your Head!* by Mo Willems.
Symmetrical: words and pictures tell the same story.

Enhancing: pictures amplify the meaning of the words, or words expand the pictures “so that different information in the two modes of communication produces a more complex dynamic.”

Complementary: “when enhancing interaction becomes very significant.”

Counterpointing: “words and images collaborate to communicate meanings beyond the scope of either one alone.”

Contradictory: extreme form of counterpointing, words and pictures seem to oppose each other. Creates ambiguity that the reader must resolve/mediate to create meaning. (225-226).

When analyzed using this framework, many if not most comics will fall on the complex end of the spectrum. With complementary, counterpointing, and contradictory relationships between words and pictures, high-quality comic books will scaffold a variety of advanced literacy practices.

**Multimodal Literacy**

Comics books are not, however, merely advanced iterations of picture books. Instead, they are multimodal texts whose text and visual features evoke sounds, sights, and movement in ways that heighten or transcend the narrative effects of picture books. What is multimodal literacy? It is the idea that people need to understand not just the alphabetic texts around them but the images and sounds that dominate the popular media of radio, film, and television. As visual stimuli have increased, and multimedia resources proliferate, people have begun to receive and interpret information in new ways.
“Literacy now means to simultaneously read and comprehend both printed text and graphic methods of presenting ideas and information.” (Monnin, 51)

As Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis have asserted, in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, for today’s readers, “written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning.” (In Jacobs, 21). The rise of the Internet and the rapid expansion of the interactive, multimedia “app” has transformed the literacy environment for all of us. Texts now include not just printed books but “digital texts, images, sound, and gesture” as recorded on film and communicated over the Internet. (Hammond, 23). Comics, with their use of stable forms to communicate movement and the passage of time, provide a useful, static guide to this increasingly harried literacy world. As more than one educator has reported, after sitting down with a comic book, “To read both the words and the picture, I had to consciously slow down … developing an appreciation for the way words and pictures worked together … a more sophisticated, multimodal form of reading than alphabet-only texts.” (Friese, 26).

**The Question of Engagement**

Whether comics are seen as one type of the traditional picture book, or as an introduction to multimodal literacy forms, to be adopted by educators, they must still meet the criteria for high-quality language-learning texts. These texts must be authentic, meaningful, and interesting to readers. (Flint, 170). Many teachers and librarians have asserted that comics are just naturally engaging, but this assertion deserves careful examination. What are the hallmarks of authentic, engaging texts? These are texts that invite readers to apply prior knowledge and experiences to their reading; to make
connections between many different kinds of texts; to take “multiple perspectives in the
telling of the stories;” to incorporate “story language and story rituals in each reading;”
and to have “active, play-like responses” to the reading experience. (Crawford & Hade,
72). High-quality comics will meet all of these criteria for a wide variety of learners, but
the parallels between comics and play have drawn special attention. Many comic stories
“inhabit a childlike world and ways of thinking … offering supernatural story lines and
characters” that mimic many children’s fantasy worlds. (Thompson, 60). Certainly
comics’ aesthetic similarity to animated cartoons conveys their value as entertainment.
And typically, comic creators will deliberately emphasize humor, action, and excitement
to engage the reader. (Thompson, 21)

Many teachers and librarians report that comics are especially appealing to
reluctant readers, especially boys. (Gavigan, 2012, 20). “For children who are incapable
of visualizing a story, the artwork helps them create context. Graphic elements also
attract visually dependent readers, who then freely read the text.” (Lyga, 2006, n.p.)
Some children will find the relatively limited number of words on a comic page less
threatening than other books they encounter in libraries and schools. English-language
learners may embrace the comic format with special fervor. Comics provide
comprehensible language in a format that often reduces anxiety and frustration. (Cary,
13). The dialogue-heavy storytelling techniques in comics can help English language
learners master idiomatic expressions. (Gavigan, 2012, 20). Comics are full of the
“culturally specific onomatopoeia, verb tenses, multiple-meaning words, and routine
phrases” that pose challenges to English language learners in other formats. (Thompson,
18)
Nevertheless, however engaged many students are by comics, others will resist the format. Some students may resist reading comics in the classroom precisely because of their status as popular, often lowbrow entertainment. For young readers, a book’s thickness or its text complexity can act “as a symbolic sign,” signifying the reader’s status in the classroom or community (Crawford & Hade, 71) Comics are a visual medium and often have fewer pages than standard novels, and so may signify a lack of literacy sophistication for students whose identity as readers is still in flux. Girls may dislike a format whose most prominent genre, the superhero comic, has a troubled history of stereotyping and sexualizing girls and women. Finally, many students will know about the stigmas attached to comic books, and resist reading a format that has traditionally been denigrated. (Connors, 69) And as with all texts, readers may have background or experience that leads them “not [to] fill in the gaps of the text or make meaning as the author intended.” (Hammond, 25) Because comics depend so much on inference and reader participation for meaning-making, this background/experience gap can be an especially high barrier to reader engagement with comic stories. Luckily, students can learn to read the grammar of comics just as they learn the conventions of other genres presented in class.

**Comics and Literacy**

Comics have their own grammar, a set of conventions and tropes that frame the narrative and communicate the creators’ message. There are seven key elements that comic readers must master to gain full comprehension: panels, directionality, narrative boxes, speech and thought bubbles, lettering, pictures, and gutters. (Thompson, 28-30).
Panels. Panels are the paragraphs of comic books. The action within each panel, and the panels’ placement and size on the page, create a sense of movement within the story. In *Benny and Penny: The Toy Breaker* (Figure 7), panel design focuses the reader’s attention on specific details in the story. The author depicts some events outside the panel frame to expand the setting, visually for the reader and physically for the characters in the story.

**Figure 7. Benny and Penny: The Toy Breaker** by Geoffrey Hayes
Directionality. Comic creators position panels to move the reader’s eye in a specific direction down or across the page. Panels that draw the eye down the page will evoke a different response than those that move from left to right (or right-to-left, as in Japanese Manga comics). Two-page panels will give an expanded sense of time, place, and action. In Figure 8, a page from *Fangbone: Third Grade Barbarian* demonstrates how directionality conveys frantic movement in a typical comic fight scene:

![Figure 8. Fangbone: Third Grade Barbarian by Michael Rex.](image)
Narrative boxes. Narrative boxes can provide a third-person point of view, signal a change in time or location, or sum up the action so far. In *Aphrodite: Goddess of Love* (Figure 9), George O’Connor uses narrative boxes to provide facts about Ancient Greek myths. O’Connor uses narrative boxes, though, to address the reader directly, and to create a tonal scheme for his story-telling.

Figure 9. *Aphrodite: Goddess of Love* by George O’Connor.
Speech bubbles and thought bubbles. Comic creators use different shapes and outlines to convey speech and thoughts, to set an emotion or tone, and to connect the dialogue to the action on the page. In Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword (Figure 10), Barry Deutsch uses a concrete form for a speech bubble – a one-ton weight – to convey both the speaker’s tone and also the emotional response of her listener.
**Lettering and Symbols.** Comic creators choose their letters and symbols with the same care they draw their pictures. In this page from Frank Camusso’s *Knights of the Lunch Table* (Figure 11), bold, italicized words signal volume, emphasis, and the speaker’s state of mind. Note the hesitant italicized “uh” and the emphatic bold of “girl” in panels one and two.

![Comic strip](image)

Figure 11. *Knights of the Lunch Table: No. 1* (The Dodgeball Chronicles) by Frank Cammuso.
In *The Flying Beaver Brothers and the Evil Penguin Plan* (Figure 12), the author Maxwell Eaton III uses onomatopoeia to communicate the sounds of flight. Each of the sounds created as the beaver flies through the air is drawn with a different size or color, so that the words indicate the loudness of each noise and the sounds become a part of the action. Eaton also uses one of the most common comic conventions, drawing lines to indicate action on the page. (Hammond, 29)
Pictures. A reader who skips the pictures in a comic will usually grasp less than half the story the writers and illustrators wish to convey. Every element counts, and words and pictures always go together. Through pictures, Ben Hatke conveys action, emotion, and a cinematic sense of loss at this crucial moment in *Zita the Spacegirl* (Figure 13):
Zig and Wikki in the Cow (Figure 14) uses comic fantasy to teach nonfiction facts to elementary-school students. Symbolic imagery in the fantastical panels contrasts with the figurative imagery used to convey factual information. Here, the pictures help readers understand which parts of the story are real and which are imaginary.

Figure 14. Zig and Wikki in the Cow by Nadja Spiegelman and Trade Loeffler.
**Gutters.** In comics, some of the action always happens “off screen,” in the gutters, the white spaces between the panels. (Jacobs, 21) In this page from *Akissi* (Figure 15), there are minimal jumps within the gutter. The reader can use common elements within the panels – the tree, the can – to infer that these are different aspects of the same location.

Figure 15. *Akissi* by Marguerite Abouet and Mathieu Sapin
In this page from the wordless comic *Owly* (Figure 16), the gutters signal greater shifts in point of view. The reader must infer that Owly has gone from the outside of the building shown in panel one to its interior in the subsequent scenes. The author uses a repeating motif, the smiling potted plant motif, to assist the reader across the gutters. It appears on the store’s sign, on the closed door in the first panel, and on the open door in the second panel, too.

![Owly, Volume 3: Flying Lessons by Andy Runton](image)
Teaching Literacy with Comics

Although some students will arrive in school with prior exposure to comics, and most students will quickly acquire the ability to read comics successfully, teachers and librarians should provide lessons in the seven key comic features summarized here. Knowledge of comic conventions increases reader comprehension and engagement; it also allows students to apply the skills used to read comics to a variety of other texts. (Hammond, 28). “Inviting students to consider how texts are used for different purposes and how they are constructed with different elements contributes to their growing sense that texts serve particular purposes and that these purposes are meaningful to becoming lifelong readers.” (Flint, 197)

Comics have been widely adopted now in high schools, but they can be used to support learning at every stage of literacy development. For emergent readers, drawings and illustrations are an essential component of the reading and writing process. Teachers know that children benefit from “picture walks,” using visual cues to predict the story before they attend to the words. (Flint, 195). The pictures in comics for young children can also support their writing. Comics emphasize dialogue, distinctive character, and unique voice. Drawing comics, using facial expressions to show emotions and panel layout to show character movement, allows students to practice the dictum “show, don’t tell” when creating a story. This experience can then be applied to text narratives, or to more advanced comic narratives as fluency grows. (Friese, 27-28).

Literacy specialists propose that transitional readers need instructional support to master six key skills, so that they can become proficient readers. To become fluent, transitional readers must:
• Learn to select books that match their reading skills and information needs.
• Sustain comprehension while reading longer texts.
• Demonstrate persistence by maintaining interest in a narrative or informational text.
• Understand the concept of genre, and read a variety of genres, texts, and authors.
• Master different decoding and fluency skills, so that they understand the structure of words and patterns in language.
• Use text features to obtain the information they seek. Transitional readers will become comfortable with fiction that has more complicated plots, more characters in a story, and changes in time and place. They will also seek out nonfiction that presents information in text, graphs, pictures, tables, and charts. (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 9-10).

Comics are valuable tools for helping transitional readers acquire these essential skills. In particular, Comics “make visible” many of the decoding and fluency skills students are practicing during the transitional phase. Comics teacher Rachel Sawyer Perkins recommends:

“For students who lack the ability to visualize as they read, it provides a graphic sense that approximates what good readers do as they read. Moreover, it provides an excellent way for reluctant writers to communicate a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. I think comics and graphic novels are an excellent vehicle for teaching writing, as a story has to be pared down to its most basic elements. It is easy for the students to look at a short comic strip and identify story elements.” (Using Comics, n.d.)

People reading comics predict and anticipate, make connections, resolve mental confusion, draw inferences, and synthesize the key ideas they derive from the text. (Lyga, 2006, n.p.) When comprehension breaks down, proficient readers back up and fix the
problem. Comics help transitional readers practice their attendance to meaning, because
the story breaks down so quickly if the reader’s attention wanders. (Thompson, 52).

Comics are especially useful to scaffold the process whereby fluent readers make
mental images as they read. “Comics [serve] as a tangible model of the visualization that
good readers create in their heads as they read.” Comic imagery depicts all five senses;
line and shading indicate movement; and color variations and panel size create a mood.
(Thompson, 71-72) When students learn to read the visual imagery of comics, they are
learning how to create visual images with all kinds of text. Educators can promote this
skill by asking children to describe the visual setting in words, and to describe pictures of
characters’ emotions in written text. They can practice visualization by drawing new
panels showing what they think happened “in the gaps,” the missing pieces of the story
that take place in the gutter and in the reader’s imagination. (Sturm, 63)

Scott McLeod devoted an entire chapter in Understanding Comics to the white
space between panels, the gaps in the action where readers must make assumptions and
visualize the unseen parts of the story the authors and illustrators have written. This
process, “reading between the panels,” makes comic readers co-creators of the story in an
explicit, visual way. Comic readers practice explicitly something that theorist Wolfgang
Iser asserts readers do with all texts: they gap-fill. They choose what to include or
eliminate from the narrative based on “past experience, social and cultural factors, and
knowledge of text conventions.” (Hammond, 25) “Comics promote their narration in
complex ways, and the reader has to construct the storyline filling in the gaps. He has to
generate predictions, move back and forth between text and images, and draw inferences
to build meaning. He has the opportunity to invest in the book in his own way according
to his age and experience. Reader goes as deep into the several levels of the narration as his experiences and skill allow him.” (Missiou & Koukoulas, 155)

Selecting Comics for Literacy Instruction

Selections standards for comics will vary depending on the audience and purposes for which specific titles are being selected. Many educators will select comics primarily for independent reading, relying on students to choose books with high-interest subjects and engaging artwork for their own pleasure. (Thompson, 10-11). Educators who wish to use comic books in an instructional setting will need to use more care. In most cases where comics are used for classroom instruction, teachers and librarians will want to choose comics “that address issues and concerns students care about, meshing them in units with more traditional print texts, as well as showing them how the draw on familiar archetypes in print literature, enhancing students literary knowledge.” (Gutierrez, n.p.). High-quality comics will demonstrate their literary value through many design elements. Artwork and text will need to work together so that, among other things, they “direct the reader’s processing,” (Thompson, 65) just as well-written picture books and novels promote advanced reader responses.

When choosing comics, then, selectors must consider each intended reader's “language skills, their background knowledge, [and] their reading preferences, all of which factor in to the challenges that might exist between a specific book and a particular reader.” (Friese, 25) Brian Sturm has proposed a framework for selecting comics for use in the classroom based on existing selection criteria for picture books and early readers. Among the criteria to consider, Sturm emphasizes the integration of text and art, the use of color, and other pictorial techniques, as well as line spacing in text boxes and speech
bubbles, text size, and ease of reading. Selectors should consider whether a particular comic is appropriate in its vocabulary, topic, and sentence structure for a reader's abilities and interests. Beginning readers will benefit from dialogue-heavy texts because they mimic the reader's oral experiences. The art should support the text, and be engaging and visually compelling on its own terms. Color, shading, and contrast should work to support the story and promote comprehension. Young readers may benefit from larger book sizes and greater use of white space, to enhance focus on key text and ideas. (Sturm, 2012).

Paula E. Griffith proposes her own set of criteria for evaluating the format, illustrations, and content of graphic novels. She suggests that selectors ask four questions about the texts they evaluate:

- Do the gutters aid comprehension or distract the reader?
- Do the illustrations provide clues to character emotion, mood, and personality?
- Are the characters three-dimensional?
- Does the denouement resolve the preceding narrative events? (Griffith, 184)

Other key criteria for comic selection include:

- Positive reviews in professional journals and online comics resources;
- Lists of recommended titles and award-winners;
- A school or classroom’s reading and curricular needs;
- The age and developmental stages of the students being served;
- The work’s content, writing, art; and
- The creator’s authority and accuracy. (Gavigan, 2012, 21).
Finally, teachers and librarians should familiarize themselves with these and other major publishers of high-quality comics for children in the United States:

- First Second at http://us.macmillan.com/firstsecond.aspx publishes comics for all ages. It publishes series such as *Sardine in Outer Space* by Emmanuel Guibert and Joan Sfar for children and *Astronaut Academy* by Dave Roman for middle-grade readers.

- Graphix at http://www.scholastic.com/graphix/ publishes comics for elementary- and middle-school readers. Besides the *Bone* series, Graphix also publishes the high-fantasy series *Amulet* and *Knights of the Lunch Table*, discussed earlier.

- Toon Books at http://www.toon-books.com specializes in graphic novels for readers in elementary school. The editors select topics and design their comics specifically to support literacy learning, and most of the titles are designed as early reader books in comic format. Toon’s *Benny and Penny: The Big No-No!* won the Theodore Seuss Geisel Award for best early reader book in 2010.

**Annotated Bibliography**

The following is a list of websites and books that provide specific guidelines and lesson plans for integrating comics into the K-8 classroom. Entries are organized alphabetically by title.

**Title:** *Adventures in Graphica: Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Teach Comprehension, 2-6*

**Author:** Terry Thompson

**Publisher:** Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2008.

**Recommended Grade Level(s):** K-5, 6-8

**Classroom subjects:** Language Arts
After a brief summary of the research on comics and literacy, Thompson presents ideas and lesson plans designed to support transitional and fluent readers in their mastery of several key literacy concepts: inference and mental imagery, vocabulary, and fluency. The book includes photos of students using the techniques Thompson recommends, as well as selected pages from comics that support his lesson plans. The appendices include a selection checklist for teachers to use when choosing comics, recommended titles of comics appropriate for students in grades 2 through 6, and templates for comic creation and graphic organizers for readers to use while reading comics in class. Teachers will find a series of links to online comic creators especially useful.

**Title:** Comic Book Legal Defense Fund at cbldf.org  
**Author:** Charles Brownstein, Executive Director  
**Publisher:** n/a  
**Recommended Grade Level(s):** K-5, 6-8, 9-12  
**Classroom subjects:** Language Arts, Social Studies

The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund “is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comics art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers.” Although the site focuses on the history of comics, and challenges to comics in the library and classroom, it also includes guides for using specific titles in the classroom. Among these titles are *Squish*, a series for elementary students by Jennifer L. Holm and Matthew Holm (the authors of the *Babymouse* series) and *Smile*, a comic memoir for middle-schools students by Raina Telgemeier.
Scott Tingley is a primary-school teacher in New Brunswick, Canada. His website lacks the polish of professionally designed sites, but features a long list of reviews of classroom-friendly comics published for elementary-age students. Most of the content dates to 2008/2009, but many of the reviewed titles are still in print. Tingley includes his own lesson plans, using specific comics to teach specific literacy skills or to convey information about topics in social studies and science. He also provides links to other educators’ comics-related lesson plans and general ideas for using comics in the classroom.

Gavigan and Tomasevich offer ideas on using comic books to teach each of the core subjects taught in secondary schools in the United States. Besides a general discussion of how to design lesson plans and curriculum guides when using comics, the authors divide their content into subject-related chapters. They offer a separate introduction to Manga, a Japanese comic form especially popular with teenage girls in which readers progress from right to left and “back to front.” The authors provide core-collection lists for middle schools and for high schools.
Diamond Bookshelf publishes articles about using comics in the classroom as well as
guides for aligning comics to the common core. A Reference Resources list includes
reviews of books for educators as well as published guides to specific comic genres. The
site also publishes sample lesson plans for specific titles, with an emphasis on comics
published in the past few years. Many of these lesson plans were created by Katie
Monnin, author of *Teaching Graphic Novels* (2010); each lesson plan includes at least
one graphic organizer or handout for use in the classroom.

**Title:** Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom

**Author:** Stephen Cary.

**Publisher:** Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

**Recommended Grade Level(s):** K-5, 6-8, 9-12

**Classroom subjects:** English Language Learning, Language Arts

Stephen Cary worked as a second-language teacher in the California public schools. This
book offers research-based support for teachers who want to introduce comics to their
curriculum. Twenty-five communication-based activities form the heart of the book. Each
activity integrates “listening, speaking, reading, and writing” and Cary provides detailed
instructions about implementing his ideas in class. He shares anecdotes and ideas from
second-language learners and their instructors who have tested these activities. The book
closes with a resource guide that includes recommended titles of books in languages
other than English, as well as websites where teachers can find comics published since
Cary’s book was released.
Bakis has written lesson plans designed to support secondary-level literacy using specific high-quality comic texts. Bakis focuses primarily on graphic memoirs, and selects books that rank among the most highly-regarded comics of the past thirty years. These chosen texts are Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*; Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*; Rachel Masilimani’s *Two Kinds of People*; Gene Leun Yang’s *American Born Chinese*; Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God and A Life Force*; Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*; Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*; Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (the comic adaptation); Scott Russell Sanders’s “Under the Influence; Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Night Returns*; and Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta*. The publisher maintains a companion website at http://www.corwin.com/graphicnovelclassroom/ where teachers can find additional lesson plans, quizzes, and teaching tools for the materials introduced in the printed text.

Robin E. Brenner, the site’s creator, is teen librarian at Brookline Public Library in Massachusetts, and the author of *Understanding Manga and Anime* (Libraries Unlimited, 2007). A team of reviewers offers up-to-date information about comics and manga, and uses tags to categorize titles by age and subject matter. The Comics 101 section provides a comprehensive vocabulary guide and possible responses to questions from comic-book skeptics. “No Flying, No Tights” celebrates high-quality comics, and correctly notes that
as publishers have jumped on the comic-format bandwagon, too many books have been published where “the art is sub par, the writing clunky, and no one quite seems to understand how to use the format.” Educators looking for high-quality titles would do well to start here.

**Title:** *Teaching Visual Literacy in the Primary Classroom: Comic books, film, television and picture narratives*  
**Author:** Tim Stafford.  
**Publisher:** London: Routledge, 2011.  
**Recommended Grade Level(s):** K-5  
**Classroom subjects:** Fine Arts, Language Arts

Tim Stafford is a British teacher at the primary level. His book includes lesson plans not just for the teaching of comic books but for movies, television, and picture books, as well. Each chapter includes lesson plans, resource guides and handouts, and samples of student work. Although some of the recommended titles and films listed at the end of each chapter will be unfamiliar to teachers in the United States, the literacy concepts and ideas for the lesson plans correspond to those in U.S. schools. Teachers will find his ideas about integrating drama into the literacy classroom especially valuable: readers’ theater has become a popular and pervasive literacy tool in the elementary-school classroom.

**Title:** *Using Comic Art to improve Speaking, Reading and Writing*  
**Author:** Steve Bowkett and Tony Hitchman.  
**Publisher:** London: Routledge, 2012.  
**Recommended Grade Level(s):** K-5, 6-8  
**Classroom subjects:** Language Arts

Bowkett and Hitchman are British educators who have written a book for any educator who wants to use comic creation to teach specific literacy skills. Each short chapter focuses on a specific aspect of comic creation and how that activity supports a specific literacy goal. Chapters include lists of exemplary texts for students to use as models, and
reproduces handouts and graphic organizer. Interspersed with the lesson plans tip boxes, conversations between teachers and students that arose from the proposed activity, and proposed adaptations and extensions of the basic lesson plan. U.S. educators may be unfamiliar with some of the recommended texts, but the step-by-step guides to comic creation, the authors’ focus on using comics to promote literacy concepts that apply to all texts, and the reproducible panel pages make this book an essential resource.

**Title:** Wham! Teaching with Graphic Novels Across the Curriculum  
**Authors:** William G. Brozo, Gary Moorman, and Carla K. Meyer.  
**Publisher:** New York: Teachers College Press, 2014.  
**Grade Level(s) Covered:** 6-8, 9-12  
**Classroom subjects:** Language Arts, Mathematic, Science, Social Studies

Brozo, Moorman, and Meyer have written a comics guide for teachers who want to introduce comics into the curriculum at the secondary level. Each chapter focuses on a different core subject, with questionnaires to gauge the reader’s prior knowledge and concluding prompts to help teachers revise the proposed lesson plans to fit their students’ specific needs. Teachers are encouraged to share the book with their colleagues, so that Personal Learning Networks can decide together how to adopt the books’ ideas. Each chapter includes checklists and recommended comic titles. Appendixes offer lists of graphic novels by discipline and a chart aligning comic lesson plans to the Common Core College and Career Readiness Standards for Reading and Writing.

**Title:** When Comics Meet Kryptonite: Classroom Lessons From The Comic Book Project  
**Author:** Michael Bitz.  
**Publisher:** New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.  
**Recommended Grade Level(s):** K-5, 6-8, 9-12  
**Classroom subjects:** Language Arts
The Comic Book Project is a national literacy initiative to promote “creativity, critical thinking, identity exploration, and community engagement.” Comic creation is presented as a way to foster “core literacy skills” and an “authentic literacy approach that includes writing, listening, speaking, editing, revising, sharing, and publishing.” (5) Each chapter includes lesson plans, with detailed descriptions of handouts for students and supporting materials, as well as discussion prompts to use in class. Chapter-based resources include recommended websites and comics to use in elementary-, middle-, and high-school classrooms. The author provides annotated student work to use for inspiration and classroom discussion.
Bibliography


Sturm, B.W. (2012). Evaluating Graphic Novels. [Class Handout.] School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.


