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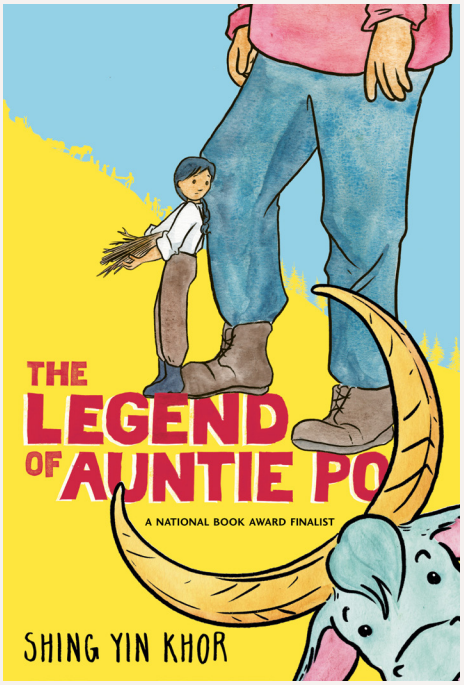
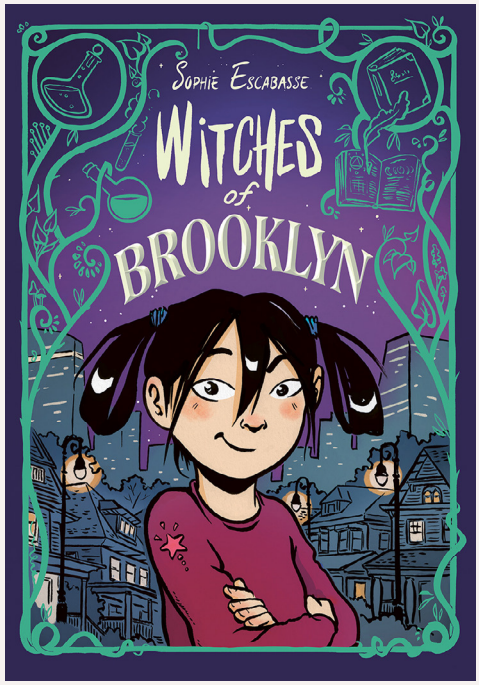
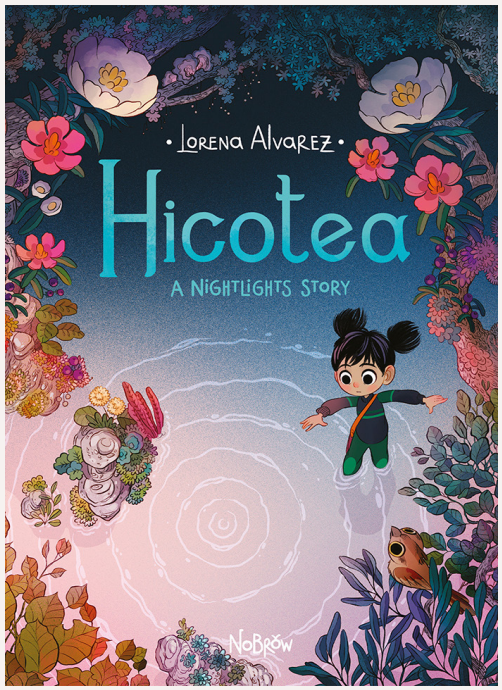
THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching with Graphic Fiction and Nonfiction

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL







CONTENTS

If you are new to teaching graphic novels, go to the **next page**.

If you already teach comics and graphic novels, but you want to dig deeper into important content that can be taught with comics, go to **page 5**.

NEW TO TEACHING WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS

Welcome! You may have been a comics reader as a kid, or maybe you are completely new to comics but have noticed students discussing them or carrying them around. A lot of us have noticed that comics hold a special place in the literary landscape of schools. As a form or medium, comics don't get a lot of teacher approval. In fact, some research has found that elementary teachers are afraid they won't be taken seriously if they use comics in their classes.

But, here's the thing: teachers who have brought graphic novels and comics into the formal curriculum have found overwhelming success. Comics provide multiple access points for readers to engage with complex stories in flexible and complex ways.

Ok, enough convincing. You are no doubt here because you want to know how to teach with graphic novels. So let's start with the basics.

LET'S GET STARTED

The first step in your journey of teaching with graphic novels must be setting solid learning goals. Are you teaching the hero's journey? Memoir? Small moments? Are you looking for mentor texts for your students to find inspiration or for modeling persuasive essays? For perspective taking? All of these are important and can be taught with comics. For this guide, we will use teaching perspective taking and triumphs as the model, but graphic novels can be used for teaching just about anything.

COMICS AS A FORM

You may have noticed the terms "comics" and "graphic novels" being used interchangeably. We are defining comics as a narrative form using verbal and nonverbal elements, in sequence, bounded by page and panel, to tell a story. Of course, anytime you try and define something as complex as comics, there is something missing. In this case, there are wordless comics, single-panel comics, and comics that don't use panels at all. Luckily for readers, authors, illustrators and designers ignore definitions and create their own vibrant and complex pieces of literature. Defining graphic novels is like trying to get a puppy to pay attention while there is a parade of chickens walking by — there is just so much excitement and chaos! The act of defining comics as a form sort of misses the point.

What is important to remember is that just as with all media (print, film, music), any story can be told in comic form. But comics require active, engaged, and recursive reading to make meaning from the layers of written text, images, and sequence.

READING GRAPHIC NOVELS

Graphic novels are read from front to back, top to bottom, and left to right — unless the author wants to break those conventions (which they often do!). The other thing you need to know about comics is that every time an author takes up a pen or stylus, they get to do just about anything they can think of to tell a story, as long as they use images. Comics are a lively, active, defying, audacious form of literature to be puzzled through and enjoyed.

Let's get started thinking about the basic design elements. Remember, there are no accidents in graphic novels. Each design element has been thought about, considered, drawn, erased, and redrawn countless times. These elements are much more important in comics than in standard prose books because so much meaning is conveyed using an agreed upon visual language.

Now you have some of the highlights about graphic novels and comics in general. If you want to read more, there are some suggested readings at the end of this guide. You are now ready to join the other folks, so please proceed to the next section, *Not-So-New to Teaching with Graphic Novels and Comics*.

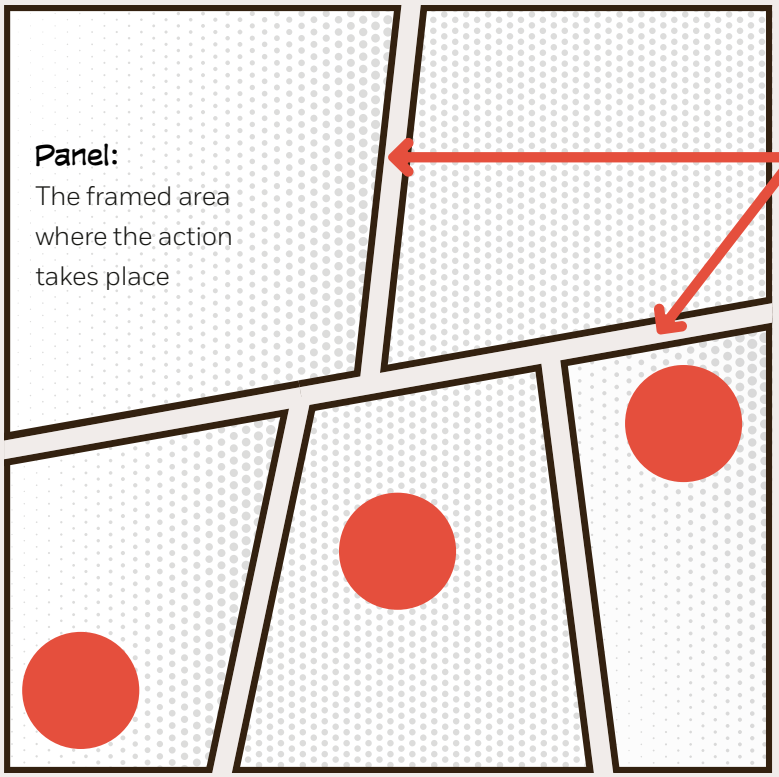
NOT-SO-NEW TO TEACHING WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS

Thanks for joining! We hope you find some new information you can use in your classes. Let's jump right into some important terminology for both you and your students to consider when thinking about and discussing graphic novels.

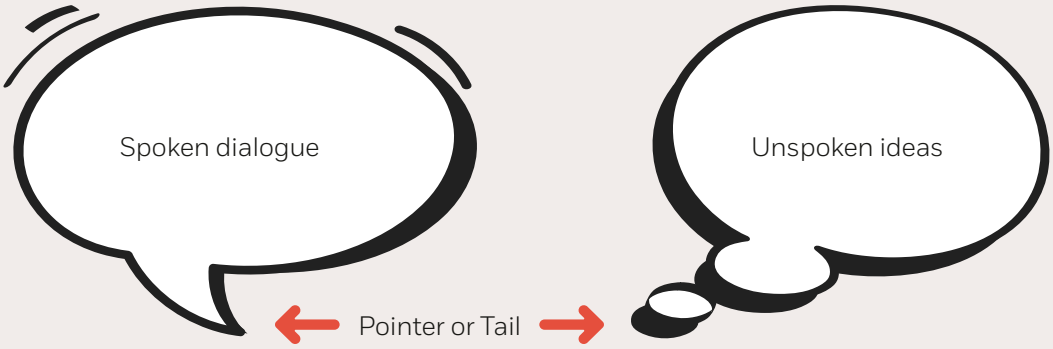
GLOSSARY

Color* *Also known as hue.	Color is used to convey mood and tone, distinguish emotional states and clarify or code one character from another. The color palette is the overall impression of the color landscape of the book.
Saturation	Dominance, intensity or purity of the color. In printing, it refers to the amount of pigment used in creating the ink.
Line	A basic building block of illustrations. Lines can express mood and evoke senses, including motion. Lines have style and expressivity from feathery and light to angular and heavy.
Gutters	The space, usually white, between the panels of a comic. The reader imagines the action that links the two static images and transforms them into a single idea. This is where reading comprehension is most active.
Panel	Acts as a general indicator that space and time are being divided. It's usually constructed by a line.
Transition	Changes between panels to imply sequence and movement.
Text/Font	Captions, speech bubbles, environmental text (signs). Look at the font and how the shape of the words is also a visual element.

VISUAL GLOSSARY OF TERMS



Speech bubbles or balloons



Captions

Text that appears in a box within the panel. Often used in direct address to the reader

A WORD ON REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

It should come as no surprise that there is an over representation of white, male, and able characters in children's literature. Graphic novels and comics are no exception to this historical reality. But, the good news is, you have the chance of changing that! Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, in her article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," provided an elegant metaphor for literature that represented marginalized communities. This is such an important concept because one book can be a mirror for one reader and a window for another, while a truly well-written book can be a sliding glass door for some readers to "become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author" (p. 1).

One element of graphic novels that isn't talked about enough is the added benefit of seeing characters – actually *seeing* them. It may seem obvious, but seeing characters from different cultures provides another dimension to readers. By bringing graphic novels written by and about marginalized people into the formal curriculum, you are sending a clear message to your students that their histories and stories are worthy of serious study.

ACTIVITIES, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, AND WRITING PROMPTS

WRITING SMALL MOMENTS AND IMAGINED EXPERIENCES

Good writing is inexorably tied to expansive reading. Teaching students good writing often hinges on finding examples of craft and voice that students can engage with and read deeply. Graphic novels can be a powerful way to provide students with opportunities to witness and experience stories, but they are also another way to see and study craft. By studying everything from significant historical events written as memoirs to fantastical stories, students can closely read and learn how language and images work together to create strong narratives. These graphic novels will engage students with stories from communities that are often left unexplored. Students see themselves reflected, and they can see into others' lives and experiences. Students must take in all the compelling layers when reading stories in graphic form, including how authors and illustrators communicate emotions, mood, and actions through color, line and using backgrounds to carry more of the narrative weight.

GRAPHIC NOVEL EXPLORATION

We suggest teachers take some time to start students off on the right foot by ensuring they have the skills to comprehend these multi-model texts. Go to your local library (public or school) and get as many graphic novels, spanning as many genres and styles as you can find, and bring them into the class. Make sure each student has a choice to read something that intrigues them.

Make piles of books spread out around the room. Talk to them about the paper, the weight, the color palette, and the style. Have students handle the books, flip through the pages, get a feel for them before choosing.

Also, load them up with sticky notes — because who doesn't love sticky notes?!

Provide the glossary for students to use as a reference tool.

Choose one of the graphic novels they will be reading and use it to model finding and explaining the impact of specific design features. Ask students to review the glossary and find examples in the books they choose. Then, ask them to mark and explain the design element and share their findings with others (this is where sticky notes — LOTS of sticky notes — really shine!). We are using Chad Sell's *The Cardboard Kingdom*.

Character

Sophie is excited in panels 1 and 2. Meemaw yells "LOUD" and makes Sophie feel small. The illustrator makes her smaller and smaller.

Color

The background of Sophie's story tells how she is feeling. She's excited to tell her mom about her costume but then her Meemaw scolded her for being loud and the green gets darker.

Speech bubble tails

Sophie is so unsure of her voice, you can see the tail of her speech bubble is wobbly and weak.

Panel

The last panel is out of alignment. It shows that Meemaw's criticism breaks the flow of Sophie's story.

The Cardboard Kingdom by Chad Sell (Page 45)

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND DISCUSSIONS

After students have spent some time familiarizing themselves with comic design elements and the meanings they can carry, it is time to dive into the selected texts and find the elements that communicate specific moods, tones, and emotions. We will explore details and how they are used to move a story, capture a reader, or explain an important aspect of the story. We recommend having students choose the book they are going to read from a selection. You can give a short book talk on each while showing the illustrations to get students interested. It is especially important that they see the illustrations.

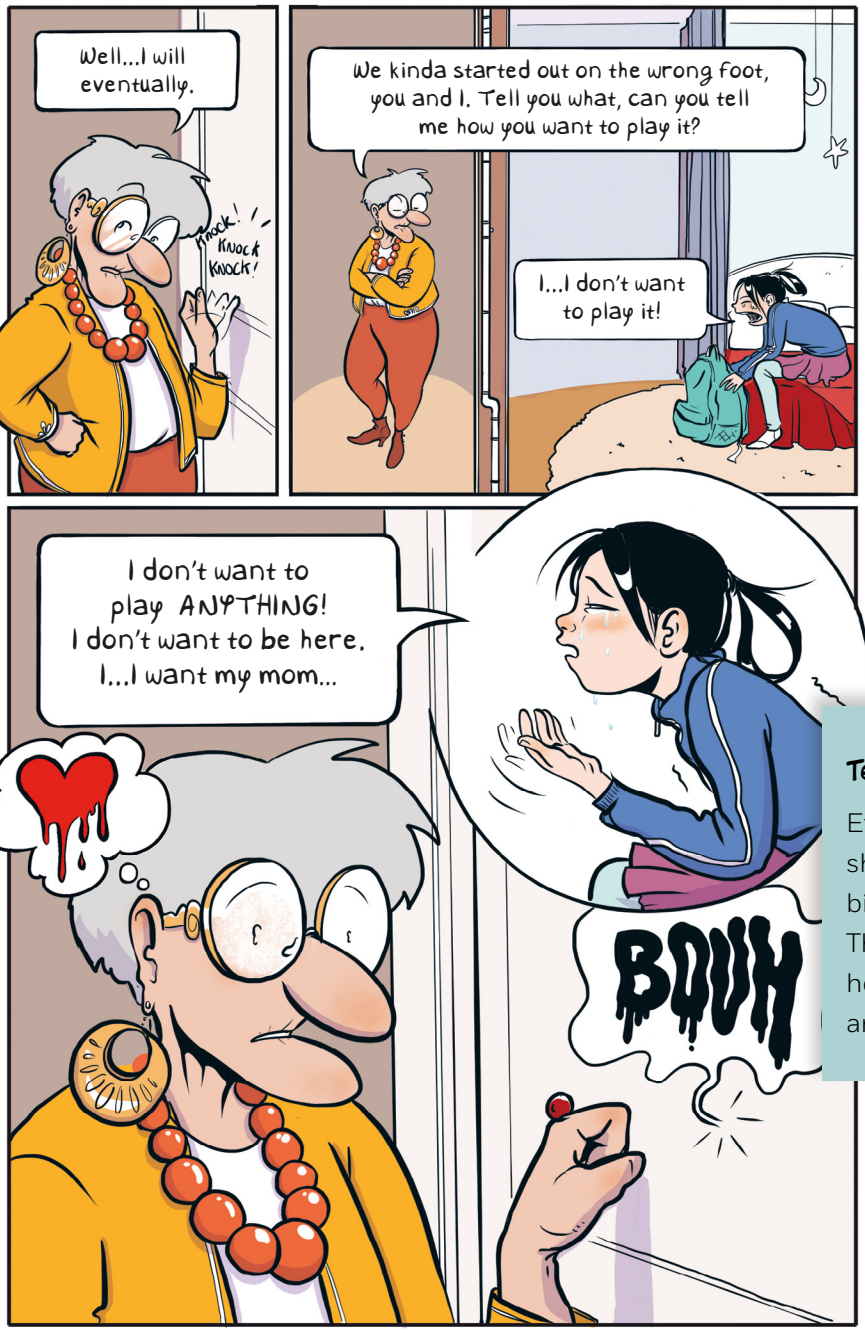
Once students have the books, make sure they slow down and look for the ways the illustrations are working. Ask them to use those sticky notes again! Finding, identifying, and understanding the ways the written text and illustrations work together is a terrific way to encourage close reading. Using sticky notes makes it easier for students to find the evidence they will need for small group discussions and writing prompts. Have them tag specific design elements and explain what they mean. Nothing in a graphic novel is accidental, so these design elements communicate something, sometimes multiple meanings.

Motion

The black birds are rushing down and over. The three panels are out of place and look like they are falling. The ink bottle is spilling. Books are open. Everything looks like it is in motion and a little scary.

Hicotea: A Nightlights Story by Lorena Alvarez (Page 35)

Have students tag places where illustrations and written text align, where they diverge, and where one expands the other. Realizing the ways the illustration and written text interplay often leads to a greater understanding of the story.



Witches of Brooklyn by Sophie Escabasse (Page 27)

Text and Image Align

Effie is so mad and sad all she can do is make that big sound. She's crying. The BOUH and the little heart both look like they are crying too.

Have students tag transitions. This is an essential and often overlooked element of graphic novels. Authors and illustrators use transitions to set the story's pace — to speed it up or slow it down. They also use transitions to show time passing, emotions, and physical distances. Transitions are often signaled with color or shading changes.

The Cardboard Kingdom by Chad Sell (Page 9)

Saturation

The vivid and bright color shows how complex and intense the imaginary scene is compared to the plain background in reality.

Transition

The first two panels are Jack's imagination: full of light and fire and excitement. The inset panel shows the transition to the less intense reality.

Have students tag important dialogue. The written text (in this case, dialogue) often answers readers' questions but can also leave the reader with more questions. Understanding the ways authors utilize dialogue in graphic novels is an important key to comprehending the text.

The Legend of Auntie Po by Shing Yin Khor (Page 101)

Dialogue

Martha stresses the need for honesty — even when it might be scary. The conversation shows how important it is to balance speaking honestly with kids about racism AND making them feel secure.

SUGGESTED SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Show something that surprised you in this section of the book. Why did it surprise you?
- Show a design element used to convey an emotion and discuss its effectiveness and why (think about color and line!).
- Show a page that was especially interesting to you. What was it that held your attention?

SUGGESTED WRITING PROMPTS

WRITE A REVIEW FOR NEXT YEAR'S CLASS

- Write a summary that includes details about characters.
- Include details about illustrations (color, line, panels) and the ways sequence and transitions worked.
- Include comparisons to other books, movies, shows, or video games to help the reader connect with the book.
- Include whose story is being told (be specific!) and why it is important.
- Include pages or panels that illustrate style.

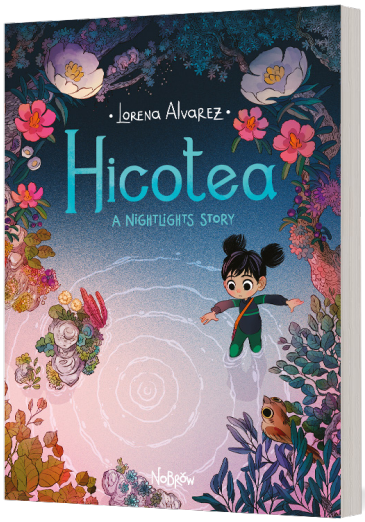
WRITE A FOUR-PANEL STORY IN COMIC FORM

- Select one moment in your life to write about. Describe who was there, what time it was, the colors and feelings you remember.
- Create a comic that uses specific design elements. Think about what you want to say.
- Decide what can be shown and what needs to be said.
- Decide how that moment felt and use color and shading to communicate that feeling.
- Draw the action, going from one panel to the next.

A FINAL WORD

We hope this guide has given you some ideas to play with in your own class. Take a new form (comics and graphic novels) and allow yourself and your students time and space to learn and discover in new ways. Bringing graphic novels and comics into the curriculum brings a vibrant new way of seeing stories not often studied in school.

TITLES MENTIONED IN THIS GUIDE

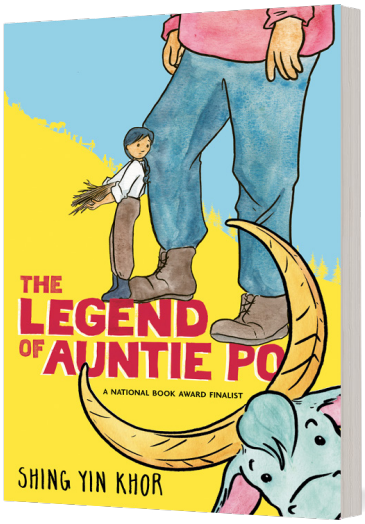


Hicotea
A Nightlights Story

LORENA ALVAREZ
978-1-910620-59-5
Paperback | Nobrow
64 pages | $10.99 | Lexile: N/A

Witches of Brooklyn

SOPHIE ESCABASSE
978-0-593-11927-3
Paperback | Random House Graphic
240 pages | $12.99 | Lexile: GN320L
Also available: **E-Book**



The Legend of Auntie Po

SHING YIN KHOR
978-0-525-55489-9
Paperback | Kokila
304 pages | $12.99 | Lexile: N/A
Also available: **E-Book**

The Cardboard Kingdom

CHAD SELL
978-1-5247-1938-8
Paperback | Knopf Books for Young Readers
288 pages | $12.99 | Lexile: GN150L
Also available: **E-Book**

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Dr. Laura M. Jiménez is currently the Associate Dean of Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion at the Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development. Her work spans both the literature read, as well as the literacy practices taught across elementary, middle, and high school classes.

Dr. Jiménez's scholarship focuses on the representation of marginalized individuals, communities, and history in children's literature with a special interest in graphic novel reading comprehension. Her scholarship appears in *The Reading Teacher, Journal of Lesbian Studies, Language Arts, Teaching and Teacher Education, and Journal of Literacy Research*.

Her book reviews, and calls for social justice in children's literature can be found on her blog, **booktoss.org** and on her frequent Tweets @booktoss.

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