



# GRAPHIC NOVELS

## FEARS AND FACTS

We begin by recognizing that most parents and educators have very strong feelings about graphic novels and their place in classroom curricula. For some of you, we will be reinforcing and validating many of your assumptions. For others, we hope to if not convince then to at least leave you open to consideration. For all of you, however, we hope to relay innovative tools and lessons to liven up your classrooms, libraries, and curricula.

Our journey together begins with addressing the fears, concerns, and hesitations teachers have expressed to us during our panels and workshops as we've introduced them to graphic novels. More specifically, we begin by debunking the three most commonly given reasons why teachers are reluctant to incorporate graphic novels into their classroom curricula. All three are valid concerns.

### Fears

#### **Fear #1: Classics Versus Graphic Novels and the Fear of Losing the Passion for Prose**

As members of a panel addressing graphic novels in classrooms a few years ago at the New York Comic Con, we were presented with the following request at the very end of our session, from a man who sat way in the back of our audience-packed room:

“You make good points about what graphic novels can do, and I hate saying this, but all I see is this dystopian future where people are no longer reading books and are instead totally engaging in screens, online interactions, and popular culture. . . .Address this.”

This was a challenging request because we don't totally disagree. For us, the classics represent masterful storytelling, and they are as much products of their time as they are timeless works of literature. As teachers, we use them to teach about Western cultural history and as commentaries of the ongoing “human condition.” We use them to develop students' mastery of rhetoric, literacy, aesthetic, and analytic skills that will help them to thrive and to act, write, and sound educated at colleges, parties, interviews, and the workplace.

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Recognizing these strengths the classics hold, our humble response is that as parents and educators we must work to find places for both classics and graphic novels in our homes, classrooms, and curricula. They offer very different reading experiences that should not necessarily exclude or preclude one another. There is no “right” way to teach nor one perfect tool to teach with because there is no one “typical” student or one “typical” teacher. We all have different strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. We all think and work differently. And we all come from different backgrounds that shape us. As a result our teaching tools must also reflect that difference. The books we teach with should reflect diversity in format just as they should reflect diversity in genre, characters, and plot. Furthermore, there is no arguing that we live in a changing society and culture. Images and technology are playing increasingly stronger roles in our lives, and as our modes of communication become more complex, we need to ensure that students have proficiency (if not mastery) in not just written but visual media as well.

Our goal in the pages and chapters that follow is to provide you all a plethora of tools, techniques, and resources from which to make your own choices.

## Fear #2: Graphic Novels in Curricula and the Fear of Backlash from Parents or Administrators

There are a number of reasons why teachers fear backlash from parents or administrators for using graphic novels in their curricula. Most of the backlash is due to one or more of the preconceived notions outlined in this section and addressed in greater detail in the chapters that follow. In addition to this information, please make sure to take a look at Appendix A. There, we provide you with specific and detailed steps you can take and references and resource materials you can use to help prevent and/or address backlash or challenges you may encounter due to graphic novel (or any reading text) choices.

*Many educators fear backlash for using graphic novels . . .*

*Because they're perceived predominantly as tools for weak or reluctant and/or English language learners.* This is probably due to the fact that this was the reason graphic novels were initially introduced into classrooms. And while they *are* outstanding tools for weak, reluctant, and/or English language learners, their value doesn't end there. It merely begins there.

In addition to recognizing the awards kids' graphic novels are receiving as quality children's and teen's literature – including Caldecott and Newbery awards, National Book Awards, and starred reviews from prestigious literary magazines – educators and librarians are finding that today's kids' graphic novels offer strong examples of language use, vocabulary, and storytelling that benefit all kinds of learners. They foster and reinforce attention, memory, sequencing, and higher-order cognitive skills beneficial to all your students in all content-area classes.

*Because they're full of violence and mature content.* As with most literary formats, there are some books that are appropriate for all readers and some that require adult supervision. While some graphic novels may contain mature content, so do many award-winning prose novels, such as *Julie of the Wolves*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Hunger Games*. It is always advisable for parents and teachers to look through books before selecting or assigning them. And if there is no opportunity to read them first, it is advisable to ask knowledgeable colleagues, librarians, or booksellers about intended reading selections.

In an effort to help you find and determine the appropriateness of select graphic novels, we introduce, suggest, and discuss a large selection of our favorite graphic novels throughout this book. We also indicate age and grade appropriateness and whether they contain any mature content that might need vetting. In the Bonus Resource, an online companion download, we provide you with an extensive list of over 200 graphic novels currently available, along with summaries, notes, and grade levels for these books. In Appendix A we provide resources on how to address naysayers and challenges to your reading selections. In Appendix B we offer resources for both creating and using graphic novels in your classroom. Finally, we recommend you check our website periodically, where we will be continually monitoring new works and updating information, and also that you ask your favorite bookseller, librarian, and/or colleagues for guidance when you have questions.

*Because their stories are about superheroes and my kids don't really like that kind of stuff.* While some graphic novels tell superhero stories, most don't. Graphic novels embrace a wide variety of genres. These genres include realistic fiction, such as *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier; historical fiction, like the *Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales* series and *Boxers and Saints* by Gene Luen Yang; nonfiction, such as *The Gettysburg Address: A Graphic Adaptation* and *The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation*, both by Jonathan Hennessey; and books about science, such as the *Last of the Sandwalkers* by Jay Hosler and *HowToons* by Dr. Saul Griffith, Nick Dragotta, Ingrid Dragotta, Arwen Griffith, Joost Bonsen, Jeff Parker, Warren Simons, Sandy Jarrel, Meredith McClaren, Jason Marzloff, Leigh B. Estabrooks, Lee Loughridge, Rich Starkings, Comcraft, Jimmy Betancourt, and Andrea Dunlap. Throughout this book you will see examples and sample lesson ideas based on graphic novels, and we encourage you to note the diversity of texts, stories, and genres.

*Because I'm afraid I won't meet Common Core or other state standards if my students read graphic novels during our precious class time instead of complex prose.* Graphic novels are wonderful tools teachers can use to meet educational standards. Briefly, graphic novels are complex authentic texts that promote both verbal and visual literacies. They contain a rich vocabulary and extensive and concrete use of literary devices. *For weak language learners*, graphic novels' concise text paired with detailed images helps readers decode and comprehend the text, and their format makes reading feel less daunting and more engaging as the concise verbiage highlights effective language usage and vocabulary. *For skilled readers*, graphic novels offer a differently formatted reading experience, using both strategically selected words and images to tell a story, and thereby modeling concise language and aiding in vocabulary acquisition. Graphic novels have also been found to foster and strengthen a variety of learning skills essential for success in and out of the classroom, and are being successfully used to help readers and writers better understand sequence and its effect on storytelling.

Note that we unpack Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in the "Facts" section below, explicitly detailing how graphic novels can help you teach the discrete standards listed.

### **Fear #3: I Don't Understand What a Graphic Novel Is, So I Don't Know How to Teach It**

In regard to the first part of this fear, for practical purposes we can define graphic novels as bound texts composed in comic format – where the story is told through both text and image – in

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sequentially presented panels that follow guidelines similar if not identical to those followed in classic novels or informational texts.

When it comes to the second part of this fear, how one teaches graphic novels is one of the greatest obstacles teachers feel when contemplating adding these works to their curricula. Showing how to teach a graphic novel is the purpose of this book, and it is directly addressed in the chapters to follow.

## Facts

### Graphic Novels and Common Core Standards

While the Common Core State Standards have had widespread effects on many of our classrooms, we recognize many of you may no longer use them. In an effort to reach as wide and diverse an audience as possible, we limit our discussion of Common Core Standards to this section and do not list how each of our lessons addresses these standards specifically. Also note that we discuss the anchor standards for reading and writing and not the specific standards grade by grade. Please feel free, however, to contact us with questions you may have, via our websites: [meryljaffe.com](http://meryljaffe.com) and [taliahurwich.com](http://taliahurwich.com).

*Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading* attempt to define what students should be able to read at the end of each grade and correspond to the College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards for reading readiness. These standards include the following:

- Key Ideas and Details (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1-3), where students can competently
  - read and understand a text;
  - make logical inferences from it;
  - cite textual evidence (when writing or speaking about the text) to support such inferences;
  - determine central themes of a text and summarize the key supporting details and ideas; and
  - analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of the text.
- Craft and Structure (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4-6), where students can competently
  - interpret words and phrases as used in a text (including technical, connotative, and figurative meanings) and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone;
  - analyze the structure of specific sentences, paragraphs, and/or larger chunks of text to better understand how they relate to each other and the whole; and
  - assess how the author's point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7-9), where students can competently
  - integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats containing visual images, quantitative expressions, and/or verbal text;
  - delineate and evaluate reasoning, relevance, and evidence presented in arguments and/or claims in a given text; and
  - analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
- Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10), where students can read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Graphic novels' stories are told through paired text and images, and this often makes it easier for students to more readily recognize and understand developing themes, analyze social interactions, and recognize and incorporate "key ideas and details" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1-3). An uncle of ours loves telling a story of how he was the only student in his class who got 100% on an *Ivanhoe* test because he was the only one who could describe Ivanhoe's shield and coat of arms. He could do this because he was the only one who had read the graphic novel adaptation of the classic, in which the shield and coat of arms were frequently and prominently displayed.

Graphic novels are great tools for teaching "craft and structure of text" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4-6). As you'll see in Chapters 3 and 4, graphic novel stories are told in any number of boxes (of various sizes and shapes), where text and image vie for valuable space, and therefore *everything* represented on the page is intentionally chosen. The critical reading of graphic novels requires readers to evaluate the author's choice of words, sentence structure, images, font size, shape and color, even design for intent and meaning – all of which is required in this standard. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 we demonstrate how to help students evaluate these choices, thus addressing craft and structure issues that work not only for graphic novels but translate well for analyzing any given text.

Regarding the Common Core Standard "integration of knowledge and ideas" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7-9), graphic novels by their very nature require readers to integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats. And while they have a textual component, they're not limited to text. Instead, they engage in visual and verbal communications, requiring students to engage and discuss multiple ways to communicate and discuss ideas.

Finally, regarding the last anchor standard for reading, "range of reading and level of text complexity" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10), graphic novels offer quite a range of reading and level of text complexity. As we detail in Chapter 6, graphic novels offer both complex vocabulary and sentence structure. Furthermore, they often offer varied types and formats of text.

Figure 1.1 (taken from *Zita the Spacegirl*) displays just one example of the complex vocabulary and sentence structure that graphic novels offer their readers. On these pages, we see Zita talking with Piper. She's rifling through descriptions – alien mug shots – in "Gilliam's Guide to Sentient Species," in the hope of finding who ran off with her friend Joseph in this alien world. In this graphic novel (for ages 8 to 12), the language is both complex and varied, as there are two

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**FIGURE 1.1** Complex vocabulary and sentence structure in *Zita the Spacegirl*  
 Source: Ben Hatke, *Zita the Spacegirl* (New York: First Second, 2011), pp. 56–57.

very different types of texts here. The mug shots Zita is looking through contain informational text and images about various alien species, while the graphic novel story continues around this with narrative text and dialogue. On page 56, we read through descriptions of Dozers, Whiskersmiths, and Tentacled Tubbs, after which Zita excitedly shouts, “. . . found him!” On page 57, we see that Zita has identified a Screed, whose species is “. . . dangerous, agile and enigmatic . . . working as bounty hunters and mercenaries.” Piper informs Zita, “your friend is in terrible danger,” as the tension increases and the hunt begins. As you can see in this example, the vocabulary, language use, sentence complexity, and text formats vary and provide very different reading experiences for readers to navigate (and enjoy).

*Common Core Anchor Standards for Writing* attempt to define what students should be able to do at the end of each grade, and correspond to the College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards for writing. These standards include the following:

- Text Types and Purposes (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1-3), where students can competently
  - write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence;

- write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content; and
- write narratives that relay real or imagined experiences or events that contain well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
- Production and Distribution of Writing (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4-6), where students can competently
  - produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the text’s task, purpose, and audience;
  - develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach; and
  - use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
- Research to Build and Present Knowledge (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7-9), where students can competently
  - conduct short and/or more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation;
  - gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism; and
  - draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- Range of Writing (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.10), where students can competently write routinely over extended time frames (where time is spent on research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Graphic novels are well suited for teaching and reinforcing “text types and purposes” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1-3). In Chapter 7 we discuss how graphic novels can be used to teach and develop students’ expository, creative, and nonfiction writing. They can be particularly beneficial when helping students work on developing well-structured sequences of events (due to their sequentially presented panels), and for determining the use and placement of well-chosen details (due to the limited nature of the choices that need to be made, as mentioned earlier and discussed in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4).

Graphic novels can be very effective tools for the “production and distribution of writing” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4-6) as well, as addressed in Chapter 7. In particular we detail how graphic novels can help students with planning, collaborating, and editing, and we provide links and online resources for students to produce and publish their own fiction and/or nonfiction graphic novels.

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Regarding “research to build and present knowledge” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7-9) and “range of writing” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.10), offering students alternate writing formats and assignments often makes the writing experience less daunting. In Chapter 7 we detail how graphic novels can be used for various formats of nonfiction writing, and in Chapter 8 we provide examples of nonfiction and historical fiction graphic novels for classroom use when studying topics in math, science, and social studies. Offering students a greater number of writing options and formats also provides them with greater writing opportunities across wider ranges of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

## How and Where to Find Graphic Novels

There are several ways you can find quality graphic novels. We recommend, first, asking your favorite librarian or children’s bookseller. You can also find reviews of graphic novels in *Kirkus Reviews*, the *Horn Book Magazine*, and the *Horn Book Guide*, all of which are available in both print and digital form. And (as noted earlier) we provide you with an extensive list of quality kids’ graphic novels, along with summaries, special notes, and suggested grade level appropriateness, in our Bonus Resource.

In addition to these lists, here are some other links and resources you’ll find valuable:

- Our website will continue to review graphic novels while providing you with lesson suggestions, paired reading suggestions, and additional resource links. Check it out regularly.
- The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) has a fairly active link with updated graphic novel reading lists for grades K–2, 3–5, and 6–8. Here is the latest list (compiled in 2016): [www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/book-lists/graphicnovels2016](http://www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/book-lists/graphicnovels2016).
- The Quicklists Consulting Committee of the ALSC has created a list of core titles for starting or maintaining a children’s graphic novel collection. This list is updated at least annually and can be found at [www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/book-lists/graphicnovels2016](http://www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/book-lists/graphicnovels2016).
- The *School Library Journal’s Good Comics for Kids* is a collaborative blog covering kids’ comics written by a group of librarians, parents, and other writers for readers up to age 16. Find it at [blogs.slj.com/goodcomicsforkids](http://blogs.slj.com/goodcomicsforkids).
- Meryl and Talia host an ongoing column, “Using Graphic Novels in Education,” for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF). Each column highlights a specific graphic novel, providing a summary, suggested lesson plans, and additional resources, at [cblddf.org/?s=using+graphic+novels+in+education](http://cblddf.org/?s=using+graphic+novels+in+education).
- Teachers often review graphic novels; here are three blogs we’ve visited for such reviews:
  - [www.goodreads.com/list/show/5038.Best\\_Graphic\\_Novels\\_for\\_Children](http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/5038.Best_Graphic_Novels_for_Children);
  - [thecomicbookteacher.com](http://thecomicbookteacher.com); and
  - [theothercomicbookteacher.com](http://theothercomicbookteacher.com).



## Moving Forward: Using this Book to Help You Read and Integrate Graphic Novels into Your Curricula

In the pages to follow we introduce some of our favorite kids' graphic novels to you while detailing how to read them, how to teach reading them, and how to integrate them into your language arts and content-area curricula. Here is an outline of the remaining chapters:

- **Chapter 2, “Why Use Graphic Novels? Why Now?”** shares much of the research that is coming out about graphic novels. We open with this to give you a framework to advocate for their use and also to get a more complete picture of how they might be used in your school and in your classroom.
- **Chapter 3, “Foundational Skills in Graphic Novels, Part 1: Reading Pictures,”** introduces how to read graphic novels by exploring visual literacy and what one must keep in mind when critically reading images. Whether analyzing an advertisement, viewing a newspaper or online photograph, or reading a graphic novel, one must understand not only the author's or artist's intent in the image's construction but also the reasons behind choices made (and not made) in its perspective and design. This chapter is intended to help you teach various visual media formats, including advertisements, photographs, films, and graphic novels.
- **Chapter 4, “Foundational Skills in Graphic Novels, Part 2: How to Teach Graphic Novels,”** focuses more specifically on how to teach your students to critically read graphic novels. We describe how to “read” and teach graphic novels' “anatomy” and essential component elements, while we also provide lesson suggestions and strategies to help you best build your students' graphic novel toolbox and in turn their reading and reading comprehension of graphic novels. We end this chapter by modeling how to critically read a page from one of our favorite graphic novels.
- **Chapter 5, “Motivation,”** critically looks at the motivating nature of graphic novels. It lists several ways graphic novels motivate students, several challenges you may encounter, and strategies to address these challenges in your classroom.
- **Chapter 6, “Using Graphic Novels to Teach Reading,”** opens by discussing challenges you may initially find when using graphic novels for language arts instruction and how best to address those challenges, including the best ways to find and select appropriate graphic novels for your language arts or reading classes, and also ways to get your students to slow down and really “read” the images. We then provide lesson suggestions for using graphic novels as primary or anchor texts for teaching phonics; wordplay, language usage, and vocabulary; reading comprehension and close reading; literary devices; and character development.
- **Chapter 7, “Graphic Novels and the Writing Process,”** explores different ways in which graphic novels are effective tools in the writing classroom. We open with an

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exploration of how graphic novels can help you highlight and practice skills required not only in graphic novels but in prose fiction writing as well. We then continue with prose nonfiction, exploring different genres of nonfiction, and how graphic novels can develop skills useful in the creation of such written pieces. Finally, we close with details and pointers for teaching the prewriting, writing, and editing processes for comic strips and graphic novels.

- **Chapter 8, “Graphic Novels and Content-Area Curriculum,”** explores various ways graphic novels can be and have been used in content-area classrooms for math, social studies, and science. We provide arguments for their inclusion in these classrooms, suggested reading options, and detailed lesson suggestions.

We hope that with these objectives in mind you enjoy this journey as we discuss and model how and why to use graphic novels for creative and exciting classroom curricula.