

Using Graphic Novels To Help Struggling Readers by Meryl Jaffe

There are many reasons students struggle with reading. These include (but are not limited to): language weaknesses, learning weaknesses, difficulty sequencing, and/or poor attention. As graphic novels tell stories with paired (and vibrant) images and text, they help level the language arts playing field. They motivate all students while promoting cognitive, language, attention, memory and sequencing skills. In the space below I briefly detail how they do this. Please visit *Worth A Thousand Words* (Jaffe, Hurwich, 2018) for details, supporting research, and numerous lesson plans. Below I highlight how graphic novels can help struggling readers.

Graphic novels empower students. Reading them, students must engage visual and verbal literacies as they analyze text, images, font and page design choices. Furthermore, as are fewer words (than prose), the vocabulary and language use is sophisticated as authors must choose their words carefully to best express thoughts, ideas, and emotions. This combination of limited text, sophisticated vocabulary, and inviting colors, images and design make the material feel less daunting and wonderfully inviting, motivating reluctant, struggling readers. Furthermore the graphic novel format reinforces language, attention, memory, sequencing, and critical thinking skills – all of which are required for academic success.

Graphic Novels Motivate and Engage All Kinds of Learners with bold images, design and colors these books *feel* modern, fun and they literally invite readers into the adventure.

How to leverage these motivational factors:

- Use graphic novels to introduce challenging prose and non-fiction texts. For example you might use a graphic novel like *March* (by John Lewis, Andrew Ayden, and Nate Powell) before reading autobiographies, famous speeches, or studying specific events of the civil rights movement. For additional pairing ideas please check out these resources:
 - *Worth A Thousand Words* (2018) by Meryl Jaffe and Talia Hurwich
 - *Using Graphic Novels in Education* – a series of columns by Meryl Jaffe at <http://cblldf.org/?s=using+graphic+novels+in+education> critically evaluating specific graphic novels with additional resources, suggested paired readings, lesson ideas, and more.
- Use them to compare and contrast classic literature (there are graphic novel classic adaptations for Shakespeare's works; *The Golden Compass*; *Moby Dick*; *A Wrinkle in Time*; *The Gettysburg Address*; *Austin's works*; *Poe's Selected Poems*; *Metamorphosis*; *Fahrenheit 451*; *Don Quixote*; *The Good Earth*; *Anne of Green Gables*; and many more .

Compare the pros and cons of graphic novels, prose, plays/movies formats as they attempt to tell the same story.

- There are some wonderful non-fiction science graphic novels. First Second Books in particular has a growing Science Series. You might use those to jump start specific science units.
- Use them to introduce a writing units or to get reluctant students to write stories, poetry, speeches in comic versus prose formats.

Graphic Novels Promote Vocabulary and Language Usage expanding literary/communication skills and leveling the classroom field as they appeal to and empower all kinds of learners.

Language Use. Graphic fonts, color use and images highlight vocabulary and with the limited space for text, authors' word choice is concise and intentional. Discuss and highlight authors word choice and language usage.

Literary Devices. Use graphic novels to teach and reinforce onomatopoeia, metaphors, and similes that visually and verbally permeate their pages - making abstract concepts more concrete and engaging. Further, their visual/verbal onomatopoeia can introduce, reinforce, and support phonics instruction as students hunt for sounds and or words.

Just a few ways to use graphic novels and promote language skills:

- Create index cards/dictionaries of phonic sounds/blends, and cool-sounding words;
- Create graphic dictionaries collecting challenging words and images they find;
- Discuss word choices highlighted in the pages having students analyze other options, what works best, and why.

Teaching Close Reading. Close reading involves examining complex texts empowering students to better navigate a variety of texts. Close reading has students examine layers of meaning uncovering:

- What the text says;
- How it says it;
- What the content means;
- What the author's intent was; and
- How the content inspires us.

Graphic novels naturally lend themselves to close reading because their story components are inherently deconstructed. Analyzing their text, design, and image layers feels more meaningful and engaging for diverse student learners. For more, please see *Worth A Thousand Words* Chapter 5.

Graphic novels help sharpen attention and sequencing skills as students must slow down and attend to various details. They must attend to colors (which relay emotions), to faces (relaying underlying emotions, motivations, and/or reactions to speech, actions and events), to

font sizes and styles, to time and settings relayed in images, as well as to the text. Students must slow down as they intentionally focus on these varied essential details. The short bursts of text also empower students who have weak attention skills, helping them focus on language and the unfolding plot while the engaging art holds their attention and draws them into the details. Furthermore, their sequential panel arrangement requires readers focus on their presentation/sequence, reinforcing concepts of beginning, next, middle, and end as they piece together the discretely laid out pieces of the story.

Teaching suggestions (Please see *Worth A Thousand Words* for lesson details):

- Create a modified “Search” for elements in images to help students slow down and attend to essential details.
- Copy a strategic page, cut the panels apart, and have students discover the sequences as the story unfolds.
- Have students tell/create their own stories in sequential panels

Graphic novels help sharpen critical thinking and reading. Abstract concepts such as inference, metaphor, and social context are often difficult for students to comprehend. Typically, such constructs are taught through classroom discussions, which pose distinct challenges for weak language learners, and for concrete learners with weak cognitive skills.

Graphic novels help as:

- Their visual and verbal elements aid comprehension and the integration of abstract concepts;
- Their visual and verbal cues aid recognition of and comprehension of temporal, physical, and social relationships;
- Their visual and verbal cues empower readers to compare and contrast how vital information is presented;
- Their sequential storytelling has natural breaks between panels providing natural opportunities for scaffolding and comprehension;
- Information and story gaps between the panels require active problem solving as readers must extrapolate what is missing; and
- Short bursts of text make it easier for readers to recognize main ideas, while presenting material in a fast-paced exciting manner.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. I invite you to search the diverse resources on this website as well as checking out *Worth A Thousand Words* for more.