

## Free Reading and the Graphic Novel is FUNdamental

Throughout the school day, I hear several comments about reading from both students and teachers alike: “Reading is boring,” “I never like what we read in school,” “I like reading, but I don’t have enough time to sit down with a book,” and “My kids never do their reading assignments for class.” These comments target the same issue: How can we make reading, which is fundamental to learning, fun for our students? The answer to this question is simple: institute Free Reading time in our Language Arts or English programs. This idea may help solve many of the reading issues that plague both students and teachers.

There seem to be two large groups of students who have reading obstacles: the reader who wants to read something that is not required for school and the reluctant reader. Students complain that they are not allowed to choose what they are interested in reading, and thus attribute reading for leisure with schoolwork. Similarly, students who are labelled as reluctant readers often do not hate the act of reading, but rather hate what they are reading and therefore have not established a personal connection with reading. With Free Reading time, however, students are given the freedom to explore their reading interests. Therefore, reading can be associated with the freedom to choose and a hobby which students enjoy, indirectly helping students to perform their best at standardized exams where reading comprehension is a part of the exam.

So if students are actively reading and performing well on their exams, what is the problem? The answer is that the instructors’ view on what their students should be reading during Free Reading time—with limitations such as format, page numbers, and quality. This is a particularly sensitive issue when students are reading graphic novels.

Graphic novels are generally targeted as less serious reads because they contain illustrations along with text, contain stories with superheroes, and are sometimes “graphic” in terms of violence and sex. Due to these characteristics, some parents and teachers see them as less valuable than a traditional book. I admit that I thought the same thing when I first heard about graphic novels. It was not until I actually read one and further studied the medium did I realize that there are several genres and types of graphic novels that

are beyond superheroes and are written for various audiences. As I started to read a graphic novel, I was surprised to find that, for me, they are a lot harder than reading your traditional book. Not only did I have to pay attention to both illustrations and text in one panel, but I needed to figure out which panel to read next in order to follow the story line. Unlike the traditional book, where I had to read linearly and then spend time after finishing the book to process how I feel about the novel, the graphic novel allowed me to immediately respond to what I was seeing and reading. For example, the first graphic novels that I read were Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novels, *Maus I* and *Maus II*. Both volumes depict the Holocaust through different perspectives: the survivor, and those who did not experience it directly, but are deeply connected to it nonetheless. Not only are graphic novels complex in structure, but they are also more reader friendly to different types of learners. For example, Andy Runton’s Eisner Award-winning series entitled *Owly* is a wordless graphic novel. Unlike reading the traditional novel, where the plot and characters take lots of pages to develop, graphic novels dive right into the action and are generally under 200 pages. I have overheard several of my students say they like graphic novels because they read and feel like movies. These are all reasons why students should be allowed to read graphic novels for their Free Reading choice; and it is our responsibility to allow them the freedom to choose.

As a teacher-librarian who is relatively new to the field of graphic novels, I often feel overwhelmed to find and select them for my library collection. I have learned a few simple tips to help my anxiety when it comes to ordering graphic novels. For starters, choose graphic novels the same way you would for your print and electronic sources: know your audience and collection development policy. Use lists provided by reviewers or organizations as guides rather than as directives, because your specific community may respond differently to the content and style. I would highly suggest contacting a nearby comic book store and chatting with fellow teacher-librarians who are avid graphic novel readers to see what they recommend.

Why not ask the students for suggestions? Here are four titles recently examined by my friend’s Graphic Novel Reading Club and Review Team (a group of students in grades 6–8: