



## Visualizing Biography: Engaging Your Students' Creative Potential through Graphic Novels

Curriculum Unit 12.02.01  
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"I draw because words are too unpredictable . . . when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it." <sup>1</sup>

- Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diaries of a Part-Time Indian*

### A Prefatory Note on Terminology

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This unit deals with several different types of graphic sequential narratives, commonly known as "comics," but is concerned primarily with the art of the graphic novel. Let's begin by defining the graphic novel by what it is not. First, the graphic novel is not a comic book. Wait, you thought the term "graphic novel" was just a fancy term made up by the publishing industry to make it acceptable for adults to read book-length comic books? Au contraire, mon frere. Graphic novels are a distinct genre, and they're with us to stay. Yes, graphic novels and comic books have a lot in common—sequential illustrated panels that follow a narrative—words and pictures, right? It's the "comic" piece of the moniker "comic book" to which this writer takes offence. A comic book must deal with subject matter and themes that are not to be taken seriously by definition (this doesn't stop legions of comics fans from doing so regardless). This helps explain why so many great graphic novels are neglected as serious literature. They have been relegated to the same section of your local bookstore that houses such distinguished works as *Aunt Mabel's Bathroom Reader* and *101 Naughty Cats*. The graphic novelist must overcome the reader's biases and misperceptions of her graphic novel before she has written her first panel. A graphic novel is neither a cartoon nor a comic book, though it employs elements of both; most graphic novels have nothing comic about them. A graphic novel is a work of visual art first, and a novel second. A graphic novel is not a novel. Novels do not contain pictures, otherwise they are considered illustrated novels. Graphic novels are not illustrated novels. Don't get me wrong; I have nothing against illustrated novels. Sherman Alexie's illustrated novel, *The Absolutely True Diaries of a Part-Time Indian* is a

cornerstone text for this unit. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* also comes to mind as a popular example of the form. But neither of these are graphic novels.

So what are graphic novels, then? They are comic books built on a human scale. They are comic books without the comic book characters and superheroes that have become ubiquitous in pop culture. A graphic novel must deal with recognizable human characters (or their anthropomorphized stand-ins) that deal with human conflicts, and take place in a world that, more or less, resembles our own. The characters in a graphic novel can only have a superpower if it acts as a visual metaphor as in, for example, Dan Clowes' *The Death Ray* , whose protagonist discovers a weapon that gives him the ability to make people disappear completely. I can already think of about dozen exceptions to my own rule, such as Anders Nilsen's excellent *Big Questions* , which views human events through the points of view of its animal characters or the Frank comics of Jim Woodring, wordless fables that take place in a universe that defies description, so I'll shut up now.

## Introduction

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Graphic novels have their origins in the cave paintings of Lascaux, the hieroglyphs of Ancient Egypt and the petroglyphs of the American Southwest. The pictogram pre-dates all other systems of written language. As long as man has had the tools, he has been compelled to depict his world visually. We are born with the instinct to re-create reality and, in the process, create alternative universes projected from the artist's imagination. We draw for the same reason we press our hands in freshly poured concrete or write on restroom walls. It shows we were here. We existed.

In an era that has produced such masterworks as R. Crumb's *Book of Genesis* , Art Spiegelman's *Maus* , Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* , it is difficult to argue graphic novelists haven't proven capable of wrestling with the themes of the literary novel while cutting word count down to its essence, and is there anything more intimidating to a struggling reader than a text-heavy book that can be used as a doorstop? The following is a guide to combining your students' words and pictures. Embedded within these fun lessons on creating graphic sequential narratives, or, as the layman insists on calling them, comic books, you will find a serious curriculum regarding the role, responsibility, and reliability of the biographer. The learning objectives of these lessons are tied to the Common Core state standards. However, beyond satisfying these rigorous academic requirements, I hope this unit's lessons will instill confidence in the struggling reader, give the class artist (or class clown) an outlet, and provide a break from the daily drudgery of preparing for standardized tests. I want these lessons to unlock the artist hidden inside, silence its critics, and open a portal to a hidden universe.

The readings used to illustrate the concepts taught in this unit were chosen based on their school-appropriateness, subject matter, as well as the age of their protagonists. The majority of these readings focus on adolescents, making them more relatable to high school freshman. Instructors may want to substitute these readings for their own choices (in the case of lessons employing single panel comics, painted portraits, and Golden Age Sunday comics, this is highly encouraged), but it is worth noting that a lot of thought and research went into these selections.

Before World War II, American families gathered around their radios to listen to their favorite programs. They had words, but not pictures, to go along with their favorite soap operas and serials. In 1948, broadcast

television was introduced in America, and by 1950, more than ten million American homes had TVs where the radio once stood, now relegated to the basement or garage, like the VCRs of today. <sup>2</sup>The age of radio was in swift decline because television took radio's platform and added pictures. The graphic novel is a relatively young art. The term "graphic novel" did not come into widespread use until the 1970s when works like Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* erased previous boundaries between the comic book and the literary novel. <sup>3</sup> Today, the graphic novel is more popular than ever thanks to an explosion of new artists who are redefining what the form is capable of expressing. Surely great novelists will continue to write great works of literature. A few of them will dare to add pictures to their work at the risk of being considered (at best) children's literature by the literary establishment. The age of the Great American Novelist may not yet be over, but the age of the Great American Graphic Novelist has only begun.

## Central Questions

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What is the role the biographer?

How reliable are our own memories?

What are the limitations of the biographer / artist?

What can a graphic sequential narrative provide that writing alone cannot?

What makes an interesting subject for an artist or biographer?

## Unit Duration

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Ten 45-minute classes

## Unit Rationale

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As an urban educator, I am constantly trying to find new ways to help my students realize their potential as readers and writers. One way this can be done is by differentiating instruction through a variety of approaches: teaching methodology (i.e. direct instruction, student-centered learning, small group instruction), evaluation (testing, essay writing, project-based learning), but perhaps the best way is through content. This unit addresses all three areas of differentiated instruction with an emphasis on content meant to engage the struggling reader. Students will learn to read images as well as words, and understand how to communicate graphically, as well as literally.

## Content Objectives

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The objectives of this unit are two-fold: first, I would like to tap into my students' creative and artistic potential. As a teacher at a health and business magnet school, there are no art classes available to my students. Therefore, I see it as my obligation to expose them to forms of self-expression they don't normally access in school. If a student's artistry is not fostered and encouraged, there is a very good chance it will wither on the vine. Artistic talent is like a muscle or a foreign language; you must either use or lose it. Second, I want to reach students who are reluctant readers. It is no secret the attention span of your average fourteen-year-old rivals that of a gnat. Their lives are fragmented into a series of digital avatars through texts, Twitter, Facebook, and videogames. Why not at least attempt to meet them halfway by furnishing them with content that is as fresh, young, and vital as they are? I see graphic novels as the perfect antidote to digital media. This is why you won't see any references to illustration software or other computer applications in this unit. Yes, illustration software is out there and it is certainly helpful to the right student; however, this unit is about peeling our students' eyes away from the screen and onto the page. In order to become an artist, one must first see as an artist, with fresh eyes. Students with eyes affixed to their phones, tablets, and televisions cannot see clearly. Only by re-contextualizing and reinvigorating the printed page can we, as educators, hope to create students with the ability to think critically, explore boldly, and create masterfully.

## Intended Audience

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Though the unit is designed with my ninth grade English students in mind, I believe it would work well with students from 6th to 12th grades.

## Materials

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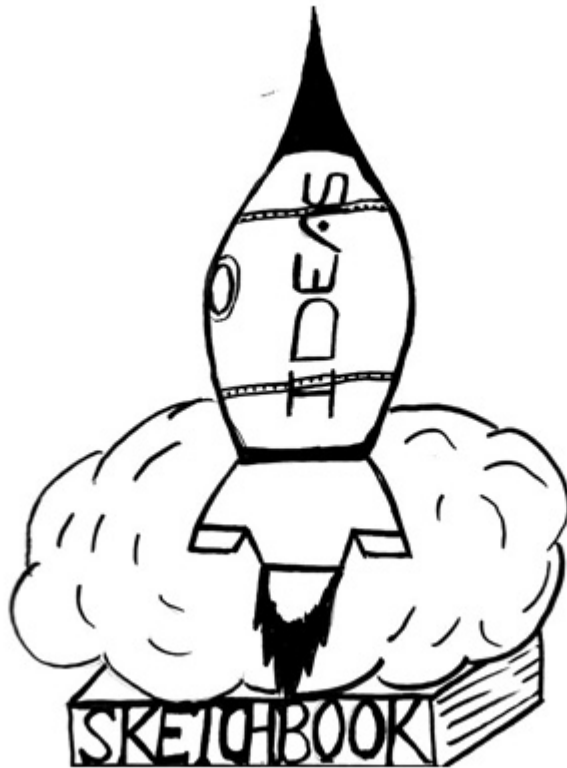
Basic: pencils, colored pencils, brush pens, markers, reliable pencil sharpeners for students (non-electric, handheld), erasers, sketchbooks, a variety of painted portrait reproductions, and class copies of all assigned readings (see "Bibliography" below)

Advanced: All of the above, plus, Bristol board, India ink, dip pens, watercolor brushes and paints, lettering guides, pastels, and a T-square for outlining panels.

## Class One: Drawing Conclusions

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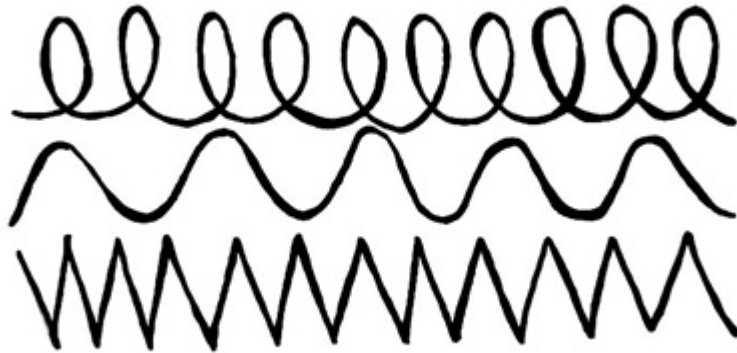
Begin class by distributing sketchbooks. Explain to students that they will be expected to bring these to class and encourage students to take and use them when they leave. Emphasize that sketchbooks are for their use. Decorating, doodling, brainstorming, writing, drawing, or painting in the sketchbook is necessary to success in class. There is no such thing as a bad idea or bad drawing. Think of a sketchbook as a launching pad for your ideas (see Figure 1). Who knows where they may take you?



### Drawing Exercise 1

For your first piece, you will draw a self-portrait in pencil. We will be using pencils because it will be easier to fix our mistakes and most comic artists do their original sketches this way. If we want a more professional feel, we can write over our pencil drawings with ink later. This is a process called "inking," and it is what separates a sketch from a finished piece. We won't be working with ink today, but you might want to try it on your own later, or experiment with different art supplies like colored pencils, pastels, or watercolors.

Our focus today is on creating a steady line, understanding how a line can be thick or thin, rigid or flowing, messy or neat (see Figure 2).



Find a line that suits you. Draw at a pace that is comfortable. Don't rush. Focus on making simple shapes. Use these shapes to create objects and people. A tree, for example, is simply a triangle plus a cylinder. A house is a square and a triangle. Mastering these simple shapes will help you get a feel for proportion and perspective. For the next two minutes sketch cylinders, rectangles and triangles. See what objects you can create from these simple shapes.

Share student self-portraits.

Read *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, pp. pp. 118–125 "Living in Line"

#### *Closure*

Assign students one of the following book-length graphic or illustrated novels: *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Volume I), *The Absolutely True Diaries of a Part-Time Indian*, or *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (Volume I). It is a good idea to assign daily reading benchmarks, so that students are literally on the same page in their small groups. Before students leave class, have them answer the following question in their sketchbooks: What are the tools necessary to becoming a graphic artist?

#### *Homework - Drawing exercise 1A*

Draw ten different emotions, e.g. happy, sad, angry, nervous, depressed, annoyed, excited, guilty, tired, and bored. There are two reasons for this assignment. First, experimentation will allow students to get a feel for how lines create emotions. Also, drawing exercises will emphasize the importance of practice and repetition. Drawing consistent characters and objects, no matter how simple they may appear, is incredibly difficult, as anyone who has attempted a to draw a comic will attest.

## **Class Two: Drawn Together**

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Begin class by assigning the composition or an eight-page autobio-graphic novel that will detail a momentous event in the student's life. This culminating project will be due on the final class of the unit. Explain that the project must be autobiographical in nature and employ the basic elements of the graphic novel: panels drawn in a sequential order with character consistency, captions or narration boxes, and thought and dialogue

balloons. It is always a good idea to illustrate these elements for your students for clarity. Emphasize that it is up to the student how much detail they wish to include, how many panels are on each page, or whether or not to use color.

Last class, students began their sketchbooks by drawing a self-portrait. Today we are going to draw a partner. We'll begin by working in pairs. Once students have found partners, explain that you would like them to interview each other. These are the ground rules: ten questions (minimum), no yes/no question, no prying or personal questions; if your partner crosses the line, tell them you don't feel comfortable answering their question. Focus on your partner's hobbies, activities, pastimes, and favorites. Get an idea of who your partner is outside of school. Emphasize that students should write down both their questions and their partner's answers in their sketchbooks.

## **Drawing Exercise #2**

Once students have completed their interviews, students will make a pencil drawing of their partners. It's a good idea to have colored pencils or markers on hand, so the drawings are as expressive as possible. Also, students tend to get more enjoyment from colored drawing implements. Suggest that student portraits should depict their partner's interests, hobbies, and activities visually.

After students have completed their partner portraits, share these with the class. Each student should introduce their partner, and mention two or three interesting facts they learned about their partner.

### *Homework - Drawing Exercise 2A*

In your sketchbook, draw a family member or pet from memory. Do not look at them. This drawing should be spontaneous.

## **Class Three: The Perfect Panel**

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One of my purest pleasures from my childhood arrived with the Sunday paper and its full color comic insert. These have become smaller over the years. One hundred years ago, single comic strips covered entire pages, unfortunately we've come a long way since the golden age of the newspaper comic strip. I like to illustrate this by showing students examples of golden age strips, like *Little Nemo in Slumberland* by Winsor McCay, *Gasoline Alley* by Frank King, or *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman. Yale University Press's *Masters of American Comics* anthology is a great resource that has many superb full-color reproductions of these Sunday strips in addition to biographical essays about their creators.

Today, we're going in search of the perfect panel, a single panel cartoon that says it all. One of my favorites comes from an offbeat comic "strip" syndicated when I was a kid called *The Far Side* by Gary Larson (I put strip in quotes since it was a single panel cartoon, like *The Family Circus* ). In the panel I like to show my classes we see a man and a lion in a full elevator, addressing the other riders. Beneath is the caption, spoken by the man with his hand on the lion: "'Don't be alarmed folks . . . He's completely harmless unless something startles him.'" <sup>4</sup> This is a great example of the perfect panel because of its multiple levels of irony, a concept that can be difficult for adolescents to comprehend. Explain to students that there are multiple types of irony, including situational, verbal, and dramatic and this single panel uses all of them. First, the situational: We do

not expect a lion in an elevator. Therefore, our basic assumptions about what is normal are subverted. Second, the verbal: Here is a man telling his fellow riders there is no need for concern when, clearly, there is. Finally, the dramatic: We know something those other riders don't know. Because of our perspective facing the elevator's closing doors, the reader knows those doors are about to close on that lion's tail, which will, of course, startle the lion. This is a brilliant strip for so many reasons, chiefly its visual juxtaposition of the ordinary (riding an elevator) with the extraordinary (there's a lion on the elevator). Another incredible achievement of this panel is that it works by suggestion. The only part of the lion we see is its rear end. This is precisely how this cartoon works so well. We see that there is cause for alarm. The riders, facing us, do not. It is this simple shift in perspective that creates comic tension. We know what the riders are in for once those doors close; the riders do not.

Irony is usually achieved in two ways in comics—understatement and overstatement. This *The Far Side* panel works via understatement. Contrast the mundane elements of the cartoon—the people in business attire, the elevator setting, the clichéd reassuring pet owner—with the extraordinary—hey, there's a lion in the elevator.

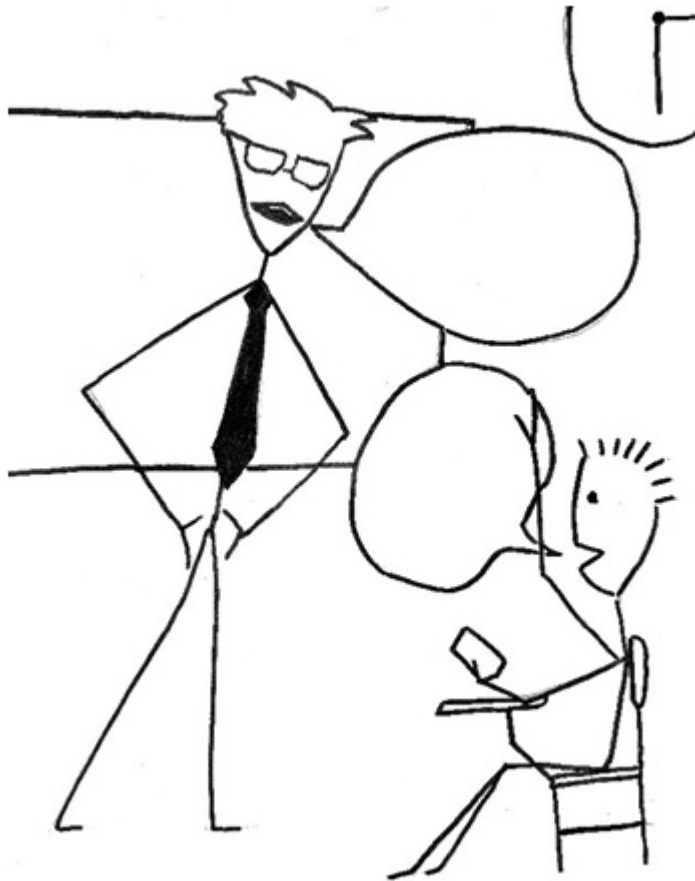
Overstatement is achieved through caricature. Can someone explain to me the difference between a portrait and a caricature?

### *Drawing Exercise 3*

Once student explains, have students create a caricature of a teacher at their school (yes, you too will be fair game). Explain that this caricature must be done from the shoulders up, and should emphasize a standout facial feature.

Draw a picture on the board of two stick figures talking. Draw blank dialogue bubbles above both of them (see Figure 3). Ask students for suggestions as to what these two characters might be saying. If the students have difficulty, start by filling in one of the bubbles with a leading quote. Trust me, they'll have plenty of suggestions.





*Homework - Drawing exercise 3A*

Create a single panel gag comic that creates visual irony via understatement or overstatement.

## **Class Four: Putting it all Together**

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### **Drawing Exercise 4**

Students will write in their sketchbooks about a time they were never angrier. After they write these memories, they will draw them.

When students have completed drawing their memories, allow those who wish to share their angriest moments with their class time to do so (This can be done with any number of emotions, anger just tends to provoke stronger recollections, thus better imagery).

#### *Discussion questions*

Did you feel yourself becoming angry just remembering this moment? What kind of visual metaphors did you use to represent your anger (i.e. Lightning bolts, tears, daggers)?

Read Jonathan Lethem's essay "Things to Remember" from *The Ecstasy of Influence* .

### *Discussion questions*

Why do we remember what we remember? How do we remember? Are our memories reliable? Do we have control over what we remember?

### *Homework*

Write an essay from memory about a life-changing or momentous event. This essay will be the basis of your final project.

## **Class Five: Limitations of the Form**

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### **Drawing Exercise 5**

In your sketchbook, create a four-panel comic strip of your day so far.

Share student comic strips.

### *Discussion questions*

What happened in the space between the panels? What objects or people that were a part of this memory did you choose not to include? What events did you leave out? Why did you decide to leave in what you left in?

This should lead to a discussion of selection and emphasis. Explain to students that any writer or artist must choose which details to include and what to leave out. Discuss what makes a detail or episode important? What makes it insignificant?

Create a T-chart titled "Limitations of the Form" with one column marked "Biography" and another "Graphic Novels"

This should end up looking something like this . . .

## Limitations of Form

Biography	Graphic Novels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Must rely on memory, which is often unreliable or flawed</li><li>✓ Researches documents, esp. other books, journals, professional writings</li><li>✓ Operates on reader's sense of sight</li><li>✓ Limited by time (reader's sense thereof), timeliness (publisher's deadline, subject's relevance)</li><li>✓ Communicates via the written word</li><li>✓ Reality re-created dramatically through selection, emphasis, inference</li><li>✓ Seeks to re-experience reality</li><li>✓ Relies on abundance of detail</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Cannot recreate reality</li><li>✓ Limitations of form=limitations of media, in our case, pencil and paper</li><li>✓ Operates on viewer's sense of sight only</li><li>✓ Limited by size of panel, page, length of book</li><li>✓ Pictures can communicate ideas to non-readers, speakers of different languages</li><li>✓ Reality represented stylistically</li><li>✓ Purposefully seeks to create alternative reality</li><li>✓ Relies on simplification of reality to its visual essence</li></ul>

Read Gabrielle Bell's story, "Hit Me" from *Cecil and Jordan in New York*

Discuss: Why did the author choose to write about this event? Can you relate to the author's experiences i.e., have you ever been a bully or been bullied? Explain why/why not? Examine theme of bullying. Why does this make an appropriate theme?

### Homework

If someone were to tell the story of your life, what would you want the author to include? For homework, write a one-page summary of your life's accomplishments. List them if you must.

## Class Six: The Responsible Biographer

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We have already spoken of the unreliability of memory, both our own and others. Sometimes something is rumored about a person and never verified. How do we write about things of which we do not know the truth? Is there even such a thing as "the truth"? Write a memory, whether it is a half-remembered dream, your earliest childhood memory or a family myth or legend.

After writing, students will share their memories.

### Discussion Questions

What are the common themes of these stories? What parts of these stories seem like they could be made up?

Students will break into groups and read excerpts from *Stitches* by David Small, specifically pp. 10-14, 56-63, and 64-75, 109-122, and 250-259.

Discuss: What parts of this story seem unrealistic? How does the character remember what he remembers? How does the author create visual metaphors? How would you describe the author's visual style?

### *Homework-Drawing Exercise 6*

Read *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, pp.24-36 "The Vocabulary Comics."

Create a list of as many visual icons as you can (e.g., Nike "swoosh," the Star of David, or a Christian fish).

## **Class Seven: Filling the Page**

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### **Drawing Exercise 7**

Students will work with the same partner as during Class Two. They will create drawings of each other as super heroes. Think about: What are their super powers, if any? What does their costume look like? What are their distinguishing physical features?

Share student illustrations.

Read "Two Questions" excerpt from Lynda Barry's *What it Is*

### *Discussion Questions*

Describe the author's visual style. What recurring visual symbols or motifs do you see? What keeps us from expressing ourselves creatively? How do we overcome self-doubt?

Now, draw a nine-panel grid in your sketchbook. Having already tried your hands at the single-panel gag cartoon and the four-panel strip, today you will create full-page comics.

### *Homework - Drawing Exercise 7a*

Create a full-page nine-panel comic. This may be a page from your final 8-page graphic novel about a life-changing event.

## **Class Eight: Closure**

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At this point in the curriculum students should have all the tools necessary to create their own comics. Now that we have created our own comics, we want to reach a clearer understanding of how they work, or the theory behind the craft.

Read *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, "Blood in the Gutter," pp. 60-72.

### *Discussion Questions*

How do we perceive the world? How does this contrast with the way graphic novels portray the world? What occurs in the reader's mind in the space between panels? How is the way we read graphic novels similar to how we watch a movie? How is it different? How do comics force us to use our imaginations? What are the six different types of closure according to the author?

### *Homework*

In a one to two-page essay, write the life story of a family member you never met.

## **Class Nine: Composition**

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Begin class by showing students slides or pictures of painted portraits. This will work best if the students do not know the subjects of the paintings. You might do this by projecting images onto a screen or by taking students to the local museum or art gallery. Also, it is not necessary to use portraits, just as long as the paintings represent individuals in some kind of environment. The focus of this lesson is going to be composition, or how to represent three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane. For each portrait, have students write down their impressions of the subject: Who are they? What is their occupation? What are their interests? Where are they from? Where are they going? Have students discuss their impressions of each subject with a partner.

### *Discussion Questions*

How do we represent three dimensions in two-dimensional space? How does a symbol work in a piece of visual art? In literature? How are compositional elements in painting and writing similar? How are they different?

Read *Epileptic* by David B., pp. 17-27

### *Discussion Questions*

What are David's and Jean Christophe's interests and fascinations? What do their interests tell us about their personalities? Why does David fixate on his grandfather's experiences in World War I? Why is Jean Christophe obsessed with Hitler? What sorts of visual symbols does the author use in this excerpt?

### *Homework - Drawing Exercise 8*

Create another self-portrait, but this time place yourself in the middle of some kind of scene or action. Include details that symbolize different facets of your personality. Your picture should tell a story about you, just like the portraits we saw at the beginning of class.

## Class Ten: Publish and Share

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Today's class is the culmination of all your students' hard work. During the first half of class, students will present their graphic novels to the class. This will work best with a document projector, so that the student may read their graphic novel to the class in such a way that the whole class can see the work clearly. Students are encouraged to write and share their impressions of each classmate's graphic novel. These impressions should be in regard to specific details, techniques, or symbols that students notice, or any questions they might have regarding the subject material or creative process.

After students have shared their work with the class, students will break into small groups and discuss the book-length graphic novels that were assigned at the beginning of the unit. Ideally, this will be a student-led discussion, but the instructor should emphasize discussion involving the how graphic novels can be used to represent an individual's life.

If students struggle with this, the instructor can catalyze discussion with leading questions, like: Why does the author choose the details and episodes they have included? What sorts of visual metaphors or symbols does the author use? Do you think you would get along with your book's protagonist? Explain why/why not. How does the protagonist change throughout the course of the novel? How does the author represent shifts in time? How is that change represented visually?

### Conclusion

This discussion will bring the unit to conclusion, but if your students show an increased interest in comics and graphic novels, you may find that it is beneficial to use them as a teaching tool throughout the school year. Nearly every concept we teach via literature can also be taught using the graphic novel. Please refer to the section titled "Further Suggested Reading" for other invaluable resources that will assist you in teaching graphic novels as literature.

## Bibliography and Reading List

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Alexie, Sherman. *Absolutely True Diaries of a Part-Time Indian* . New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. The story of Junior Polatkin, who decides to leave "the Rez" in hopes of a better life.

B., David. *Epileptic* . New York: Pantheon, 2006. This autobiographical graphic novel chronicles the author's tumultuous relationship with his older brother, who is epileptic.

Barry, Lynda. *What it Is* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008. Ms. Barry, the author of the syndicated *Marlys* comic strip creates a thought-provoking collection that is part autobiography, part instructional guide to tapping one's creative potential.

Bell, Gabrielle. *Cecil and Jordan in New York: Stories* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2009. Ms. Bell's text-heavy graphic stories are deceptively simple, detailing the struggles of growing up as an outsider.

Brunetti, Ivan. *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. This slight but indispensable book is a

great how-to guide to creating one's own cartoons and the inspiration for many of this unit's lessons.

Carlin, John, Paul Karasik, and Brian Walker, eds. *Masters of American Comics* . Yale University Press, 2005. This coffee table companion book to the traveling art exhibit features excellent original art and biographical essays on the great comics artists of the past century.

Larson, Gary. *The Far Side* . Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1982. The first collection of the widely syndicated humor strip that ended its run in 1995.

Lethem, Jonathan. *The Ecstasy of Influence* . New York: Doubleday, 2011. A collection of Mr. Lethem's non-fiction writing.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* . New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Simply put, this book was invaluable toward conceptualizing this unit.

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* . New York: Pantheon, 2004. Ms. Satrapı's autobiographical account of growing up in Iran with the consequences of the Islamic Revolution.

Small, David. *Stitches: A Memoir* . New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009. Mr. Small, a long-time children's book illustrator, turns inward in this autobiographical graphic novel about his unhappy childhood.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* . New York: Pantheon, 1986. The book that put graphic novels on the map details the author's father's trials surviving the Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

## Additional Suggested Readings

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Bechdel, Alison. *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Ms. Bechdel examines her strained relationship with her mother.

----- . *Funhome: A Family Tragicomic* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006. Ms Bechdel writes a sympathetic memoir of her father, a funeral director and closeted homosexual.

Briggs, Raymond. *Gentleman Jim* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008. A Walter Mitty- like janitor dreams of a more exciting life.

Brown, Chester. *I Never Liked You* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2002. Mr. Brown details a relationship with a female friend from his adolescence.

----- . *The Little Man: Short Strips, 1980-1995* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006. This collection showcases the inimitable style of the Canadian graphic novelist.

----- . *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006. The graphic biography of Louis Riel, who led the Metis Revolt in Midwest Canada during the 1880s.

----- . *The Playboy* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 1992. Mr. Brown details his relationship to pornography as an adolescent.

Clowes, Daniel. *The Death-Ray*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2011. Clowe's anti-hero is an everyman who finds a weapon with the ability to make his enemies disappear completely.

----- . *Wilson* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010. *Wilson* is the story of a middle-aged bachelor's misguided attempts to turn his life around

Crumb, Robert. *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* . New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009. The Babe Ruth of comics tackles the first fifty chapters of the Bible.

Gloeckner, Phoebe. *A Child's Life and Other Stories* . Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 2000. Ms. Gloeckner, a medical illustrator, brings her talents to bear in the x-rated story of her misspent youth.

Johnson, R. Kikuo. *Night Fisher* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005. The story of a privileged Hawaiian high school student's drug-abetted fall from grace.

McCay, Winsor. *Little Nemo in the Palace of Ice* . Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1976. This book includes thirty-two full-size reproductions of McCay's Sunday strips and is excellent for demonstration purposes.

Neufeld, Josh. A.D.: *New Orleans after the Deluge* . New York: Pantheon, 2009. Neufeld's graphic novel is a grim reminder of all that was lost in New Orleans to Hurricane Katrina.

Nilsen, Anders. *Big Questions* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2011. This graphic novel, told from the perspective of its woodland inhabitants, tells of the fallout of jet pilot's crash landing.

Pham, John. *Sublife* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008. An assured debut that brings to mind the precision artistry of Chris Ware.

Sacco, Joe. *The Fixer and Other Stories* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2009. Sacco's graphic novel portrays major events in Sarajevo during the Serbian War through the author's dialogue with Neven, a journalist fixer and former sniper.

----- . *Palestine* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2002. Sacco writes about the Israel- Palestine conflict from the perspective of West Bank Palestinians.

----- . *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia , 1992-199 5* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2002. Sacco uses first-hand accounts to tell of the siege of the Muslim-dominated city Gorozde during the Serbian War.

Seda, Dori. *Dori Stories* . San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1999. The late, great Dori Seda was one of the great graphic novelists of the 1980s. Her comics show a great sense of humor and absurdity.

Seth. *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003. The author's attempts to unearth the work of the forgotten Canadian cartoonist, Kalo.

Shaw, Dash. *Bottomless Bellybutton* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008. The dissolution of the Loony family told from the point of view of Peter, a pothead filmmaker lacking in self-confidence.

Tatsumi, Yoshihiro. *A Drifting Life* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2009. Tatsumi's autobiographical account of growing up in the vanguard of Japan's early manga boom during the 1950s.

Thompson, Craig. *Blankets* . Portland, OR: Top Shelf Productions, 2003. *The author's autobiographical account of his first love while growing apart from his family's Christian beliefs.*

----- . *Carnet de Voyage* . Portland, OR: Top Shelf Productions, 2004. Details the author's travels abroad in a graphic journal.

----- . *Habibi* . New York: Pantheon, 2011. *Habibi* is the story of Dodola and Zam, refugees from child slavery in a mythical Middle



East, and their shared destiny.

Tomine, Adrian. *Thirty-two Stories: The Complete Optic Nerve Mini-Comics* . Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 1998. The author's earliest mini-comics present an offbeat world view.

Watson, Esther Pearl. *Unlovable* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008. The author creates a graphic novel from a found diary of a teenager from the 1980s.

Woodring, Jim. *The Portable Frank* . Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008. Woodring's further adventures of Frank, the anthropomorphic cat, through a surrealistic universe that plays by its own rules.

## Notes

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1. Sherman Alexie, *Absolutely True Diaries of a Part-Time Indian* , 5.
2. <http://www.classicvhits.com/tvratings/1950.htm>
3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphic\\_novel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphic_novel)
4. Gary Larson, *The Far Side* .
5. <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards/history-social-studies/grades-9-10/#rh-9-10-1>

## Appendix: Implementing District Standards

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This unit will implement Common Core State Standards for English / Language Arts, Grades 9-10<sup>5</sup> . All language taken from these standards will be in quotation marks.

### *Reading Standards*

Students will "determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of a text" by reading and discussing a variety of comics and graphic novels.

Students will "analyze how the author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within and manipulate time" through classroom discussion of limitations and elements of both the graphic novel and biography genres (see *Class 5* ).

Students will "analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States" by reading works including the French graphic novelist David B.'s *Epileptic* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (Iran).

### *Writing Standards*

Students will "write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences" by writing autobiographical essays and creating autobiographical graphic novels.

Students will "produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience" by writing and drawing exercises embedded throughout the curriculum.

Students will "write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences" through daily in-class and homework writing exercises.

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