Glen Downey

2. Students must be taught a vocabulary relevant to the study of comics

There is little point in having students study and then write about comics and graphic novels without giving them the vocabulary to do so. In the absence of this vocabulary, students will focus on those features that they find in forms they are used to, like short fiction or the novel. Such features include major themes, setting, and characterization.

There is nothing wrong with examining these things, but understanding how they work in a graphic novel requires that students properly write about the form they are investigating. They have to understand what a gutter is, what encapsulation means, and how panel sequences can achieve closure. They should be comfortable with filmic language as well, understanding the difference between how an establishing shot can give the reader/viewer a clear sense of place and how a pullback might do this in a different kind of way. Knowing this vocabulary isn't just useful—it's empowering for anyone wanting to talk about comics in a way that does justice to the form.

3. Students must apply what they learn from the form to make them better writers

We often tell students that when they read good literature—whether a novel, a poem, or a play—that this will help them improve as writers. The same is true of comics and graphic novels, especially when we leverage their formal characteristics. Visual brainstorming, visible thinking, and sketchnoting are names that we collectively assign to the relatively new activity of having students articulate their thoughts and ideas using words, symbols, and images. Such an exercise can be more powerful than a traditional prewriting activity like freewriting because it allows students to do more than write.

By showing students how graphic novelists combine words and images to make meaning, we can encourage those same students to articulate their thinking in a way that doesn't constrain them to think in linear terms. There will be plenty of time to have students write an essay or book report. For now, why not have them express their thoughts in a way that

makes the most sense to them?

When my students engage in visual brainstorming, visible thinking, and sketchnoting, they will often do so for many more hours than class time affords them, even without the motivation of a grade being on the table. And they can produce some amazing work as a result.

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So, the next time you're debating whether or not you should teach students a comic or graphic novel in your classroom, consider these three simple rules and incorporate them into your teaching. The result will be a unit that doesn't just engage students with a work they find accessible; it will empower them to understand a unique artistic and literary tradition, build their vocabulary, and empower them to see the thinking and writing process in a new way. ▮