GRAPHIC NOVELS IN YOUR SCHOOL LIBRARY

JESSE KARP / ILLUSTRATED BY RUSH KRESS
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At Reed College in Portland, Oregon, there is a most unusual library. Student-conceived at the end of the 1960s, and funded and run by students since then, it is a repository for a collection of but one thing: comic books. Standing apart from the Reed College Library, it is called the Media Lending and Loan Library (MLLL) but is better known as the Comic Book Reading Room. It was the earliest effort within the confines of an institute of education to recognize the importance of the sequential art form.

A great deal has happened to both education and the comic book since then; perhaps most surprisingly, an unlikely union between the two and a shared evolution. Many colleges and universities have recognized the production end as a valid form in which to pursue an education and a living. The Savannah College of Art and Design offers one of the top such programs in the country, but far from the only one. The Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art has been devoted exclusively to the study of this form since 1976.

My own experiences as a teacher and librarian bear out the worth of the medium. It will come as little surprise to anyone who works with children and young adults that graphic novels disappear from the library shelves faster than nearly anything else (except, perhaps, vampire novels, at least at the time of this writing) and are the topic of eager discussion when they find their way into classrooms. But I’m not talking just about young kids looking for some fun in a colorful narrative. I’m talking about the graduate students whom I’ve taught at Pratt Institute and the educators and parents at the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School, where I work. Their fascination with the history and language of this form as a vehicle for education is clear.

Comics have long had a reputation for being disconnected from legitimate concerns; they were supposedly fluffy things, good for a laugh at best, agents of desensitization and proponents of violence at worst. These educators, librarians, and future educators and librarians are uniformly astonished and delighted to discover that the history of the comic book is the history of American culture (and not just popular culture); that the medium’s evolution reflects our own cultural growing pains over the last century and defines aspects of the American psyche more trenchantly than any other art form around.

The point of all of this is merely to say that, with much credit to the invention of the term graphic novel, sequential art (the form of expression graphic novels are filled with) has become recognized as an art form whose history and production have something to teach us. That sequential art is a focus for education at this point can no longer be debated.

So what’s the next step?

Well, the next step is already, fitfully, under way. The graphic novel is no longer just a format that it’s suitable to be educated about; it is starting to see use as an actual tool with which to educate. It is not simply the production and history being recognized anymore...
either, but the content itself and the way it is conveyed that is becoming part of a curricular infrastructure. Already a mainstay of public libraries and having gained a foothold in school media centers, graphic novels are now finding their way into classrooms, with examples such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* drafted as supplements to history and social studies curricula. Those are two great books, to be sure, but there is so much more potential yet to be tapped.

That’s what this book is for. Not the *why* of graphic novels in education, but the *how*: how to use them, when to use them, what to use them for. The key to using the format properly is to first understand it yourself. This book begins by defining the form and separating, as clearly as possible, comic books from graphic novels from manga, then provides a quick primer on the aforementioned *why* of graphic novels in education. From there, we break down the language and iconography of the form to get a look at its inner workings, to see what gives it such raw power. We’ll then go on a quick tour of its history and see how it holds a mirror up to the world around it and, often enough, reveals what is occurring beneath the surface of that world, too.

After that, we’ll get to the nitty-gritty: reading lists that will include the classics, the neoclassics, the ones everyone knows about, the ones everyone should know about, and the specialty items that it would be very good to know about. These annotated lists for every grade school age will be highlighted with notes on their specific curricular uses. Finally, I’ve included a number of lesson plans centered around various works or around the art form itself, for use in a variety of curricula, programs, projects, classes, and courses.

Perhaps you are a school librarian who’s beginning a graphic novel collection or maintaining an established one, but you want to expand and see new ways the format can work for you and the teachers. Maybe you’re a teacher who believes in the format as a worthwhile addition to the curriculum or is at least willing to give it a try, but you’re not sure where to start. You are why this book was written. I have studied the medium for more than three and a half decades, first as an object of personal enthusiasm and later as a reviewer, scholar, librarian, and educator, and I’ve seen its incredible potential as an art form and a tool of education, a potential springing from its unique position as a nexus of two different forms of expression. The unification of these forms is able to reach parts of readers’ psyches and lift their imaginations, interest, and focus to unparalleled heights.

Take advantage of this incredible potential. Use your students’ enthusiasm to inspire new heights of investment in their education. That’s what this book is here to help you do.
Perhaps you know what a graphic novel is, at least well enough to get by. How specific do you really need to get, anyway? Suppose a student comes up and says, “Isn’t this just a comic book?” Or a parent demands to know what you’re doing with these things in your library or classroom. Or maybe you want to know what techniques the graphic novel uses to convey its narrative and which cognitive switches are being flipped as a person reads it—the magic of the art form, as it were.

In chapter 1 I will define as completely as possible what a graphic novel is and is not (and sometimes what it both is and is not at the same time), and why it is worth using with kids and even reading yourself. In chapter 2 I’ll get down to the fundamentals of how the form works, its language, codes, and symbols. This will be both a broad overview and an inquiry into the more intricate nuances so that you will be fully prepared to discuss just how and why it is a narrative art just as powerful, in its own way, as prose. Finally, in chapter 3, we’ll make a brief aesthetic and philosophical comparison between American comic art and Japanese manga, which differ in some surprisingly deep and telling ways.
What Is a Graphic Novel and Why Should You Care?

The first thing I’m obligated to do is inform you that graphic novels are not a genre. A genre refers to content, specifically the style or subject of the writing, such as mystery, romance, or science fiction. Because a graphic novel, just like a novel or a television program or a movie, can tell a story in any number of styles or subjects (and hence genres), a graphic novel is, like other media, a format. The graphic novel’s problem in this area comes from its immediate ancestor, the comic book. The comic book has had a long-standing association with a very specific genre, namely the superhero adventure. Although the relation between comic book and graphic novel is still, in many ways, a hazy and ill-defined zone, a quick trip into a local comic store or a quick glance at a comic book rack in a local bookstore will assure you that even the comic book is no longer quite so dominated by crime fighters.

Graphic novels are a format and not a genre. Now that we have that out of the way, we can move on to more concrete definitions.

Graphic Novels Are Not Comic Books . . . Or Are They?

Let’s be clear right off the bat that even if a graphic novel isn’t a comic book, their DNA is so close as to be nearly indistinguishable. What it boils down to is sequential art, the series of illustrated panels that both formats use to tell a story. Sequential art is a related series of images ordered in a sequence so as to create a narrative. The images are generally contained
within boxes called panels. The sequence of the panels is most often chronological (panel 1: Batman punches the Joker; panel 2: the Joker goes flying through a window), but not always. The imagery within the panels is usually figural art and, often, words appear in the panels, too. The panels themselves are mostly squares or rectangles, but not exclusively. As you can see, as with any other form of creative expression, any definition of sequential art has room for plenty of built-in exceptions. The important thing to hold onto is that sequential art is a sequence of images used to express a story or idea and that it is the form that links comic books and graphic novels inextricably together. But if that’s what links them, what exactly separates them?

The term graphic novel was coined by comic visionary Will Eisner. Back in 1978 he wrote and illustrated A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, which was a comic book bound in paperback form with distinctly non–comic book content: Jewish life in the New York tenements of the 1920s (see fig. 1.1). Eisner wanted to elevate the form in people’s minds and he wanted his work on the shelves of bookstores, where adult readers could find them, and not just on the racks of comic stores, where adult readers would surely not find them. So graphic novel is, when you get right down to it, a marketing term to make comic books seem more sophisticated or to possess a higher degree of literary merit. And it’s a term that worked. Though comic books are starting to find their way into chain bookstores, graphic novels have been there for quite a while, with stores like Barnes & Noble and Borders giving them their own sizable sections. This is also how comic book publishers employ the term these days: to differentiate their comic books, which tend to appeal to specialty audiences, from their graphic novels, which attract a wider market. It will be very helpful to remember that the term graphic novel is little more than a business decision. That’s okay, though; many of the decisions that have evolved sequential art over the years were inspired by profit-inducing strategies conceived of by men in suits around conference room tables. But make sure to hear what the men in suits are not telling you: most graphic novels are really comic books after all—that is, containing not original material, but collected material from monthly comic books.

Most graphic novels produced in this country are published by the two biggest comic book companies: Marvel Comics and DC Comics. But these graphic novels are, for the most part, reprinted collections of comics that have already been serialized on a monthly schedule. Most graphic novels containing original material are produced by the independent comic market or by established publishing houses such as Simon and Schuster, Random House, and First Second. Based on statistics from the Graphic Novel Archive website, of the 12,294 graphic novels that had been cataloged as of 2010, 5,939 (48.31%) of them are collections of previously published material (i.e., mostly superhero graphic novels). A mere 424 (3.45%) contain original, stand-alone material (e.g., Persepolis or Fun Home). Another 5,645 (45.92%) are defined as serialized graphic novels, most of which are manga collected and translated from the original Japanese material. (Statistics provided by the very helpful webmaster extraordinaire Jeff Bogumil at the Graphic Novel Archive, http://graphicnovelarchive.com.) Clearly, the vast majority of what is considered a graphic novel is collected material.

So, are we to distinguish between collections and original works? I’m afraid it’s too late for that, since they’ve all been referred to under the blanket term graphic novel since practically their inception. Publishers surely don’t want us to make that distinction because it could rob the collections of the extra gravitas and respectability that the term affords them. And we don’t really want to, anyway, because it would make cataloging them a nightmare (more of a nightmare, I should say) and such a distinction would likely prove confusing for our patrons, students, and readers. So the term graphic novel encompasses books containing sequential art that is either original or collected.
Unfortunately, this still leaves us with the question of whether comics and graphic novels are any different and, if so, how. On the way to a final answer, let’s examine some of the common notions on the subject.

Here’s a popular one: graphic novels contain more sophisticated, mature, and “worthwhile” content than comic books. Given the facts about reprinted stories, it should be patently clear that this isn’t true. If a majority of graphic novels actually contain material from comic books, they can’t very well be thematically different in their approach or content from the comics they collect, can they?

Have a look at another generally accepted criterion for distinguishing comics from graphic novels: graphic novels tell a full story from beginning to end, even if it’s over the course of several volumes, while comic books have an open-ended continuity that could run on indefinitely. Again, the issue of collections makes this hard to accept. If many graphic novels simply collect a series of comics that are running a potentially infinite story, how could the graphic novels not have that same potential, regardless of whether more of that story is told between two covers? However, there is some truth to the idea that even graphic novels that are collections tend to give a sense of closure to their stories within a single volume. A standard collection of the latest Spider-Man comics (for instance) will tell an arc of story that completes a specific adventure of the character but leaves several overarching themes and elements developing for further issues and collections.

This is, as it happens, an intentional practice on the part of comic book publishers these days. Monthly comic books are written in these six- or seven-issue arcs specifically so that they can be collected and marketed in this way. As I mentioned, the real money is in getting graphic novels to bookstore shoppers and not just to comic store shoppers. In order to appeal to the bookstore crowd, you want to give them the sense that they’re getting a full story for their money but also leave it opened enough that if they enjoyed it, they’ll come back for the next volume. This is a practice that went into full swing at about the time Marvel Comics really dived into graphic novel publishing (the company was years behind competitor DC in a strong program for collecting its work in graphic novel form). More specifically still, the consistent story and standard can be traced to Marvel’s launch of its Ultimate imprint with *Ultimate Spider-Man* (see fig. 1.2). *Ultimate Spider-Man* was a retelling of Spider-Man’s origin and subsequent adventures in an updated setting (rather than in the early 1960s, when the character was actually created). Writer Brian Michael Bendis spearheaded a style of comic book writing that told stories within these easily collectible dramatic arcs. The first seven issues of *Ultimate Spider-Man* not only told the story of Peter Parker’s transformation into a superhero, but also contained the origin of and showdown with his archenemy, the Green Goblin. By comparison, the original version of this tale in the *Amazing Spider-Man* title published in the 1960s—encompassing just the introduction of the Green Goblin, the revelation of his secret identity, and the dramatic (but not actually final) showdown between the opponents—ran from issue numbers 14 through 40. That’s twenty-six issues, featuring a number of other character introductions and narrative elements that had nothing to do with the Green Goblin, published over the course of a little more than two years and, obviously, not written with the intention of collecting them for the bookstore market.

So individual graphic novels tell full stories (or arcs), while individual comics don’t. This is, unfortunately for clarity’s sake, not a hard-and-fast rule, but it does tend to apply. As should be obvious from the Spider-Man example above, as older comic books are collected into graphic novel form, it’s impossible to adhere to this rule consistently.

What, then, is the absolute, incontrovertible distinction between graphic novel and comic book? Well . . . there isn’t one. Sorry. But we can get considerably more clear-cut on the issue by looking at matters of physical form.
Put simply, comic books are floppy and graphic novel are not. Comics are bound with staples and usually run twenty-two pages (though they can run up to one hundred). Graphic novels are bound like novels, hardcover or paperback, and usually run upward of sixty-four pages (though they do sometimes run down to forty-eight pages). Both formats have a range of physical dimensions (though more so with graphic novels) and so we’re really better off not bothering with those. There is, to confuse things further, a comic book format known as *prestige*, most popular back in the 1980s and early 1990s. These comics were bound as trade paperbacks and ran forty-eight pages or higher. They were, in many ways, the precursor of the modern graphic novel and are seldom produced any more. It would be fair to say, in sum, that as physical objects comic books and graphic novels can be different, but as an art form they are the same. So, by and large, you are safe identifying a graphic novel with this rock solid, nonabstract, definition of physical form, eschewing the content for means of definition. It is not, as we are about to see, the last time we will need to eschew content to clear the table and make a final statement about what a graphic novel is.

**Graphic Novels Are Not Novels**

... or Are They?

You will notice that the term *graphic novel* is used even when the material in question is a biography (say, *Persephone* by Marjane Satrapi), current events analysis (say, *The 9/11 Report* by Jacobson and Colon), or a historical record (say, *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* by Butzer). This has frustrated many because it appears to be inaccurate. A novel is a story, a work of fiction, whereas things such as biographies, current event analyses, and historical records are clearly not fiction. There’s been a call from some quadrants to rename the format. Some suggestions I’ve heard are *graphic format*, which sounds a bit stiff and technical; *graphic book*, which suggests that the content features extreme violence or sexuality; *graphic narrative*, which does not seem to specifically refer to a physical object; *graphics*, which is easily confused with the same term used for images and illustrations; and *sequential art book*, which is a bit unwieldy and probably somewhat on the confusing side for people who haven’t heard the term *sequential art* before. A written abbreviation often used, and one I’ll be using myself in later chapters, is *GN*, which allows us to both keep the term intact and hide it at the same time.

It’s a moot point, in any event. The issue is by and large ignored by the general readership, which would no doubt be confused by a rejiggering now that the format has been so well established and gained such respect under its current name. Whether or not it would even be possible to change the term now that it has been accepted into the cultural lexicon is beside the point.

Let’s return to where we started the chapter, with the conceptual. Just as graphic novel is a format (having to do with physical form) and not a genre (having to do with content), the word *novel* should be taken as a reference not to the content of the work, but rather to its physical form. It is, essentially, sequential art with the physical form most reminiscent of a novel, which is to say, bound as a hardcover or softcover book, rather than a comic. If we can accept the idea that the term as well as the object itself is defined by its physical form rather than by its content, then we can all relax and get on with important stuff.

Here it is, then, all in one neat sentence: a graphic novel is a generally complete narrative told in sequential art, bound on sturdy paper without staples.
WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

As I said in the introduction, this book is about how graphic novels can tie into education, not why they should. Nevertheless, I recognize that this isn’t a done deal for much of the ed-ucation world. For the record, and as quickly as possible, let’s get the why out of the way.

In their seminal Graphic Novels in Your Media Center, Allyson and Barry Lyga identify three types of burgeoning readers to whom the format proves a particular benefit:

“Slow visualizers,” who have trouble creating mental images from word descriptions (a skill essential to reading) and can be intimidated by long passages of text, benefit from the graphic novel’s “visual cueing systems that not only balance the text but also help the student interpret it” (Lyga and Lyga 2004).

“Reluctant readers,” who lack motivation to pick up or enjoy books, “don’t consider graphic novels to be ‘real’ books [and so do] not mind reading them” (Lyga and Lyga 2004).

“Visually dependent” students, victims of the all-encompassing visual media that inundates children every day, tend to eschew books because books are too slow moving or have no visual component to keep interest engaged (Lyga and Lyga 2004). Graphic novels, naturally, tend to stimulate interest in these students much faster than books.

In every case, graphic novels build skills, confidence, and desire to move on to other formats and to continue reading just for the sake of enjoyment. There is, of course, an obligation to teach these students to go deeper than the surface image, and graphic novels nurture a form of visual literacy that “goes beyond the presented graphics and looks at the messages, meanings, and motivation behind a visual image” (Lyga and Lyga 2004).

According to Drego Little in “In a Single Bound: A Short Primer on Comics for Educators,” the form “appears simple at first but is actually a complex cognitive task” (Little 2005). Three primary phenomena occur, interconnected and overlapping, when reading sequential art. They are:

- **closure**—the brain’s capacity to create complete images out of partial ones, to fill in gaps and construct a sequence where none specifically exists
- **narrative density**—the interpretation of the full range of many layers of information that a single panel can convey
- **amplification**—the ability of pictures and words to scaffold one another to support full comprehension (Little 2005)

“Because the images and the words are both working to convey the same story arc, comics provide a type of literacy support no other medium does” (Little 2005). Children who read comics growing up even show a larger vocabulary and a better understanding of verb tenses than children who do not (Smetana 2009). Indeed, countries with high national literacy rates also tend to have a thriving comic culture, one that is respected by adult interest and has authority figure approval, such as Finland and Japan (Little 2005).

With information like this to build on, sequential art gains ever more purchase as a pedagogical tool. In New York, Columbia University’s Teachers College has created the Comic Book Project, a program that uses sequential art creation to expand children’s interest in reading and story creation. Since the program began in an elementary school in Queens, New York, “it has expanded to 860 schools across the country” as teachers realize that “for kids who may be struggling and for kids who may be new to the English language, that visual sequence is a very powerful tool” (Gootman 2007).
Indeed, in the spring of 2008 the New York Department of Education began a program to train many of the city’s school librarians in selecting and teaching graphic novels as a tool to inspire student’s interest in reading and literacy.

Yet another application was found in a state school in Northern California engaged in a literacy program for deaf students in 2008. Given that a deaf person’s primary means of communication is visual, it seemed a natural fit. Sure enough, the teachers found great success in both building interest in their deaf students and raising comprehension levels because “due to their visual nature, comics and graphic novels provide a context-rich, high-interest story environment for acquiring new vocabulary” (Smetana 2009).

In the face of all this, you may still hear the cry go up that graphic novels are merely “picture books for older kids” and that the visual element simply makes it a reading shortcut and lowers comprehension. A study conducted by Mallia Gorg, however, counters this handily. Gorg represented the same story in three different forms: one as written text, another as written text with a small number of illustrations, and a last version in classic comic book style with sequential panels of art and words. Three different groups of students were presented with one version each and then asked questions to determine comprehension level. The results showed no significant difference whatsoever in the test scores, proving that the comic version was just as effective as the more traditional two in putting across the story and message (Gorg 2007).

The heart of the matter is, perhaps, best summed up by James Sturm, a graphic novel writer and artist and director of Vermont’s Center for Cartoon Studies, who noted that “there is plenty of information out there. Google and Wikipedia can provide a biography in seconds. It is stories that give information meaning. Compelling stories make readers want to learn or do more” (Karp 2008).

Graphic novels, in other words, help students invest in their own education.
How do graphic novels work?

Sequential art combines words, which appeal to the intellect, and pictures, which appeal to the emotions, in a way that no other art form does. Unlike picture books, the words and pictures in sequential art coexist in the same conceptual space (the panel) and are joined into a single piece (usually via word balloons). Unlike movies, the words and pictures in sequential art are perceived at the speed the reader desires and with the same sense (visually), and thus have a unique and essential unity in the way the reader experiences them. By joining the intellect and the emotions together as it does, sequential art has a vast and unique potential for creating powerful narrative.

However, to tell a story in sequential art, something vital is required: a sequence. Without the images relating to one another, you may have some interesting things to look at, but you don’t have a story any more than you would if you joined unrelated words together. And, like words, the images must relate in a specifically chronological and contextual way. One image must lead into the next and the next, thus creating a sequence. And for a sequence to exist, time must pass, because that’s what a sequence is: related incidents occurring one after the other. For “after” to occur, time must pass. That’s really the secret of this entire enterprise called sequential art. It is, at its very core, a manner of showing you that time is passing. Even within a single panel, it is often necessary to arrange images in a sequence for this purpose. That’s the sequential. The art, of course, is in how you make the time appear to pass. It is within this span that expression comes to bear, revealing action, emotion, character, and everything else necessary to a compelling story.

Sequential art has only three tools at its disposal for creating this illusion. These are (1) the gutter (the space in between panels), (2) symbols and codes, and (3) words. Essentially, everything you see in a comic or GN will adhere to one or more of these three techniques, which we will now explore individually and at length.
GETTING YOUR MIND INTO THE GUTTER

Time cannot actually pass within a still image, and if that time cannot pass within the panels, then there’s only one place left for time to do its business: in between the panels. The space in between two panels, be it a vast channel or a nearly invisible millimeter of dark line, is known as the gutter. An artist strives to create the perception of passing time by using this internecine space; to, in effect, make us create the passage of time within the gutter merely by suggesting that passage in the panels on either side of it.

What’s happening, exactly, in figure 2.1? The man jumped, right? Wrong, actually. The first panel within figure 2.1 shows the man about to jump, and the second panel shows him landing. No actual jump has occurred in that sequence, except for the jump you created by following the artist’s suggestions. The two panels in figure 2.1 depict a man jumping without actually showing a jump. The gutter is where a skilled artist will make you do all the work. Depending on the skill of the artist, or the effect he is trying to achieve, he can let more or less action or time occur within the gutter.

What have we got in figure 2.2? There’s a man actually jumping, right? Wrong again. A man can’t actually jump in still images, no matter how many there are. Figure 2.2 is in fact the same as figure 2.1 with the addition of a middle panel in which a man is frozen in the air. The depiction of the jump here is rather more explicit, and playing with this simple sequence can reveal the artist’s motives and perhaps even the nature of the story he’s trying to tell. The simpler sequence in figure 2.1 suggests the same jump, but it’s a quicker way of showing the action. This leaves room in other places for what the artist deems more important story elements.

Heading further away from the simplicity of figure 2.1, you have figure 2.3. Here, again, is the same jump, but with rather more specific moments depicted. You see not only the jump, but also how difficult the jump is, how agile the man jumping is, and how far the two cliff edges are. This takes up more space and conveys more drama and suggests that this story may be more action oriented. Superhero comics commonly feature a high panel-to-action ratio, lavishing space on fisticuffs and giving rather less space to straightforward dialogue, for instance. Little surprise, since superhero stories are, in many ways, about action, and the characters themselves are defined not only by the actions they take, but also by the
specific ways they take them. You don’t imagine Spider-Man engaging in the same kind of
fight that Superman does, right? Spider-Man bounces off walls, dodges bullets, spins webs
from a distance, leaps in for quick punches and kicks. Superman is an unstoppable force,
implacable, warding off bullets by merely standing still and throwing large punches to dev-
astating effect. That says something about the characters, and to define those things, their
actions need to be quite detailed. There are other comics, meanwhile, that fill entire pages
with dozens of panels of two heads talking. Granted, this is a more experimental, indie-
spirited kind of a page composition, but just flipping through the two different styles will
quickly tell you how time is intended to pass and thus what sort of a story to expect.

The panel itself, the actual borders that define the space of the image, are malleable,
too. Generally speaking, simple and uncrowded page composition transmits a story most
effectively, but there are exceptions. Splash pages (full-page images) are fairly common in
action-oriented comics to give an even greater scale or impact. Occasionally a panel effect
can be used to transmit subtle nuances. Because the panel borders determine our percep-
tion of the space the story exists in, a panel shape like the one in figure 2.4 can alter our
sense of distance or time as, here, we have a more thoughtful and majestic tone than the
previous “action shots.”
The story is not just in the panels, but just as important, in between the panels, not to mention what the very lines of the panels themselves have to say.

But, since I mentioned it, what exactly is in the panels, anyway?

Within a single panel of sequential art, there’s plenty to see. Even disregarding the figural images, there’s often an array of things to interpret. There are words, of course, but before we even get to those, there’s a form of language even more rudimentary. If time is to be made to pass within a single panel, if there is any action to be taken, then it is this language that will drive the image, suggest animation to us much as the gutter does in between the panels. These are symbols and codes that function as the specific language of sequential art and have become so integrated into the experience that we generally take them for granted. We take in only the effect of these symbols, just as we don’t spend time interpreting a question mark at the end of a sentence.

The most common symbol in sequential art is the word balloon, the white bubble that indicates its speaker with a pointed stem. The balloons are meant to hold words, but still ignoring those words, the balloons themselves can have a variety of meanings. Figure 2.5 contains four sorts of word balloons: (1) a speech balloon, (2) a whisper balloon, (3) a thought balloon, and (4) a shouting balloon. These symbols function such that you don’t even need to look inside the balloon to get a sense of what is being expressed.

As I said, the balloons generally contain words. However, other symbols can sometimes express an idea just as elegantly. Put a lone question mark within a speech or thought balloon and you understand what the character is feeling. Put a “&$#@!” inside a shout balloon and . . . you see where I’m going.

Leaving the word balloons behind, there’s still an awful lot with which to work. The most elementary way to convey the passage of time in sequential art is through movement, and if you need to do that in a single panel you’ve got a few choices. Remember our jumper? Figure 2.6 matches the middle panel from figure 2.2, but this time it has speed lines indicating his progress. The same fellow is making the same jump, but the motion, or speed, lines convey his movement within the single panel, dramatizing the effect of the jump without extraneous panels.

In figure 2.7 we have the same jumper again, this time with the ghosting or doubling effect behind him, showing a detailed progress of his entire jump. This has the effect of hyperfocusing the reader on the action, highlighting it much as slow motion would in film.
Going beyond motion, there is a vast array of symbols constructed to give a sense of emotion and conditions. The first panel in figure 2.8 depicts a plate of food. Would you care for a bite of this food? Perhaps you should wait a bit because it’s quite hot, as indicated by the heat symbols rising from it. In the second panel, a man hoping for a plate of ice cream or perhaps some cool lemonade after a hot day’s work instead finds hot food waiting. How does he feel about it? I’m sure you can tell, even though you can’t see his face or hear his words, as the anger lines emanating from him make it plain.

These examples barely scratch the surface of the vast lexicon of symbols and codes used in sequential art. If you think about it, I’m sure you can conjure a few, even if you’ve barely cracked a comic book in your life. The argument can be made, of course, that sequential art functions solely on symbols. What is an image after all, but a form of symbol? The more obscure the representation is from the actual thing being represented, the more acute our interpretive abilities must be. Take a face, for example. The less specific an image becomes,
the more symbolic it appears. The face in figure 2.9 is the most abstract (that is, most obscure from the actual object) way you can possibly reproduce the thing known as a face in symbols and still recognize it, right? As Scott McCloud pointed out in his seminal (and incomparable) Understanding Comics, you can, in fact, depict a face still more abstractly. Here’s how: FACE (Harper 1994). Letters and words are the most common form of iconography we have, and their symbiosis with images is the power of sequential art.

**IF A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS, HOW MANY WORDS IS A PICTURE WITH WORDS IN IT WORTH?**

First and foremost, the very presence of spoken words within a panel demands the passage of time. How can a word be spoken unless time is passing? In figure 2.10, the first panel shows us, merely through its use of spoken word, a moment of time passing. The second shows us a longer stretch of time passing, all within a single panel.

Let’s look at the way the words themselves are portrayed. What is being said or thought certainly tells us something about a character, but so does the manner in which it’s being said or thought. In figure 2.11, the first panel conveys the thought and feeling. The second panel makes the point somewhat more forcefully—not just in the shape of the word balloon, but also in the font of the letters themselves. Still more dramatic is the sense of isolation, sorrow, and uncertainty conveyed in the third panel, specifically because of the size and lightness of the words within the balloon.

Outside the confines of a single panel, words change and sometimes even create the relationship between images, the very sequence itself. In figure 2.12, the first sequence certainly tells you what’s happening, but the second sequence gives a stronger sense of continuity between the panels and heightens the tension of the moment.
Subtle shadings are created by making choices about word placement, such as in figures 2.13 and 2.14. The first panel does not particularly cry out for attention to the emotional undercurrents of the situation. The sequence of panels beneath suggests a more noteworthy message.

And that's just the spoken word.

The caption, the free-floating box in the panel that contains narration, has fallen into far less use in sequential art these days. Back in the golden age of the panel, they were as integral to the sequential art experience as the word balloons themselves, panels often crowded with both description and conversation (the old EC Comics of the 1950s are a prime example of this style). As the sophistication of the art has grown, however, storytellers have found that
narration, especially that which duplicates the message given by the image within the same panel, tends to bog down the story. These days, images and dialogue function elegantly on their own, in most instances. There are, however, some cases in which the caption remains integral.

The subjective narration of a character depicted within a caption can give a cinematic voice-over quality to a story at the same time that it illuminates character and motive. The image in figure 2.15 is surely made more intense by the narration, more so than it would have been in a thought balloon, as the caption gives a greater sense of removal, disassociation, and omniscience.

![Figure 2.15](image_url)
The caption is also still the most effective way of tying images into a sequence when there might otherwise appear to be no connection whatsoever. The first sequence in figure 2.16 may as well not even be a sequence for all the connection it has. But add a single word to the second panel and you have an instant contextual connection, thus illustrating the difference between what is merely art in sequence and what is sequential art.

**FIGURE 2.16**

The gutter, symbols and codes, and words are the three methods that sequential art uses to convey the passage of time and to highlight the storytelling necessities of character and emotion. I’m going to go ahead and say that you will not find a piece of narrative sequential art that doesn’t conform to this rule (and, yes, I have come across rare exceptions). But within these three methods is a vast array of possibility, and every culture, to say nothing of every artist, puts its own stamp on the art form.
WHILE THIS IS BY NO MEANS A BOOK ABOUT MANGA, ANY discussion of sequential art at this point in time must involve some consideration of the Japanese form, given its astonishing rise in popularity since 2000. *Manga* (pronounced mahn-ga, not mayn-ga) is a Japanese word meaning “disreputable pictures” or “whimsical pictures” and, to be succinct about it, is simply the Japanese version of a comic book. Ah, but even within that straightforward distinction there is room for a great deal of divergence.

Comics have had a long hard climb for widespread respectability in the United States (which they’re still struggling through in many ways). Other cultures have long been more accepting of the form, to some extent because no other culture has seen the form dominated by a single genre like we have (that would be superheroes, a genre mainly associated with children’s interests). France, in particular, has an extensive history of more adult-oriented fare within the medium, referring to the form as “the Ninth Art.” However, no place has it over Japan in this regard. In an astonishing figure, 22 percent of all printed material in Japan is manga. This is no doubt the result of the fact that manga covers a vast range of genres and is aimed at so many different interests and reading levels. There is no shame in cracking one open, regardless of age. Riding the subway in Tokyo, you are likely to see “graying salarymen, twenty-something [sic] hipsters, and schoolgirls all paging through a manga” (Pink 2007).

Even in the United States, the power of manga has become undeniable. Between 2003 and 2007, manga sales in the United States tripled (Pink 2007), and between 2000 and 2006, manga went from “a third of the $75 million graphic novel industry to claiming almost two-thirds of what is now a $330 million movement” (Thompson 2007). Even given the vast $255 million rise in the income over six years of the GN industry itself, when it
comes to manga “nothing in the bookstore market has seen that sort of evolution in such a short time” (Thompson 2007).

What, exactly, makes manga so popular with our kids? So many of the animated television programs and video games that children and young adults are consuming are created and produced in Japan; everything from Pokemon to the ever-popular Naruto series. The aesthetic sensibility of the manga, in particular, has become a permanent fixture of the American cultural landscape and a visual language with which kids and young adults feel comfortably familiar. As the manga style of art and storytelling becomes so popular, it’s little wonder that American artists and publishers are beginning to adapt and synthesize it into the production of American comics.

So just what are some of these differences, anyway?

DEATHMATCH: MANGA VERSUS COMICS

Let’s get this obvious one out of the way first. Manga in its original Japanese form is meant to be read from right to left, and is thus designed that way. This isn’t just a matter of the page and panel sequence, but applies to the imagery and word balloons within the panels themselves. Many manga are reproduced in this country with the original sequence intact, and reading them can take some getting used to. While this is a significant difference in form, it does not change the inherent nature of the stories. Indeed, there are plenty of manga reproduced for this country that reverse the original sequence into a familiar left-to-right order, and this has no essential effect on the content.

Comic book and GN content fall into various genres. Superheroes still tend to rule the form around here, but crime and horror are gaining ground and there’s humor, sci-fi, and adult popping around, too, and at least a few examples of pretty much any genre interest you could think of. However, manga focuses genre through the lens of gender and age in a very specific way, targeting not only reading levels and genre interest, but also gender in a clear, intentional manner that American publishers do not.

Shonen is boys’ manga: action, sci-fi, fantasy, and sports (nearly an unheard of subject in American comics). Shojo is girls’ manga and focuses on romance, mystery, and horror. Seinen and josei are manga targeted at older men and women, respectively (generally college age and up) and reflect this not only in genre choice, but also in maturity and extremity of content. Manga has embraced the divergent demographics of its readership and so has ended up with a wider and more immediate appeal to female readership and to older, more serious adult readers, audiences that GNs are just now beginning to lure at significant rates. One area in which manga flags by comparison is—can you guess?—the superhero genre. Why did the American comic form embrace superheroes so wholeheartedly? The answer is pent up in the history of the form and will be addressed in the next chapter.

What about the stories themselves? On a series-to-series basis, comics are generally open-ended; their stories and characters tend to run on and on until and if a dwindling readership makes it financially inadvisable to continue. Manga series are usually finite, running anywhere from four to thirty volumes, though not as a rule. The point is that a manga series is conceived as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, while comics generally are not.

Those are some all-encompassing ways in which the formats themselves differ. But what about content? The first thing you come to when you open either one is the art, and the
first thing you’ll notice is that comics are nearly always in color, while manga are, by vast majority, not. But that’s merely the surface.

Although we’re starting to see aspects of the manga aesthetic in American comics, there is little mistaking the art style in one for the other. Depending on the genre, manga figural art tends to contain more extreme stylization than comics, the figures being more pliable, elongated, and what many would call “cartoonish,” as seen in figure 3.1. The art is, by and large, less literal, if you will, often intended to suggest the emotion of the character or situation rather than the actual appearance.

**FIGURE 3.1**
Meanwhile, manga background or object art tends toward realism of an intensely acute variety. Images of guns (as in figure 3.2), cars, trees, buildings, can be so realistic that they border on the fetishistic.

Deeper philosophical differences emerge. Take this action sequence from a comic in figure 3.3 and compare it to the action sequence from a manga in figure 3.4. The panels in the Spider-Man comic depict the pose of a strike, the look on a face at impact. The only sound effects here are the sounds of that impact, and each such impact is highlighted by

![Figure 3.2](image-url)
Figure 3.3

Ultimate Spider-Man #7. Spider-Man and all other Marvel characters: TM and © 2010 Marvel Entertainment, LLC. and its subsidiaries. All rights reserved.
FIGURE 3.4

a “flash of light” effect. Even the motion effects, as when Spider-Man is being thrown by his enemy, make it look as though he’s blasting away like a rocket ship. The panels in the manga Hellsing, though they certainly contain impact, are about the effort of the movement leading up to it, the motion of the characters, as highlighted both by the riot of speed lines that make figures seem a blur of motion and the sound effects that spring from the effort behind the movements and the sound of air being cut by motion. From these representative examples we can gather something crucial about the nature of the individual media. American sequential art is about action, which is to say the effect of movement. Manga strives to capture the action as it happens, which is to say the movement itself. Does the American interest in result and the Japanese concentration on process say something salient about the cultures themselves? You will have to be the judge of that.

As we look at the art as a visual language—as we discussed at length in the last chapter—some more extreme differences become evident. This should come as no surprise because symbols and visual codes develop from a culture’s deeper understanding of itself. The more distinct the cultures, the more distinct their symbols. Another whole book could be filled with an analysis of manga’s own codes and symbols. For the sake of a simple example, let’s look at one that points up the more obvious differences between manga and American comics.

Where we tend to let a character’s facial expressions, or the situation they’re in, spell out their emotional condition, manga will often add a descriptive effect. These can be utterly literal, as in figure 3.5.

![Figure 3.5](image-url)

**FIGURE 3.5**

They can also be more whimsical, as with the *chibi* version of the face in the second panel of figure 3.6, who is the same character as the more realistic one in the first panel of the same figure. *Chibi* (meaning “short person” or “small child”) are small or cartoonishly extreme versions of a character in the midst of emotional moments or difficult decisions, whose facial expressions or speech reflect the emotional issue at stake.

---

**FIGURE 3.6**

These are simply two of the codes that manga uses to make the emotional lives of its characters more evident with conceptual techniques, an abstraction playing in the “real world” of the story. This prevalence of abstract or spiritual elements in manga, which are largely absent from comics and GN, again speak to the very nature of the cultures that produce these forms.

American comics favor a cause-and-effect philosophy, a result-oriented style, and they are more literal, more concrete and material oriented in their depictions. As manga favors not the result as much as the path to it, the value of a flowing process, it is also more comfortable with depictions of the abstract or spiritual elements that seem to have little place in comics. These are not hard-and-fast rules that apply to every example within each medium. This area has received little study and so at this time remains largely theoretical. (To my knowledge there has been no work whatsoever examining these deeper thematic concerns in comparison, leaving a crucial area of cultural comparison wide open to the right scholar.)

Manga is a format that is absolutely worth your time to examine more closely elsewhere, as its popularity among young readers demands. Although I will touch on examples of it as we go, it is not our focus here. Sequential art was born in the United States and in many ways is still a uniquely American form. As we’re about to see, its history and evolution reveal significant messages about our own society and culture.
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Many educators now agree that graphic novels inform as well as entertain, and to dismiss the educational potential of the graphic novel is to throw away a golden opportunity to reach out to young readers. This dynamic book takes a look at the term graphic novel, how the format has become entwined in our culture, and the ways graphic novels can be used in the library and in the classroom. To set those unfamiliar with the format at ease, graphic novel expert Jesse Karp

- Introduces the history, the symbols, and the conventions of the form
- Provides annotated lists of core titles to help K–12 librarians build their collections
- Offers lesson plans that use graphic novels to impart facts and enliven discussion on everything from life skills and dating to history

A one-stop resource that keeps the school library firmly at center stage, this eye-opening book will change your view of graphic novels.