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Reinventing the Composition Classroom, or
How Making Comics Can Clarify the Composing Process

By Jeraldine Kraver, University of Northern Colorado

It is impossible, it seems, to open a newspaper or drive past a multiplex and not recognize the influence on contemporary culture of comics or their expanded cousin, the graphic novel. The two modes are all but redefining what and how we read and see. And, at times, they are even redefining how we teach. Or they should. After all, many students know comics the way we would like them to know more “traditional” literature. They can detail the back-story to every Marvel Comics superhero. They understand the chemistry of kryptonite in all its many colors, the dark [k]night of the soul that burdens Batman, and the Teutonic paganism of Thor. They inhabit the fictional world of El-Hazard in the same way that their teachers, as adolescents, walked the streets of Victorian London with David Copperfield or traveled the road to Canterbury with the unforgettable Wife of Bath. However, ask students in the writing classroom about their comics reading, and they become uncharacteristically sheepish. The reason is not hard to discern. Stephan Cary, in his introduction to Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom (2004), recalls, "Comic book reading was one of the great school taboos, along with smoking, fighting, and swearing [. . .]" (2). This anti-comics bias, though, is waning. Increasingly, educators are acknowledging the influence of comics and graphic novels on the culture of students at all grade and ability levels. For instance, one could argue that Art Spiegelman's Maus has been embraced as part of the secondary English Language Arts (ELA) canon, and works like Marjane Satrapi's award-winning Persepolis and Keiji Nakazawa's Barefoot Gen are surfacing in history and social studies classrooms. Education journals and web sites tout the "educational potential of comics and graphic novels," noting their ability to "help with building complex reading skills."¹ The IRA's Read-Write-Think site includes lessons on using Persepolis as part of a WebQuest on Iran while The Reading Teacher explores using comics to "deepen students understanding of content using visual literacy skills" (McVicker 85). The pages of English Journal have featured essays addressing how to use graphic novels in urban schools or to introduce multiple literacies in secondary classrooms (Frey and Fisher, 2004 and Schwarz, 2006).

In addition, Cary's Going Graphic provides dozens of lesson ideas for putting comics to work in the multilingual classroom while James Bucky Carter's Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel (2007) collects essays by teachers who pair "traditional" texts with graphic counterparts (e.g., Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter with Katherine Arnoldi’s The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom or Dickens' Oliver Twist with Will Eisner's Fagin the Jew). This very journal, SANE, is only further evidence for the presence of graphic novels in the classroom canon. For all this interest, though, the effect is somewhat piecemeal, educators having not yet fully recognized the potential impact of the mode on teaching and learning--impact, in the way of meteors hurtling towards earth and diverted

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miraculously by Superman. The word suggests a violent collision, a forceful coincidence, a profound and altering effect perfectly congenial to the comics genre.

The effects of capitalizing on comics in the classroom are multiple. Literacy experts have come to acknowledge what comics readers and creators have understood all along: that the literacy skills required to read comics and graphic novels are often as sophisticated as those employed in reading traditional school-based texts. Thus, textbooks that incorporate excerpts from graphic novels (as opposed to the occasional cartoon panel for visual interest or rhetorical study) appear in the catalogs of every major academic publisher. This new affinity for incorporating students' out-of-school literacy practices is a central trend in literary learning. Indeed, comics are but one of the multiple modes identified for classroom use and explored by educators such as Cynthia and Richard Selfe, Gail Hawisher, Suzanne M. Miller, and Sara Kadjer.

One of the earliest, most compelling, and allied approaches to students' out-of-school literacies is James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Literacy and Learning* (2003). Gee, assessing the literacies used playing video games, contends that we must expand the conception of literacy beyond reading and writing to include the kind of visual literacy that prepares students to "read" the "images, symbols, graphs, diagrams, [and] artifacts [...]" populating modern mass communication (13). As he immersed himself in video games, Gee realized that, in "multimodal" texts, words and images can communicate different things, and "the combination of the two modes communicates things neither of the modes does separately" (14). Recognizing that new literacies require new skill sets, Gee looks to change the way we think about and teach what he calls "semiotic domains," defined as "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (18). When we move to this expanded notion of what it means to be literate, we think beyond mere reading and writing: individuals can be literate in the traditional modalities, they can be literate in the "new" modalities, or they can be literate in all or in part of any number of modalities.

In this discussion, I propose that fully appreciating the creative process behind the comics mode provides an engaging model for developing students' academic literacy, especially in the crucial area of composition. Gee concludes, "people are (or are not) literate (partially or fully) in a domain if they can recognize (the equivalent of 'reading') and/or produce (the equivalent of 'writing') meanings in the domain" (18). Just as Gee identifies video games as a semiotic domain, I find the same to be true with comics. And, just as Gee identifies principles of learning involved with "good" video games (in fact, he has 36 of them), I shall explore similar ideas. Critiqued from whatever perspective or in whatever terms, effective communication is effective communication. In Classical terms, the role and responsibilities of the "rhetor" are the same regardless of whether that rhetor is a composer of written or spoken words, hand-drawn or photographic images, notes on a piano, or paint on a canvas. Or, in more contemporary terms, the visual configuration of James Kinneavy's Rhetorical Triangle is equally applicable. At the same time, as one charged with training teachers of English Language Arts and composition and as a writing teacher myself, I recognize that, despite in-roads made by multimodality in secondary and post-secondary classrooms, we continue to teach (and test) students' abilities to
communicate in the most traditional of genres: the essay. One need only look to the Common Core State Standards to confirm that, although there is attention paid to 21st-century skills, both teachers and students are assessed "monomodally." Consequently, when I use comics or other non-traditional modes in the classroom, it is with an emphasis not to composing comics but to composing in any mode, especially those that are most frequently encountered and required in the post-secondary classroom.

Part One: The Creative Process of the Comic Product

To understand the full potential of the comics mode, we need to understand how the mode itself involves what comics artist and theorist Scott McCloud calls "making" comics. Rather than scattershot approaches used to incorporate comics into discrete classroom lessons, we can look to a more systematic method, one that begins from the theories of making comics as a model for developing students' academic literacy. The resulting similarities and differences cast an illuminating light in two ways. First, comics theory reveals to students that comic artists do, in fact, work very, very hard at the process of creating the comics that their readers devour whole. What seems like playful diversion requires a great deal of artfulness. In the same way, students find that they must consider multiple questions and work through multiple processes (and drafts) in their school-based writing. As students come to understand the parallel between the processes of comics and their own writing, their engagement in both directions matures, and they become both more analytical (as well as selective) in their reading. Second, comics theory reveals the kinds of complex skills underlying any literacy practice: skills in decoding, inferencing, and recognizing conceptual relationships as well as attending to syntax, semantics, and word properties. Once students identify in themselves the repertoire of skills required to engage with the X-Men or Sin City or The System, teachers can exploit such out-of-school literacy practices in a variety of school-based learning tasks.

Beyond convincing our students about how form underlies function or tapping transferable literacy skills, we as teachers must embrace a rare moment in the classroom: students are, typically, the "experts," their range of comics reference far beyond the background of most teachers. Sharing classroom space and taking seriously students' non-school-based literacy practices creates a classroom where the learners have a voice in text selection and assignment design. The result is an increase in both their self-efficacy and motivation, two principles crucial to successful literacy-learning.1 Let me make clear: valuing and incorporating adolescents' extracurricular literacy practices does not eliminate the need for preparing students to understand how literacy operates within academic disciplines or workplace settings, nor does self-selection of texts eliminate the need to develop skills required to read and comprehend school-based or work-related texts. Rather, incorporating comics into literacy instruction confirms to students that, in asking them to read school-based texts, we are drawing on the same skills they practice when reading comics or graphic novels. In this way, we intrigue them, we motivate them, and we validate their out-of-school literacy practices. Ultimately, the point is that, when we challenge students to apply the skills they have honed in one "semiotic domain" to another, we provide an opportunity for them to succeed.

Part Two: Composing Comic and the Composition Process
During the last decade or so, a wide variety of artists, historians, cultural critics, and pedagogues has propelled comics and graphic novels into the aerie space of texts associated with canonical prose, poetry, drama, and film. The resulting discussions have employed the language of literary and rhetorical theory, and the comics and graphic novels are often included in the core of curricular "heavy hitters" (a status that does not necessarily please all comics artists). Probably the most famous among comics theorists are Eisner, who began his work in the 1940s, and McCloud. Eisner, one may say, started the discussion of comics composition with two texts based on his courses at New York's School for Visual Arts--Comics and Sequential Art (1985) and Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative (1996)--and McCloud, the acknowledged "theorist of comics," codified it. McCloud's first study, Understanding Comics (1993), explores the history of the mode, offering basic definitions and critical vocabulary. His follow-up, Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form (2000), examines the growth, success, and potential of comics as a mode and an industry. However, it is McCloud's Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels (2006) that has quickly emerged as the formative text for comics theory. As with all his books, McCloud shows and tells by presenting his discussion about comics as comics. With the "cartoon" McCloud as teacher and guide, the book tackles in detail the mechanisms behind creating comics, offering an accessible and alluring connection to the invention processes at work in school-based writing. Chapter One, in particular, will be important to the following discussion.

Before even beginning to connect making comics with "making" an academic essay, I try to convince students that all writing is at some level a matter of storytelling--that even the most "dry" academic argument narrates a sequence of data into what often is called "intellectual drama." And, we agree that two familiar modes--although not the only modes--for telling stories are words and images. To make this point and prepare students for our work with comics, I select a passage from a traditional history textbook that may be coupled with one of Larry Gornick's cartoon histories or the graphic version of Howard Zinn's classic A People's History of the United States. As a class, we take these excerpts side-by-side in exploring how the historical moment unfolds in the narratives--that is, how the data, be they words or images or both, are sequenced in order to convey an idea. Here is the moment when we move to Eisner's notion of comics as sequential art, and I introduce students to selections from Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative. Eisner's definition, "A story is the narration of a sequence of events deliberately arranged for telling [. . .] kind of like reporting an event" (9), resonates with what the students have heard about writing throughout their academic lives. They recognize that, although both images and words are available for meaning-making, the combination of the two modes can transcend either. Our next activity divides the class, and half the students write a prose narrative of the graphic version in the style of a traditional history textbook while the other half renders the history textbook in a comics form. These activities demonstrate that comics are as viable for meaning-making as writing. Although I caution students that most teachers do not permit such multimodality, the point, again, is that I get students thinking about the core skills to any composition process.

Part Three: Artfulness and the Art of Composition
Given the overlaps of conventions and expectations between comics and conventional school writing, I next turn to how an artist's or writer's goals are achieved through particular choices such as examples that develop their topics, words used to express those examples, and the presentation of the whole. Subsumed in these compositional choices are issues of format, style, and tone. Thus, although our class is built on comics and our textbook is about comics theory, we do not neglect topics familiar to the more traditional composition classroom. Classical rhetoric gets due treatment when we review in our context the canons of rhetoric, especially invention, disposition, and style. Kinneavy’s Rhetorical Triangle and Stephen Toulmin’s Model of Argumentation follow, especially in terms of audience, voice, and organization. However, it is McCloud’s Making Comics that best allows the writing teacher neatly to bridge the crafts of comics and composition.

In the first chapter of Making Comics ("Writing with Pictures"), McCloud asserts that making comics requires a "constant stream of CHOICES." He then distributes such choices into "FIVE BASIC TYPES" (9) that inform the creation of any comic: moment, frame, image, word, and flow. These choices, he explains, are requisite for communicating through comics with clarity, and clarity, he continues, "means making comprehension your ultimate goal" (37). As McCloud walks us through these choices, the alignment with the choices made during academic writing emerges for students. Yet, rather than simply explaining to students this connection, I, as the flesh-and-blood teacher to the pen-and-ink McCloud, gently prod them to discover how comics and writing overlap. It is when I subsequently ask students to write about what they have learned that the alignment reveals itself, and the discussion of the writing process takes an exciting turn.

CHOICE ONE: Every Story Has a Thesis; Every Essay has a "Moment"

Starting with the choices that McCloud sees as crucial to the "ultimate goal" (37) of comprehension, "moment" refers to the event the artist wants to depict, the story being told. In thinking about moment, artists must decide what to include and what to leave out in order to tell the story with "clarity" and in a "compelling" manner (10). To illustrate, McCloud offers a comic strip of eight panels that develops a straightforward story about a man who finds a key.
The sequence shows the following panels: (1) a man walking, (2) the man looking down, (3) the man bending to retrieve something, (4) the man looking closely at the key he has picked up, (5) the man coming to a door, (6) the man inserting the key, (7) a click as the door unlocks, and (8) a lion jumping out. The "artwork" relies on stark lines, and the man is little more than a stick figure. Nonetheless, the story is obvious. The only words are "click" in Panel Seven to indicate that the door unlocks and "ROAR," in the final panel, when the lion emerges. There is also a question mark above the man's head in Panel Two, when he looks to the ground and sees some object, and an exclamation point when he encounters an apparently locked door in Panel Five. The strip is simple, yet, even given that quality, the eight panels offer a narrative that provokes much discussion in the classroom.

In his comic strip, McCloud takes events and puts them in sequence— that is, he breaks the moment into what he calls "chunks," each of which gets a panel. Each panel becomes a moment in itself, and each advances the story: remove one panel, and the story falls apart. McCloud explains, "The moments chosen [. . .] represent the most direct, efficient route to communicating our simple plot" (12). Here, in breaking down the story into "readable chunks" as part of the comic's "planning stage" (11), is the heart of Classical invention. When the comics process is aligned with composition,6 moment becomes the writer's purpose, the point of the essay that emerges as a clearly stated thesis or controlling idea. To illustrate the rhetorical importance to these moments, I have my students read (and write) traditional prose essays that supplement our work with comics, and we use these essays to compare such traditional writing genres with the graphic narrative.7 The comparison, I have found, helps students recognize that a comic or graphic novel requires readers—not artists—to construe a thesis from the words and the pictures. The task of distinguishing "moment" in these two modes reinforces for students once again the kind of complex reading skills required of comics.

In thinking further about a composition's moment, we align the panels of McCloud's "man with a key" comic to the paragraphs in an essay. In other words, in the same way panels are used to develop the comic's moment, paragraphs develop the essay's thesis, each furthering
the controlling idea and each needing to be, as McCloud instructs, clear, compelling, and efficient. In order to emphasize this connection, I have students engage in a variety of tasks that builds on McCloud's surprisingly complex comic. First, they craft captions for each frame. Then, they replace each panel with words – that is, they craft the story of the man with the key in prose without the benefit of any images. Next, they write a "thesis" for the strip of panels, one that usually takes the form of a warning about opening unknown doors or picking up items from the street. This thesis serves as the title for their prose panels. This translation illustrates for students just how McCloud’s moment drives all the elements in his comic strip.

Once they have completed this task, students parse a traditional "comp class" essay into its moments by using a template of panels. This activity reveals to students how the prose paragraphs, distributed as a series of panels, develop the writer’s thesis in the same way McCloud’s panels developed his moment. (The computer makes this task efficient for their cutting and pasting the essay's word-moments into the template.) The title of this set of prose panels is a version of what they identify as the essay's thesis. Positioned above the panels, the title/thesis serves are the essay's central moment. Thus, in a visceral way that they have never experienced when confronted with the rather abstract term thesis, by thinking in pictures, students get it.

**CHOICE TWO: "Framing" the Shot, um... Story... um, Argument**

Once the comic artist selects a moment to illustrate, decisions about how to "frame" that moment ensue. As McCloud explains, framing involves choices about developing the story through individual panels, especially in terms of where to move in closely, and where to pull back. The resulting decisions are less about the details of the panel--that is, the objects or individuals we see in each--and more about angles, distance, and position. One may imagine the framing process with the familiar film director's gesture of creating a frame with one's hands (thumbs and index fingers in parallel L-shapes). Whereas aligning moment with thesis is fairly obvious, aligning framing with the composing process requires a bit more intellectual maneuvering. Students are inclined to see framing as filling up panels--that is, in crafting paragraphs. In response, I refer them to McCloud's description of chunks and have them complete an exercise from *Making Comics*, which involves a 16-panel grid. The first panel contains, simply enough, a standing figure. Student-artists then ask a friend (or "shoulder partner") what the character should do in the next panel. When drawing that next panel, the student-artist implements "viewing angle." McCloud explains, "If your character encounters an elephant, do you have to pull back? If he/she is clips a toenail, do you have to pull in?" (57). In addition to zoom levels, framing can involve tilting, rotating, or even changing elevation. The result, McCloud describes, is that framing shows "readers what they need to see" and creates a sense of "position and focus" (37). The implications for writing echo loudly.

In examining framing, we arrive at an inevitable and difficult question for all storytelling and argument: how much information is necessary to compel readers without lapsing into "plot summary"? Framing demands that writers position themselves in positioning their readers. In class, as we think about positioning the viewer--and, soon enough, the reader--we return to the Classical canon of disposition. And when it comes to disposing of ideas, the audience is paramount. No matter the mode, rhetors want their audience to understand and care enough
about their message simply to finish it. Surrounded as they are by vast entertainment and communication options, students immediately appreciate this seemingly simple challenge. Audience must come first.

Eisner reminds us of this central component to storytelling in his chapter "Images as Narrative Tools" from Graphic Storytelling & Visual Narrative when he explains the importance of stereotype: "Comic book art deals with recognizable reproductions of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on the reader's stored memory of experience to visualize an idea or a process quickly" (17). In order to capitalize on this memory, the artist must be familiar with his audience and recognize that "each society has its own ingrown set of accepted stereotypes" (19). In other words, artists--or writers--must know and respond to their audiences. If they do not, their audiences will not be compelled. And then they will turn the channel. Or not finish the essay. Or close the comic book.

To gauge our audience when framing, we attend to the larger moves we make as writers. In an essay, framing is the art of ordering (or "positioning") the material that is most appropriate for the needs of the audience and the purpose established by the writer. I compare framing to outlining, and one of my students inevitably responds, "Oh, so this panel is a kind of Roman numeral one." This comparison casts new light on the formal outline's sequence of Roman numerals, Arabic numbers, and upper- and lower-case letters. Suddenly, outlining seems less an arbitrary exercise and more an integrated step in an essay's craft and purpose. Building on this revelation, we almost playfully caption our own set of panels with Classically framed terminology: "Dan offers his exordium"; "Poised for verbal battle, Dan asserts his narratio"; or, "In a daring parry, Dan launches into his refutatio." For a generation defined as visual learners, this approach is quite a bit of fun, and outlining becomes a step in the creative process as opposed to a chore.

Our consideration of framing alongside outlining slides easily to an association of panels to paragraphs, and the move is indeed a useful way to understand the rhetorical principle of development. However, students must recognize that one panel may be the equivalent of multiple paragraphs. Or, multiple panels may be combined into a single paragraph. To reinforce this process of distribution, I return to McCloud's notion of chunks and suggest that those chunks can be composed of one or more panels in a cartoon or paragraphs in an essay. So, as student writers move to drafting and discover which chunks will require further development, they insert additional paragraphs. McCloud well explains this point in using his eight-panel strip of the man with the key.

For instance, in Panel Three (the man bending to retrieve something), illustrating that the man bends slowly might require additional panels to indicate the speed of the man's motion. The effect could be interesting, but at issue is whether the extra panels are necessary to the story. Does it matter how slowly or quickly the man bends? In this instance, it does not, so the slowly bending panels are superfluous. However, if it were to turn out that the man with the key cannot escape the lion because he has a wrenched back, then having him bend slowly would be integral to the narration, and those panels would need to be included. By thinking about framing (or development) in such broad strokes, writers identify both what needs further development and
what needs no development at all. Either way, important to our teaching project is that students discern the tight relationship between expressive form and intellectual function.

**CHOICE THREE: Adding Images to a Panel; Seeing the Points in a Paragraph**

Before narrowing our focus to words, we pause on McCloud's discussion about how images are at the very core of all comics. (McCloud, like any good teacher of writing, organizes his "choices" from global to local concerns.) In thinking about images, artists attend to "creating pictures to fill those frames and bring the world of [their] stories to life VISUALLY" (26). Of course, student writers must rely on something other than pictures to develop their "stories," and, although the inclination is to align image with words, McCloud's separation of the two choices is advantageous for writing teachers. In comics, words are used to develop images, the two elements working together seamlessly. In writing, the content that fills our panels/paragraphs is the evidence (what Toulmin calls "data") used to support our claims. However, before writers attend to the words they will use to articulate their supporting data, they need to specify what that data will be. Image, then, aligns with evidence that will form the substance of argument through paragraphs. And, writers do well to adhere to McCloud's advice that images must "first and foremost [. . .] communicate QUICKLY, CLEARLY and COMPELLINGLY with the reader" (26). As students discover, answering McCloud's injunction is harder than it appears.

Close readings of panels help illustrate the artfulness required of images, and I have students choose a panel from whatever graphic text we are studying for a close reading. In creating images, I remind them (and iterate McCloud), randomness is not an option. To emphasize this point, I ask students not just to describe a panel's image but to analyze its moment and framing. For instance, in our study of *Maus*, more than one student has chosen the hanging of the Jews on Modrzejewska Street.

Figs. 2 and 3. From Spiegelman's *Maus I*, Chapter Four "The Noose Tightens" (83).

The image of the legs placed in the forefront against the almost indistinguishable Jews in the background is a compelling moment in Vladek's narrative. One student, Matt, explained in his analysis the implications:
McCloud writes [in *Understanding Comics*] that the more "cartoony a face" the more general it is, so it can apply to all different people. The character becomes any of us or all of us. However, the use of animal faces in *Maus* can make it hard for the reader to connect to the characters because they don't look like us. We can see them as animals. Even if we get the allegorical intention, it is hard (for me at least) to fully enter into the narrative. But the image of the feet in this frame is universal. I have killed a lot of mice, so seeing them hanging in the previous panel didn't get to me. But the legs: I felt that. The legs look like my legs.  

Matt's response is exactly where I want students to go. In describing the framing of the panel, Matt furthered that "isolating them as the central image in the center of the panel and framing them for the reader as close-up takes ordinary shoes on ordinary feet and makes them extraordinary." This notion of "extraordinary ordinary-ness" was for Matt both the moment of panel and central to the larger moment of the entire graphic novel. A teacher's task is made easy at such times. Another student in the same class observed, in a discussion board reflection about Matt's analysis, that "seeing the whole hanging and then seeing just the feet made me think about how I use quotes [sic] in my papers. I have this huge block of something I think is important evidence like something I find in a book or article and I cite the whole thing. Sometimes, it's 8 or 9 lines long. When maybe there is just a line or two in it that has more punch and I should dump the rest of it." In response, I simply directed the discussion towards McCloud's additional advice that, in the crafting of images that portray moments, artists should "get ready to get SPECIFIC" (27). As my student has already explained to his peers, such advice is sound, too, for how writers use evidence to support claims. McCloud concludes his discussion of image with a panel that speaks to all rhetors, comic artists, and writers of academic essays alike: "Question number one: will readers GET THE MESSAGE?" Students who have had teachers jot in the margins of their papers "unclear," "fuzzy," or even "huh?" understand McCloud's question all too well.

**CHOICE FOUR: "Words" That Make Pictures**  
McCloud begins his discussion of this fourth choice by asserting, "Words can be a POWERFUL ALLY in the struggle to communicate" (30). What is especially appealing to this assertion is not the obvious point about the power of words, for we recite to students that mantra semester after semester. Rather, what appeals is McCloud's explicit acknowledgement of the "struggle" inherent to all communication practices. Recognizing this shared struggle is, again, one of my (many) goals in using comics and graphic novels because students are under a number of misconceptions about the modes, one of which is that they somehow feel that comic artists simply sit down and draw. McCloud's assertion--his entire text, for that matter--is designed to counter the myth that composition can or even should be easy.

Words are so important to comic artists that McCloud devotes an entire chapter ("The Power of Words") of *Making Comics* to the subject. Part of that power is the ability to "evoke feelings, sensations, and abstract concepts" as well as "the warmth and nuance of the human voice" (128). Although the bulk of McCloud's chapter covers how words and pictures combine to create meaning or the technique of the word bubble, there is an interesting connection to composing when McCloud addresses a challenge familiar to all writers: duplicating the "rich,
immersive experiences" created through the use of sight and sound in film and television (146). In comics, McCloud explains, words provide readers an opportunity to "listen with their eyes," and comic artists can use lettering to create vocal aspects like volume, timbre, and emphasis (146). Our students, on the other hand, have only Times New Roman 12-point font on 8 1/2 x 11" sheets of white paper.

Words, obviously, have a big job, and that job ranges from the subtly connotative to the rigorously denotative. Compounding the problem is that students are often under the misconception that feelings, sensations, or warmth are somehow antithetical to the kind of writing they do for the composition classroom or in the formal assignments they encounter across the curriculum. McCloud's discussion reminds students that, although the role played by words in comics and graphic novels is vastly different from their primacy in the written essay, as writers they do have a voice, they can assume a tone, and they must create a persona through their composing choices. McCloud's notions prepare students to measure their words when they assert their ideas and engage their audience, and his discussion segues neatly to our overview of how the logos of words are pivotal to a writer's ethos when eliciting pathos from an intended audience.

Complementary to McCloud's emphasis on the overall effect of words is how Eisner, in Graphic Storytelling & Visual Narrative, theorizes about the "grammar" of the comic panel, in particular his discussion of symbols and their function as, in effect, modifiers. Eisner explains, "There are some objects which have instant significance in graphic storytelling," and comic artists employ these objects as "modifying adjectives or adverbs [. . .]."

![Fig. 4. Eisner’s collection of “good” and “bad” objects (21).](image)

As Eisner indicates, the nature of a weapon, here a gun or a knife, depends on how it is rendered by the artist. A six-shooter carried by a sheriff suggests a good gun used to serve the community against horse thieves and train robbers. An AK47, on the other hand, might suggest a "freedom fighter" or a terrorist far less interested in protecting and serving. A pocket knife is handy and
helpful at the campsite while a switchblade is never for the good. As well, Eisner depicts that how an item is presented "in action" functions as a kind of adverb:

Thus, a breadknife clutched in a raised fist suggests a weapon, but, on a breakfast tray, it is cutlery. The "tools" in the graphic novelist's arsenal are limitless: ghostly parallel lines suggest speed or movement, a few well-placed lines on a face can capture the most complicated of emotions, and, as we have seen already, adding or deleting panels controls the pace of the narrative. What students recognize is that, because they do not have the power of the image to indicate good or evil objects, they must rely on words as modifiers, and their choices will determine what readers "see" while they read.

To illustrate the challenge of capturing in words all that appears in a single image, students try their hand in an activity I call "1000 Words." First, students once again convert the panels of a comic to prose narrative. Rather than history examples, though, we use the panels of a graphic novel they are reading in class. Although students are not surprised that complicated panels can take what seems like a thousand words to describe all that is depicted, they are surprised to discover that seemingly simple panels often require quite a few words as well. However, converting the panels to prose is not the end of the assignment. Efficiency and effectiveness in diction are very much at issue when I then ask students to revise their narratives and eliminate twenty percent of the words (a task made easy by their word processing program's word count feature).

As a result of working with graphic texts, students realize that, in their own assigned writing, they must attend to how they can use best the language tools at their disposal to create the kind of stylistic effects with words that comic artists can create with their "drawing" tools. Sentence length, variety, and complexity: each decision can convey a sense of pacing--of
deliberation or of enthusiasm. Alert to these choices, students practice moving their readers through essays, looking, for instance, to verbs that best conjure images of action or movement and modifiers that enable readers to visualize the ideas being expressed. It is useful at this juncture to remind students that visualizing is a significant component of the learning-to-read process. As Adrienne Gear explains, beginning readers use words to create pictures in their minds. These mental images enhance comprehension, especially when beginning readers move from picture books to chapter books. Although more adept readers tend to rely less on the ability to visualize, writers do well to incorporate "picture words" – or modifiers – given the increasingly visual nature of contemporary readers.

**CHOICE FIVE: Organizing the Flow for the Reader's Understanding**

McCloud's final choice addresses guiding a reader's very experience. For comic artists, the resulting "flow" is all about both the arrangement of panels on the page and the elements within each panel. In effect, flow involves "using moment, frame, image and word in tandem" (37). McCloud offers, "Choice of flow is partially about clearing your readers of obstacles to a smooth reading experience" (34). Thus, what the comic artist provides to the reader must be transparent, and it must attend to the reader's expectations in terms of content, genre, and mode. Flow, as McCloud instructs, means "being on the lookout for any part of the creative process that can HELP--or HINDER--that flow" (32). Comic artists, of course, have far more choice in terms of flow than writers. Although they must attend to such matters as how readers' eyes move across a page or the placement of captions and word balloons, they can vary the shape of panels and their arrangement. And, there is room for "experimentation," although McCloud warns that if "FOURTH WALL breaks" or "BORDERLESS images" distract or confuse readers, they are no friend of the artist. Regardless of their fewer options, student writers must likewise ensure that there is a clear sense of movement through their paragraphs. In the process, they learn to identify any constraints to the flow of their essays and to locate sites for experimentation and variation.

For students negotiating their way through the writing process, the demands of flow come later in the composition process. Students examine flow in toto, beginning with the overall development of their argument and moving to the organization of individual paragraphs. Thus, they might assess whether the inductive approach they selected best serves their purpose and audience or whether they should revise to a deductive model. Perhaps the "side-by-side" pattern they selected for their comparison is less successful than they originally thought, and reorganizing to "one side at a time" is a better option. In revising at the paragraph level, students confirm that they have included all the elements that compose a well-developed paragraph: is there a topic sentence that makes a claim, evidence that is compelling, a discussion of that evidence, and a concluding sentence that signals a transition to the reader?

Rather than discouraging experimentation with structure, I encourage students to engage in the writing equivalent, perhaps using a rhetorical question as a topic sentence in order to break the "fourth wall" or maybe restructuring a paragraph to begin with the warrant or to draw the reader's eye to a piece of data rather than a claim. This kind of global revision also affords an opportunity to revise local issues, for any modifications of organization or structure will
necessarily require students to look again at their individual sentences and the words that compose them.

When we are under the spell of reading a graphic novel, it is easy to overlook the art and significance of a choice as seemingly mundane as flow. Two related activities can remind students of this important component of comics composition. The first part of the activity involves taking a page of a graphic novel students have not read, copying it, and cutting apart the panels. Students are asked to reassemble the panels as they think they appeared in the original and explain their [re]assembly. Next, groups are given a single panel from a novel they have read and asked to discuss the flow of the individual panel and its place in the flow of panels that precede and follow. For example, in Persepolis, a single panel offers a brief history of Iran.

![Fig. 6. Satrapi’s panel illustrating the history of Iran (11).](image)

Here, not only the moment of the panel, but the positioning of the images within it suggests the passage of time. Activities like these illustrate how flow is captured by the creators of graphic texts in multiple ways in both the entirety of a page, in the individual panel, as well as in the images within the panel. Such should be the movement of the reader through a traditional essay when each paragraph flows within itself and as part of the larger sequence.

To bridge my Persepolis activities with prose writings, I give students, working in small groups, paragraphs of a standard "comp class" essay or magazine article--any work of non-fiction prose—that have been cut up into sentences and ask them to assemble the pieces into what they imagine was the original order. This activity thus focuses on the claim, data, warrant
model I espouse to student writers. Next, I distribute cut-up whole paragraphs from the same essay and ask students to place them in "proper" order. As a class, we discuss this global and local activity, considering how both paragraphs and essays flow. The next activity asks students, working with their original paragraph that is now reassembled to reflect the paragraph as it appeared in the essay, to revise that paragraph by reordering the elements in any way they choose. This task might require some additional words or phrases, and it might require clarifying what precedes and follows their particular paragraph. What this portion of the activity reveals to students are the kinds of choices about flow that they often ignore or believe they do not have. (I have done this activity using students' own essays as well, by selecting a paragraph from each student's own work, giving them the cut-up sentences, and having them reassemble and revise their own work in new ways.) As students often do when given permission to "experiment," we must also remind them of McCloud's constant attention to clarity, the mode of telling never impinging on the narrative. "[S]plit-second confusion," McCloud's words resonate with just about writing teachers, "yank readers out of the world of the story" (33), and this challenge can be as delicate to our teaching as it is to our composing practice, no matter the mode.

Everything is a Story

The traditional writing classroom reads prose essays, discusses those essays, and then reads about crafting prose essays. By reading and reading about comics and graphic novels, I want my students to realize that all writing--indeed, all communication--is at some level narrative, and, as Eisner emphasizes, all narrative is based in story. Inexplicably, call an assignment "writing a story" rather than "writing an argumentative essay," and the task is perceived as less daunting. The lessons McCloud teaches and on which I build are designed to make students excellent narrators of engaging argumentative stories. Crucial is this fact: first and foremost is the story, whether it is Kal-El being rocketed to earth before the destruction of Krypton, the role of the cotton gin in the history of the Civil War, the function of conceits in metaphysical poetry, or the process of germination after pollination. Student writers, like the artists they admire, are storytellers themselves. Time and again, we preach to students that the best way to become a good writer is to read good writing. In asking students to study McCloud's choices and apply them to the comics and graphic novels they so enjoy, we foster critical readers. When we align the process of making comics with the composing process, we create more critical writers. And, in employing comics and graphic novels in the writing classroom, we acknowledge further their proper place across the academic disciplines. The resulting impact--yes, impact--will alter how we teach and how students learn.

1 *The Council Chronicle*, "Using Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom" (September 2005).
2 For example, Norton's *Picturing Texts* (Lester Faigley, Diana George, Anna Palchik, and Cynthia Selfe), Longman's *Beyond Words* (John Ruszkiewicz, Danial Anderson, and Christy Friend), and Pearson's *Envision in Depth* (Christine L. Alfano and Alyssa J. O'Brien)
3 See, again, the work of Moje and Alvermann.
4 As expected in a book by a comics artist, McCloud not only uses the comics format but such textual features as bold facing, italics, etc. When possible, I try to recreate that effect here.
In this method for teaching writing, the comics or graphic novels selected for instruction are inconsequential. The approach can be applied to any text, not only those selected by the instructor but as well those suggested by the students. In my classes, I have used all or part of such texts as Spiegelman's *Maus*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Yang's *American Born Chinese*, and Eisner's *Contract with God*--as well as a variety of serialized titles from DC and Marvel Comics. I have also used selections from Joe Sacco's graphic journalism, including *Palestine*, Larry Gonick's cartoon histories, and the collection *9-11 Artists Respond*. The point is that any comic or graphic novel works.

To distinguish making comics from writing an academic essay, I shall use the terms "comics process" and "composing process," although I am well aware that comics artists do, of course, compose.

For example, I have used *Persepolis* as our graphic novel and incorporated essays on Iran, Islam, Persian customs or culture as models of school-based or academic prose.

In discussing moment, McCloud goes into detail regarding transitions between panels by identifying six varieties, which can align to types of paragraphs. However, this kind of detail transcends this introduction to the notion of using comics in the composing process.

It is important to recall that I am teaching academic writing and not creative writing, where additional detail is part of craftsmanship. That said, McCloud, a creative person of the first order, continually advocates concision and clarity in comics.

The responses I share here are from my Methods of Teaching Composition, a course for teacher candidates in their junior or senior years. However, I complete the same activities with first-year students in a traditional "freshman comp" course. Because this latter group is less familiar with composition and rhetoric, I am required to be a bit more explicit in connecting the two processes.

For this activity, I find on-line essays or articles that I can paste into a word file. Then, with all formatting "neutralized," I cut up the paragraphs (and any photographs, illustration, or charts) to distribute to students.

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**Works Consulted and Cited**


Gear, Adrienne. *Reading Power: Teaching Students to Think While They Read*. Markham, ON Canada: Pembroke Publishers, 2006.


