COMMON CORE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

WINNING GRAPHIC NOVELS

Blending Visual Literacy With the Common Core

SHERI J. TUCKER

PHILIP J. TUCKER
The Graphic Novel Family

*Graphica* is the umbrella term for the visual literacy genres of graphic novels, comics, and mangas. In the 1940s, comics were widely read for entertainment and served as a political medium for antwar statements or for rallying nationalism. World War II gave birth to new heroes and villains, such as Superman in 1939 and the female icon Wonder Woman in 1941. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, superheroes such as Superman, Flash, and Batman united to fight together in the Justice League comic series. In 1978, Will Eisner coined the term *graphic novel* as a marketing ploy for his new work, *A Contract With God*, in an effort to distinguish it from traditional comic writing. In doing so, he established a new genre of literature that merged the longer prose narratives of novel writing with intense illustrations and the layouts of comic panels. In 1992, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: I: My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman became the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize, and another noted graphic novel, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: A Story of Childhood*, won the Alex Award in 2004.

The graphic novel contributed to a resurgence in the popularity of comic writing, accentuated by the release of movies such as *Superman*, *Green Lantern*, and *X-Men*. The popularity of graphic novels has steadily increased, and now there are multitudes of titles on the market addressing a range of topics and forms of writing. New authors and illustrators have also emerged, tailoring characters and story plots for an increasingly wider and younger reading audience. The new audience is enthusiastically responding to graphic novels for pleasure reading and as reading materials in content areas.

Graphic Novels in Schools: Addressing Teachers’ Dilemmas

Although children and young adults are finding reading enjoyment from graphic novels, teachers may have reservations about their place in classroom reading. Teachers face the challenge of keeping students engaged while ensuring that they address the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Currently, a main area of focus in the CCSS and literacy is text complexity. Although graphic novels engage readers in text and visual art reading, there may be puzzlement about the text complexity level and educational value of this genre.

In this article, we discuss the value of graphic novel reading, its rising popularity as a Children’s Choices award favorite, and suggest three strategies with a graphic novel twist to help teachers introduce great graphic novels to their students and still meet the CCSS. Two of the strategies are already familiar to teachers; however, we show how to include the visual literacy element in the strategy. Each strategy—double-entry journal, ACCT (i.e., affective, composition, critical thinking), and cubing—may be used to incorporate visual literacy comprehension elements into lessons that utilize graphic novels.

Teachers’ Comments About Graphic Novels

• “I never heard of graphic novels before. I need to look at them more closely.”
• “I didn’t think of using comics or graphic novels in the classroom. It’s different reading.”
• “I don’t like to read comics. I didn’t think about letting my students read them.”
• “I’m afraid my students won’t read the pictures but just read the text because it’s shorter.”

*Note.* From a professional development session about graphica.
Valuable Visual Literacy
The Children's Choices award is a joint committee effort between the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council. Each year, five regions receive newly published children's literature for children to read and then vote for their favorites. Different schools participate in voting every year, with over 12,500 children in kindergarten to sixth grade producing votes for their top picks from 700 new titles. Recently, a new genre trend has emerged, with a steady increase in Children's Choices award-winning votes for graphic novels from grades 3–6.

Since 2010, graphic novels have regularly placed in the top 100 of the Children's Choices for grades K–6. For example, books from the Babymouse series by Jennifer Holm and Matthew Holm consistently made the Children's Choices top list for grades 3 and 4. Babymouse Burns Rubber won a spot in 2011, and Babymouse: Mad Scientist, which introduced young readers to a new character (Squish, Super Amoeba), was a favorite in 2012. Other child favorites have been the story of Hakata Soy in Zero Gravity by Dave Roman; Zita the Spacegirl by Ben Hatke; Sharon Emerson's Zebrafish, which raised awareness of cancer among young readers; and Cardboard, Ghostopolis, and Bad Island by Doug TenNapel.

In schools, today's learners are discovering great story plots and characters in a variety of graphic novels, following story lines from mangas to anime, laughing at mishap antics to battling super villains in comic book series. The text in these stories is supported by rich illustrations that can aid comprehension and add additional meaning to the narrative. Illustrations in graphic novels range from stick figures, such as those found in Stickman Odyssey: An Epic Doodle by Christopher Ford, to vivid colorful panels and elaborate fonts in works such as Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders by Mike Townsend. Gradients of black and white in the panels can also artistically portray meaning and add to the text, as in Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity by Dave Roman.

With vivid illustrations, endearing characters, and strong plotlines, graphic novels appeal to a variety of readers. The trend in the Children's Choices awards suggests that children are increasingly reading graphic novels. The visual literacy component enriches children's reading experiences and heightens comprehension with detailed visualizations. The combination of text and illustrations transports readers into the heart of the story (Christensen, 2006), motivates them to read more books (McPherson, 2006), excites children about the curricular content, and encourages reading at a deeper level (Brozo &
Although Lexile levels are important, when it comes to graphic novels, they are not the complete story. There is more to reading visual literacy than the printed text. For example, the Lexile level of a graphic novel could be below the CCSS grade bandwidth, but the visual content could be grade-level appropriate. To sort this out, teachers can start with CCSS standards that address Lexile levels and

The CCSS recommend Lexile levels for each grade. One source for searching Lexile levels can be found at www.lexile.com. This website categorizes Lexiles by grade levels and genres. A new iPhone and iPad app called Level It Books (levelitbooks.com) can also help educators find the Lexile levels for graphic literature. Teachers can download the app, set up a free account, and build and organize electronic classroom libraries. Once the app is downloaded, teachers can use an iPhone or iPad to scan a book’s barcode to find its Lexile level. Alternatively, teachers using the app can manually search for a book’s ISBN or title to find the Lexile level.

Although Lexile levels are important, when it comes to graphic novels, they are not the complete story. There is more to reading visual literacy than the printed text. For example, the Lexile level of a graphic novel could be below the CCSS grade bandwidth, but the visual content could be grade-level appropriate. To sort this out, teachers can start with CCSS standards that address Lexile levels and

The International Reading Association (2012) addresses graphic novels in its guidelines for implementation of the CCSS English Language Arts Standards. According to these guidelines, graphic novels offer teachers an opportunity to include an “itinerary of rich and varied narrative and informational texts” (p. 1), as well as scaffolding writing, comprehension, and vocabulary learning.

### Finding Lexile Levels

Grades 3 and 4
- Babymouse Burns Rubber by Jennifer and Matthew Holm (2010) = GN370L
- Babymouse: Mad Scientist by Jennifer and Matthew Holm (2011) = GN440L
- Squish, Super Amoeba by Jennifer and Matthew Holm (2012) = GN230L

Grades 5 and 6
- Cardboard by Doug TenNapel (2012) = GN300L
- Ghostopolis by Doug TenNapel (2010) = GN300L
- Stickman Odyssey: An Epic Doodle by Christopher Ford (2011) = GN370L
- Zebrafish by Sharon Emerson (2010) = GN230L
- Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity by Dave Roman (2011) = GN700L
- Zita the Spacegirl by Ben Hatke (2010) = GN310L

Note: GN = graphic novel, L = Lexile.
then delve into the visual art in the panels to determine how it can help students draw additional meaning from the story. Students can engage in activities related to the visual art that call on skills from higher level CCSS standards. Following are three strategies that may help teachers get the most out of incorporating graphic novels while addressing a variety of CCSS standards.

**Double-Entry Journal**

A double-entry journal helps students organize thoughts about passages read as well as make connections to text, self, world, or other multimedia. The purpose of the dialogic reflection is to allow affective responses to literature while also helping students have deeper reading comprehension (Berthoff, 1978). In a typical double-entry journal, a student chooses a meaningful passage or dialogue and writes it on one side of the page. On the other side, the student writes a reaction to the passage. For a graphic novel, though, it is important to add the opportunity to write a description depicting the scene in a panel. Painting a picture of the visual colors and text in the illustration encourages students to use active, vivid words and focus on word choice in their writing. For example, *Babymouse: Mad Scientist* provides an opportunity for students to infer and make connections between Babymouse's dreams in pink and her actions in reality. For a double-entry journal with *Babymouse*, grade 4 teachers may wish to focus on the following Writing Standards:

- **Standard 2d:** “Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 20)
- **Standard 9a:** “Apply grade 4 Reading standards to literature (e.g., ‘Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text [e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions].’)” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a, 2010a, p. 21)

A double-entry journal printout and teaching suggestions can be found on ReadWriteThink’s website at [www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/double-entry-journal-30660.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/double-entry-journal-30660.html). A sample entry for *Babymouse: Mad Scientist* is provided in Figure 1.

**ACCT and Visual Comprehension**

One way to understand visual literacy is through an analysis of the affective, compositional, and critical thinking aspects of the panels in the novels. Callow (2008) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discussed the importance of the visual aspects and the metalanguage of composition needed to describe images in visual literacy. Callow provided a framework to assess students' visual literacy by looking at various parts of the affective, compositional, and critical aspects of the illustrations. She also provided questions for assessing student understanding. However, before assessing, teachers need to teach students how to read and have deeper visual literacy. Drawing on the work of Callow, Kress and van Leeuwen, and Carter (2007), the authors incorporated the following three-step process to be used with students when reading

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visual literacy for affective, composition, and critical thinking:

1. **Affective**: When working with visual literacy, a reader interprets the affective aspects of the pictures. There is an internal question posed: How am I feeling as I read the pictures?

2. **Composition**: The images, created and spatially organized, are a vital part of the story. A closer inspection of the art reveals the pictures’ compositional aspects. Composition, image relationships, organization, layout, and color influence the meanings of the visual text. The font size, shape, and style of the text convey meaning. Teach students this metalanguage (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to describe the composition.

3. **Critical thinking**: Finally, the reader brings his or her experiences, sociocultural background, and knowledge (Carter, 2007) to critically think about and interpret the meaning of the visual elements.

Always start with affective, then move to the composition of the images, and finish with the critical thinking. For the activity, give students a trifold paper with these headings: Affective, Composition, and Critical Thinking. For the affective, the student reads, pauses, reflects, and writes about his or her personal response to the reading. The student then completes the composition part of the strategy after analyzing the images, such as character position, color, actions, and facial gestures. After reading the text and illustrations in the panels to complete the first two steps, the student completes the critical thinking analysis and explains the full meaning that he or she gained, informed by personal knowledge and experiences.

An example of using ACCT to “read” visual literacy is given in Figure 2 in reference to Chapter 1 of *Zita the Spacegirl* by Ben Hatke, one of the popular graphic novels from Children’s Choices. This text has a 310 Lexile level for a graphic novel, which according to the CCSS grade bandwidth is below grade 2 for text complexity. However, the graphic novel is content appropriate for grades 5 and 6 and can also be used to address higher level CCSS standards. The reading and visual comprehension focus, for instance, may be paired with the following Reading Standards for Literature for grade 5:

- **Standard 5**: “Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.”
- **Standard 7**: “Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the

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**Figure 2. ACCT Example for Zita the Spacegirl**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Compositional</th>
<th>Critical Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The images make me laugh.</td>
<td>- When Zita and Joseph are playing, the scene is bright and sunny.</td>
<td>- Friends usually play jokes on each other, but it’s in good fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I feel annoyed at Zita and think she likes to play jokes or cause trouble.</td>
<td>- They come to a big, dark hole in the ground.</td>
<td>- A big hole in the ground with an object that caused the hole, probably comes from outer space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The boy and girl seem like friends.</td>
<td>- Zita is small compared with the big, dark hole, but she is taller than Joseph.</td>
<td>- Usually in my other books, something bad happens or there is a type of super power that comes from the space object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The scenes make me feel curious.</td>
<td>- Zita’s expression makes her look ornery, and she acts bossy when she sits on top of Joseph.</td>
<td>- Sometimes a person who is more daring doesn’t listen to advice and bad things happen, just like it did when Zita pushed the button.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I feel something bad is about to happen.</td>
<td>- Joseph shows he is more afraid and cautious. He is smaller than Zita.</td>
<td>- Zita is bossy, and sometimes bossy people get into trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Joseph shows he is more afraid and cautious. He is smaller than Zita.</td>
<td>- The sunny day is replaced by darker colors in the background when Zita is alone.</td>
<td>- Real friends always help each other, so that is why Zita goes to find Joseph.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The sunny day is replaced by darker colors in the background when Zita is alone.</td>
<td>- The button is red, meaning danger! Stop! The button looks bigger right when it’s pushed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ACCT helps students focus on all the literacy in the novel, not just the printed text. Students learn how to read the metalanguage of artistic compositions that add meaning and depth to the printed text. To learn more about what happens to Zita, visit zitaspacegirl.com, which takes the reader on a digital picture walk of the novel.

**Cubing**

Another way to address graphic novel reading is through the cubing strategy (Cowan & Cowan, 1980), which is used for both comprehension and prewriting. Each side of the cube corresponds to one of the cubing steps, and students answer a question for each side. For example, in step 1, students write their description of color choices and shades on one side of the cube. Then, students move on to step 2 and write a response about the characters on another side of the cube. They continue until all six steps and all six sides of the cube are completed. Rather than using a traditional paper-and-pencil method for writing, students may also type their answers on the blank cube sides, print the completed form, and then fold the sides together. There are several blank cubing reproducibles available online. With modifications for visual literacy, the cubing strategy is appropriate for helping students delve deeper into visual comprehension. When applying the cubing strategy to graphic novels, ask students to do the following (Bennett & Robinson, 2009):

1. Describe the color choices (or shades) inside the panels used by the author.
2. Describe the characters and how they are presented (e.g., facial animations, dress, expressions).

3. Describe the text and text shape used to convey emotion (e.g., shaky, bold, italicized).
4. Analyze how the illustrations help convey the meaning in the panels.
5. Summarize the topic/theme in the selected panels.
6. Write an analysis of your reactions to the reading. Explain what evoked your reactions.

Each chapter in *Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity* tells a story about a character from his or her viewpoint. The chapters give the reader clues about character development through illustrations and text. In the example in Figure 3, the character Billy Lee is described, reflected on, and analyzed by using the cubing strategy.

The following are possible CCSS Reading Standards for Literature that grade 5 teachers might consider for this example:

- **Standard 1:** “Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.”

![Figure 3. Cubing Example for *Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity*](image-url)
and cubing—are applicable to graphic novel reading. The strategies help students think deeply about the illustrations and make connections to printed text. The strategies also encourage students' visual literacy comprehension while addressing important CCSS English Language Arts Standards. When combining these literacy strategies with reading graphic novels, students are engaging in higher order thinking and writing skills. Importantly, the application of these strategies may draw on standards from varying grade levels and require teachers to look beyond Lexile levels when determining the appropriateness of a graphic novel for their classes. The graphic novel is a vibrant and popular genre that provides teachers with an opportunity to excite young readers and draw them in to the wonderful world of literature while also meeting the CCSS.

**Conclusion**

Graphic novels are appealing and enriching for student readers. Students create understanding from the narrative text while also drawing on layers of meaning provided by the rich metalanguage of the artistic compositions within the illustrated panels. Teachers who incorporate this visual genre must not only consider keeping students engaged but also address the CCSS. In this article, we outlined how three instructional strategies—the double-entry journal, ACCT, and cubing—are applicable to graphic novel reading. The strategies help students think deeply about the illustrations and make connections to printed text. The strategies also encourage students' visual literacy comprehension while addressing important CCSS English Language Arts Standards. When combining these literacy strategies with reading graphic novels, students are engaging in higher order thinking and writing skills. Importantly, the application of these strategies may draw on standards from varying grade levels and require teachers to look beyond Lexile levels when determining the appropriateness of a graphic novel for their classes. The graphic novel is a vibrant and popular genre that provides teachers with an opportunity to excite young readers and draw them in to the wonderful world of literature while also meeting the CCSS.

**Standard 2:** “Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 12)

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**Figure 3. Cubing Example for Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. The illustrator uses gray and white and an old-fashioned black chalkboard. To make a point or tell information the background is darker like a black chalkboard. Billie’s name is against a blackboard or black chalkboard background. The class name is on a black chalkboard background. Hearts are white chalk on a blackboard.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Billy Lee had huge wavy hair and he dresses up for class. He dresses up more than the other boys around him. He shows off his hair. He winks when he is saying something he doesn’t mean. He whistles while he walks. Girls roll their eyes or stick a tongue out at him but he doesn’t notice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Words are bolded to emphasize a point or are bolded and all caps for emphasizing a point. For instance, he thinks his hair is “STRONGEST QUALITY” that speaks for “ITSELF.” Another time the words TOKENS, LOVE, FAN are bolded and capitalized, to emphasize Billy’s true feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Billy is giving an imaginary speech trying to show that he has changed from a gay who loved his hair and now thinks he will focus on love. But the speech is like a press conference. The illustrations show how Billie is insincere and thinks a lot about himself. They show what type of person he is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The panels are about Billy Lee and that he is an insincere person and a big flirt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. In a way I like Billy Lee because I think he could be a nice person. But then I don’t like him because he seems like he’s something and he’s not all that. He is trying to show he is a different person. But he isn’t very convincing. I think he wants to be noticed, is the same person, just less hair.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Literature Cited

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Sheri Tucker** is an assistant professor in the MEd and PhD reading program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She has been involved with IRA/CBC Children’s Choices for four years as a team leader and cochair. Her research focuses are teaching with technology and critical literacy.

**Philip Tucker** is an associate professor in the Department of Exceptionality Programs at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania. He has been a team leader in IRA/CBC Children’s Choices for the past four years. His research focus is assistive technology and literacy.

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