

Graphic Options: A Comparison of Stories and Their Graphic Novel Counterparts

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Abstract

Literacy experts herald the educational benefits of using graphic novels across the curriculum and with different types of students. This study involved an analysis of the graphic novel format compared to the traditional text format for a variety of stories. A comparison of five books and their graphic novel counterparts provided insight into significant likenesses and differences among literary elements, which have implications for classroom teachers. Literacy elements of focus included plot, theme, setting, character development, and conflict found in the two formats. Findings revealed differences between the two formats that need to be addressed in the classroom to enhance students' understanding of graphic novels.

Keywords: *graphic novels, multimodal, literary elements*

Introduction

Graphic novels (GNs) are a phenomenon of modern literature. Avid fans span across genders, age levels, and cultures. Both GNs and comic books have been popular reading formats as evidenced in the sales, which have steadily risen and culminated to \$1.085 billion in 2016 (Miller, 2017). This number shows a \$55 million increase from 2015. These publications are one of the highest growth categories in the trade book marketplace (The NPD Group, Inc., 2017). GNs for children and young adults are the fastest growing segment (Maughan, 2016). Librarians across the country reported that GNs are frequently chosen by

patrons and improve overall circulation numbers (Gavigan, 2014; Rednour, 2017).

The popularity of GNs offers an opportunity for K-12 educators to increase reading engagement among students. In addition, this literature format accommodates aspects of visual literacy that are prominent in the lives of 21st century learners. Visual images play a central part in communication, education, and entertainment (Yildirim, 2013). State standards are also reflecting the emphasis on multimodal instruction, as seen in Texas' new English language arts and reading standards (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

How do GNs differ from traditional novels? In many ways, the answer to this question is obvious. Traditional books use words, while GNs rely equally on text and visuals. The differences, however, are far more complex. In order to investigate specific ways GNs differ, the authors of the present study studied five books and their GN counterparts to compare literary elements.

Graphic Novels

GNs differ from comics in that comics are typically published as magazines, and GNs appear in book format. Schwarz (2006) defined GNs as “a longer and more artful version of the comic book bound as a ‘real’ book” (p. 58). GNs have also been described as “an original book-length story, either fiction or nonfiction, published in comic book style” (Gorman, 2003, p. xii). Regardless of the slight variations in description, GNs are considered a format, not a genre (Weiner, 2010). Within the GN format, readers can find a variety of genres (Schwarz, 2006).

Classroom Benefits

GNs can be powerful teaching tools. Not only is this popular format motivational for readers, but they also build critical thinking skills (Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Schwarz, 2006); provide opportunities to develop multimodal literacies (Watts, 2015); and support both struggling readers (Carter, 2009; Richardson, 2017) and gifted students (Carter, 2009). Bakis (2012) listed many other advantages to using GNs in the classroom based on her experiences and research. The benefits included the facilitation of rich discussion, application of problem-solving skills, building of social meaning, development of confidence, promotion of personal and intellectual growth, and exposure to the constructive nature of reading.

Educators have documented success with GNs. Jennings, Rule, and Zanden (2014) studied the efficacy of using GNs with students in comparison to traditional novels and heavily illustrated novels. The researchers examined

students’ perceptions of the three types of novels, as well as how each type influenced comprehension and reading enjoyment. Jennings et al. (2014) reported the students in this study described higher levels of pleasure and interest in relation to GNs compared to the other formats. They described greater understanding with both GNs and heavily illustrated novels, which supports the complementary use of text and visuals. Additionally, using GNs sparked more discussion and increased comprehension according to formal assessments.

A Different Kind of Reading

Although GNs present a valuable format for classroom learning, they require a different type of reading (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014; Pagliaro, 2014; Schwartz, 2006). GNs can provide scaffolding to more text-intense books, but readers often report that they are more difficult to analyze than a traditional story because they require a great deal of visual analysis and inferencing (Miller, 2015). Literary elements in GNs, such as setting, theme, plot, and characters, are portrayed differently (Watts, 2015). In traditional books, the pictures that are included support the text; however, the pictures in a GN “*are* the text” (Pagliaro, 2014, p. 33).

The text features and other visual components used in GNs require skills beyond understanding literary elements. Readers must decipher visual features, such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and lettering style to interpret the full meaning of the story (Schwarz, 2006). GNs use pictures to tell their stories, which require substantial inference (Watts, 2015). The details of the illustrations “help readers infer the emotions and motivations of characters as well as more fully understand the twists and turns within the plot” (Richardson, 2017, p. 24).

Generally, GNs place art inside panels, which are individual boxes separated by blank area called gutters. Readers must give detailed attention to the artistic elements and “infer what has happened during the transition from one

panel to the next” (Watts, 2015, p. 39), which is called closure (McCloud, 1993; Watts, 2015). McCloud (1993) explained that “panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (p. 67). The reader must also determine the order of the panels and text features. Typically, the panels and text are read from left to right, top to bottom. However, the arrangement can be complex and befuddle experienced readers.

The words chosen by the illustrator, which may be in or out of voice balloons, often

represent sound (McCloud, 1993). Font shows variations in tone of voice, volume, and emotion. The words “have the power to completely describe the invisible realm of senses and emotions” (McCloud, 1993, p. 135). Colors and hues are used by illustrators to express and symbolize elements, such as mood, depth, and emotion. Specific terms related to GNs are presented in Table 1. Teachers and students who possess knowledge of the vocabulary associated with GNs are empowered to improve their understanding, as well as participate in meaningful discussions (Brozo et al., 2014).

Table 1

Specific Terms Related to GNs

Term	Meaning
Panel	An individual frame of content that tells part of the story. A panel may contain images, text, or both.
Gutter	The space between panels.
Hue	The shade (hue) of color to communicate meaning to the story.
Sound effects	Images or text, usually onomatopoeia, that portray sound in the story.
Motion lines	Lines that depict movement in pictures (also called zip-ribbons).
Closure	The “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud, 1993, p. 63). Readers of GNs use closure to connect the action in panels.
Icon	An image that represents a person, place, thing, or idea.
Frame	The border around a panel.
Speech balloons	A graphic tool depicting words spoken by a character.
Thought balloons	A graphic tool depicting thoughts of a character.
Caption	A narrative that cannot be shown through art, speech, or thought.
Bleed	Art that “runs off of the page instead of being contained by a border” (Brozo et al., 2014, p. 15).
Sound effects	Text that highlights sounds in the form of onomatopoeia or images.

GNs require “special attention to be given to its unique visual and word arrangement” (Schwarz, 2006, p. 59). Readers must slow down when reading GNs and attend to the text and a variety of elements, such as images, color, font, and visual perspective (Brozo et al., 2014). Because the combinations of words and pictures used in GNs are limitless

(McCloud, 1993), GNs may present challenges to students unfamiliar with multimodal forms of storytelling. They require critical thinking skills in order to gain meaning from new innovative features of text. Therefore, readers benefit from explicit instruction related to the characteristics of GNs.

Theoretical Perspective

The present study was grounded in the idea that GNs are a different kind of reading. Experts agree that reading involves more than just decoding text (Connors, 2015; Jennings et al., 2014; Serafini, 2014). It includes “a complex set of cognitive skills and social practices that involve people’s use of one or more modes (e.g., print, image, music, color) to make meaning” (Connors, 2015, p. 6). Multiliteracies reflect multiple ways of communicating and making meaning through various modes, such as visual, audio, spatial, behavioral, and gestural (New London Group, 1996). The technology-driven world reflects multimodal information, which includes text and visual media (Jennings et al., 2014). Serafini (2014) used the term “multimodal ensemble” to describe “text composed of more than one mode” (p. 12) and stated that multimodal ensembles contain textual elements, visual images, and design elements. Students continually use visual images to “construct their knowledge and meaning” (Gavigan, 2014, p. 98), and they encounter multimodal information more often than stand-alone written text

(Serafini, 2014). GNs present multimodal ensembles, which support the development of students’ multiliteracies. Studying a GN can bring media literacy into the curriculum as students examine artistic conventions, such as how color represents emotions, how pictures reinforces stereotypes, how a variety of angles establish setting and perception, and how word bubbles represent dialogue.

Method

Classic stories and popular modern novels have been rewritten in graphic form (Maughan, 2016; Pilgrim & Trotti, 2012), which offers choices for classroom teachers. The present study used literary analysis to compare five original novels to their GN counterpart (see Table 2). The use of a simple rubric created by the researchers enabled a systematic analysis of the following literacy elements: setting, characterization, plot, point of view (POV), imagery, dialogue, and sensory language. The researchers took notes while reading each text. After the researchers completed their independent reviews, they met to compare and discuss their findings.

Table 2

Original Novels and Their Graphic Novel Counterpart

Original Novel	Graphic Novel Counterpart
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> (1962) Author: Madeleine L’Engle	<i>A Wrinkle in Time: The Graphic Novel</i> (2015) Adapted Author & Illustrator: Hope Larson
<i>The City of Ember</i> (2003) Author: Jeanne DuPrau	<i>The City of Ember: The Graphic Novel</i> (2012) Adapted Author: Dallas Middaugh Illustrator: Niklas Asker
<i>Coraline</i> (2002) Author: Neil Gaiman	<i>Coraline: The Graphic Novel</i> (2009) Illustrator: P. Craig Russell
<i>The Lightning Thief</i> (2005) Author: Rick Riordan	<i>The Lightning Thief: The Graphic Novel</i> (2010) Adapted Author: Robert Vinditti Illustrator: Attila Futaki, José Villarrubia
<i>Twilight</i> (2005) Author: Stephanie Meyers	<i>Twilight: The Graphic Novel, Volume I</i> (2010) Illustrator: Young Kim

Findings

The present study revealed the variances between each original novel and their GN counterparts. The content of the novel pairings was similar, and many of the GNs included some of the same literary elements presented in the original novels. However, features such as setting, imagery, sensory language, and characterization relied heavily or exclusively on pictures in the GNs. A comparison of these story elements provided insight into ways authors depict meaning using words, visuals, and other modes of representation.

Setting

The original novels used robust narration with sensory language to describe scenes and the setting in detail. In contrast, the GNs, as expected, portrayed time and place using visuals. Visuals included pictures and other multimodal elements typically used by GN illustrators to depict meaning. The use of shading and color choice also depicted mood and reflected aspects of setting. For example, the GN *A Wrinkle in Time* showed the flashbacks of the character Meg with shading (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Panels from GN *A Wrinkle in Time*, p. 14.

GNs include narration, which provides insight into setting. However, the narrative is minimal, especially when compared to the in-depth descriptions found in the original novels. Some of the graphics were obvious in depicting the author's vision; however, many of the rich details of the written work became subtleties in the illustrated version of a novel. In Riordan's original novel, *Lightning Thief* (2005), the introduction consists of five pages of text that described Percy Jackson's museum trip for school. However, in the GN, this event is captured on the first page. Similarly, the fight scene between Mrs. Dodd and Percy takes place

over the span of three full pages in the original novel, while the altercation is depicted on one page of panel illustrations in the GN counterpart. To describe the setting in the original novel, Riordan (2005) wrote "thunder shook the building" (p. 12), but in the GN, the reader lacks this insight.

Some GN illustrators depicted sounds and setting with both text and visual features. For example, the graphic version of *A Wrinkle in Time* incorporated lines and onomatopoeia to portray the stormy setting that begins the novel. Therefore, the reader can use visual clues from the first and second page of the GN to

understand that the weather is stormy and ominous. Onomatopoeia, like *rattle* and *hwoooo*, indicated the violent storm is near (see Figure 1).

Characterization

Authors of the reviewed original novels devoted large sections of text to develop characters. In contrast, the images in the GNs required readers to make inferences about the characters' feelings, mood, and personalities. As seen in the depiction of story setting, coloring and shading used in GNs also exposed details about the characters. Additionally, facial expression, body depiction, and other illustrated components in the GNs portrayed feelings, mood, personality, dialog, thoughts, actions, and interactions. Collectively, these features give the reader a sense of the character's personality and feelings.

The illustrator may have also provided other clues for characterization by showing reactions between them with others. For example, the GN *A Wrinkle in Time*, showed the people around Meg whispering in the first panel of Figure 1. She appeared to react negatively to them, thinking they are gossiping about her father. Figure 2 presents another example of characterization with a panel from the graphic version of the *The Lightning Thief*. Percy Jackson is seen tossing a book over his shoulder. This image depicts a frustrated Percy, which provides insight into his struggles with school. There are no words on the panel to explain Percy's frustration. In contrast, the event from the original text version is narrated in detail to provide in-depth characterization using words instead of pictures.

Dialogue

Readers gain insight into a character through the inclusion of dialogue. Although the wording of character dialogue was similar between each original novel and their GN counterparts, the manner in which dialogue was

presented was vastly different. The GNs often borrowed dialogue directly from the original novels using word bubbles. In order to depict character tone and mood, GNs used techniques, such as varied sizes and shapes of word bubbles. For example, Mrs. Which in the GN *A Wrinkle in Time* was an odd character with a kind of stutter. Therefore, her speech bubbles were jagged to reflect the way she spoke (see Figure 3).

Plot

Plot reflects events and action, which were found to be similar in both formats. While the plot sequence in the corresponding texts remained the same, the representation of action differed significantly. In the original novels, authors described events in detail. In contrast, following the plot of a GN story required attention to panels, detailed images, and verbiage. The sequence of events did not differ significantly, even though details may have been omitted in the GN version. The illustrator used lines and slanted panels to depict action in GNs. These text features provided the reader with guidance where extensive wording was lacking.

Point of View

POV refers to the narrator of a story. In first person POV, a character uses pronouns, such as *I* and *me*, to recount a story. Third-person objective POV is a detached observer and uses pronouns, such as *he* and *she*. In third-person limited omniscient POV, the narrator tells the story from the viewpoint of one character so the reader can tell what that character thinks, sees, and knows. Finally, in third-person omniscient POV, the narrator has unlimited knowledge and describes the thoughts and behaviors of every character. In the present study, POV found in the original novel significantly changed and was more challenging to identify in its GN counterpart (see Table 3).



Figure 2. Panel from GN *The Lightning Thief*, p. 6.



Figure 3. Mrs. Which's jagged speech bubble, p. 100.

Table 3

POV Across Novels

Title	POV in Original Novel	POV in GN Counterpart
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i>	Third person limited omniscient	Third person
<i>City of Ember</i>	Third person limited omniscient	Third person
<i>Coraline</i>	Third person limited omniscient	Third person limited
<i>The Lightning Thief</i>	First person	Third person
<i>Twilight</i>	First person	First person

Imagery and Sensory Language

Imagery and sensory language often pull readers into the story as they experience the setting, characters, and action through their senses. According to Bakis (2012):

In order for readers to connect to a person, place, event, or intangible ideas, a good writer uses his or her tools to paint pictures, and these details are the same details that exist in the graphic art within the panels of graphic texts (p. 83).

Sensory language often takes the form of sound effects in GNs. In Figure 1, the two panels include this feature. The whispers of the people, the rattling of the window, and the howling of the wind all portrayed the sounds of the story. Illustrators used the narrative from the original novel to create a parallel image. Figure 4 showed a paragraph from the original novel *A Wrinkle in Time* and the corresponding panel from its GN counterpart. Imagery was frequently revealed through iconic illustrations. In Figure 5, Meg’s characterization was greatly enhanced with the images of the look daggers.



Calvin led Meg across the lawn. The shadow of the trees were long and twisted and there was a heavy, sweet, autumnal smell to the air. Meg stumbled as the land sloped suddenly downhill, but Calvin’s strong hand steadied her.

Figure 4. Panel from GN *A Wrinkle in Time* and text from its original novel counterpart, p. 88.



Figure 5. Panels from GN *A Wrinkle in Time*, p. 41.

Discussion and Implications

Five stories in their original and GN forms were analyzed and compared regarding setting, characterization, plot, POV, imagery, dialogue, and sensory language. These comparative findings indicated that the essence of a story may remain the same regardless of format. However, readers must use different literacy skills for each to gain meaning. Reading GNs requires knowledge about their unique features. Readers must also continually apply inference skills to follow the story depicted by visuals. GN illustrations use multimodal cues, which are uncharacteristic of traditional texts. Just as traditional reading skills are explicitly taught, interpretation of multimodal features must also be modeled and explained clearly and purposefully.

Research shows that the use of GNs reaps educational benefits (Gavigan, 2014; Jennings et al., 2014; Maughan, 2016). GNs are excellent texts with which to engage and motivate readers (Schwarz, 2006). The values of using GNs span across curricula and reading

abilities (Gavigan, 2014; Maughan, 2016; Pilgrim & Trotti, 2012). The visual features of these books support comprehension for struggling students (Pagliaro, 2014), and foster the development of higher-level reading skills, such as inferring meaning from both pictures and text (Pagliaro, 2014; Schwarz, 2006). GNs can also ease students through complex ideas and information (Jennings et al., 2014). Readers must attend to how the text and visuals function simultaneously to create meaning. The visual aspects of GNs require inferencing skills (Watts, 2015). Students must use their background knowledge, along with the images, to deduce meaning. Readers may overlook story details if they are not careful to examine each picture thoroughly. The differences between original novels and GNs are substantial enough to warrant teacher instruction.

Teaching students to attend to the fine points of GNs enables them to comprehend and enjoy the story. However, teaching GN elements can be challenging (Miller, 2015). The first step is for teachers to familiarize themselves with the GN format and the vast number of

publications that are available. Additionally, educators should avoid the assumption that all students have experience with GNs or can naturally gauge the structure and layout. Bakis (2012) recommended that teachers explore students' understanding through non-threatening questioning and personal sharing. Reading GNs requires complex skills and an understanding of

the differences between different book formats (Watts, 2015). Educators using GNs should guide students to be attentive to "how the images and words work together" (Boerman-Cornell, 2016, p. 333). In other words, students must critically read every element within a GN to understand the author's message.

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