



But I Live Educational Resources

Handout: Reading Graphic Narratives

Details and Context for the Five Sample Pages

Batman: Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean

Focus on the art style and lettering.

Unique to visual narratives, lettering is an often-overlooked element of the medium. Notice how the lettering aids characterization, mirroring and highlighting the contrasting art styles used for the two characters. This demonstrates how characterization is achieved in ways unique to the medium.

Boxer & Saints by Gene Luen Yang

Focus on colour and perspective.

The artist generally uses a monochrome palette, which suggests mundanity or memory, but highlights two central figures in gold, giving them an otherworldly or divine quality. Perspective is created by showing a character's perception and understanding of a scene. In this sample, we see a character's reaction to the otherworldly beings; this gives the reader an understanding of what the character sees, and how it makes her feel. Perspective creates an intimate understanding of character by allowing a reader to see through their eyes.

Note as well that word bubbles are used unconventionally: "!" and "!?" show surprise and confusion respectively. Students should understand that this character is not saying "exclamation mark" aloud—rather the word bubbles are being used to express the character's emotional state, in this case, exclamation.

Cowboy Henk by Kamagurka and Herr Seele

Focus on sequence and movement in this absurdist Belgian comic strip.

Pay attention to how the artist uses thin lines to convey movement in a still image. Also, the sequence in which the panels are read creates a logical chain of events. The **white space** or **gutters** between each panel are where our brains fill in the missing pieces. Panels 2, 3, and 4, for example, taken out of context, would all seem nonsensical. By using thin lines to convey shock and recognition in panel 2, the reader understands that the fish in panel three is what Henk is looking at. This short strip is an excellent example of the internal logic of comics, and how to navigate them.

End of Evangelion by Hideaki Anno

Focus on panelling and aesthetics.

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This page is an example of **manga**, a Japanese form of visual narrative. Manga is read from right to left. Consider the fluid panelling style, the use of linework to express intensity and movement, and the use of lettering to highlight **onomatopoeia**. Manga differ from Western comics in that they often use overlapping vignettes, eschewing bounded rectangular panels—instead action bleeds across panels. Linework is used to convey movement, but also emotional intensity. Notice the vertical lines in the middle panel, which are used to heighten the character’s sense of distress. Finally, similar to *Arkham Asylum*, the visual appearance of the lettering is used to convey sound and atmosphere: the highly jagged Kanji letters visually support the sounds they are expressing—you don’t need to understand Kanji to get a sense of what the words mean.

Watchmen by Alan Moore

Focus on characterization and composition.

In this series of panels, we see two characters incinerated by a nuclear blast. In the first two panels, we see a newspaper with the headline “WAR?” which provides context for what follows. We also see a character shield another as an act of protection, highlighting the wartime setting. By vanishing the background in panel three, the text highlights the motion of the approaching blast, which consumes the building that has been in the background in the first two panels. The vanished background also creates a sense of intimacy—and intensity—in the final moments of the characters’ lives.

These panels are an excellent example of how sequence and composition affect the reader. While the characters are in silhouette, within the context of the text, we recognize them—and moreover, understand their relationship summed up simply and clearly in this one moment. This is an elegant example of characterization through means unique to the medium.