



Why Comics?

by Tracy Edmunds, M.A. Ed.

Many teachers would like to use graphic texts in their classrooms, but need to convince their administrators of the value these complex texts can provide in instruction and learning. This document is a summary of the latest research and rationale supporting the use of comics in education.

Comics Are Motivating

“...those who read more comic books did more pleasure reading, liked to read more, and tended to read more books. These results show that comic book reading certainly does not inhibit other kinds of reading, and is consistent with the hypothesis that comic book reading facilitates heavier reading.”

— Krashen, Stephen D., and Ujjié, Joanne. “Comic Book Reading, Reading Enjoyment, and Pleasure Reading Among Middle Class and Chapter (Title) 1 Middle School Students.” 1996.
<http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/comicbook>

“Taken all together, our results suggest that, with regard to student learning, comic book stories lose nothing to traditional textbooks while having the added potential benefit of improving attitudes about biology.”

— Hosler, Jay and Boomer, K. B. “Are Comic Books an Effective Way to Engage Nonmajors in Learning and Appreciating Science?” 2011. <http://www.lifescied.org/content/10/3/309.full.pdf>

Words and Pictures Together Increase Recall and Problem Solving

“...the low-level students receiving the high-level text with the comic strip scored significantly higher than their counterparts receiving the high-level text only.”

— Jun Liu. “Effect of Comic Strips on L2 Learners’ Reading Comprehension.” TESOL Quarterly, 2004.
http://sfl.ieu.edu.tr/tdu/TESOL_Quarterly_Reading.pdf

“Across the eleven studies, people who learned from words and graphics produced between 55 percent to 121 percent more correct solutions to transfer problems than people who learned from words alone. Across all studies, a median percentage gain of 89 percent was achieved with a median effect size of 1.50.”

— Mayer, Richard E. and Clark, Ruth Colvin. *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*. Pfeiffer, 2011.

“Results of Study 2 find that verbatim recognition was superior with graphic novel texts compared to traditional textbooks.”

— McKenny, Aaron, Short, Jeremy, & Randolph-Seng, Brandon. Abstract: “Graphic presentation: an empirical examination of the graphic novel approach to communicate business concepts.”
http://www.academia.edu/2210806/Graphic_presentation_an_empirical_examination_of_the_graphic_novel_approach_to_communicate_business_concepts

Comics Have a High Average Vocabulary Level

Comic books average 53.5 rare words per thousand, while children’s books average 30.9, adult books average 52.7, expert witness testimony averages 28.4, and the conversations of college graduates with friends average 17.3.

— “Big Ideas in Beginning Reading: Vocabulary.” University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning.
http://reading.uoregon.edu/big_ideas/voc/voc_what.php

Comics Enrich the Skills of Accomplished Readers

“Incorporating visual rhetoric into your curriculum will also require students to practice higher learning critical thinking and analytical skills emphasized in an AP curriculum. The reading of both visuals and text together usually necessitates inference skills and a synthesis of a number of clues presented both on the page and as a pattern throughout the book. Graphic novels allow for a new approach to diction, imagery, syntax, structure, and language. ...Graphic novels also substitute figurative imagery with the images themselves, but the interplay of what is written and what is drawn makes for an important point of analysis. Often graphic novelists exploit the dual expressions of text and visuals to create puns, irony, and paradox. Syntax also becomes an examination of both sentence structure and panel and object structure.”

—Cohen, Lisa. “But This Book Has Pictures! The Case for Graphic Novels in an AP Classroom.” http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/158535.html

“More than a gateway to literacy, the spatial interplay of visual and verbal that defines comics makes for a powerful tool for inquiry primed for creative and critical practice.”

—Sousanis, Nick, “Comics as a Tool for Inquiry (Concerning a Dissertation in Comic Book Form).” Columbia University, Teachers College, 2012. http://www.juniata.edu/services/jcpress/voices/pdf/2012/jv_2012_162-172.pdf

Comics Support Beginning and Struggling Readers

“With graphic novels, the scaffolding necessary to build solid readers is in the architecture of the genre. The illustrations not only support the text, they are a part of the text. Students are given context clues within the subtle and sometime not so subtle expressions, symbols and actions of the characters with in the story. Vocabulary is also supported within the illustrations and text.”

—Pennella, Brenda. “Graphic Novels: The POW!-er in the classroom!” http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/teachers_perspective.htm

“With comics and graphic novels, beginning readers can enjoy more emotion, action, and detail than in a typical ‘See Jane run’ story. When kids read enjoyable, complex, compelling stories they are motivated to read more, so graphic novels can be a great stepping-stone to longer text works. This is also an advantage when encouraging struggling or reluctant readers or English learners—they can enjoy great stories and practice high-level reading comprehension skills even at a lower text reading level.”

—Edmunds, Tracy. “Why Should Kids Read Comics?” <http://www.grammarmancomic.com/article1.html#.UWyFKqtASBI>

Comics Support English Language Learners

“The students, primarily English-language learners, were able to make use of this medium [comics] in order to learn new reading practices. The teacher used the comics to teach multiple aspects of various reading processes...[this] demonstrates their use as instructional texts, because comics provide interesting and motivating material as well as visual support for literacy learning.”

—Ranker, Jason. Abstract: “Using Comics as Read-Alouds: Insights on Reading Instruction from an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Classroom.” *The Reading Teacher*, October 2007. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1598/RT.61.4.2/abstract>

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