

# Reading Comics

Comics and graphic novels are a rich and varied art form that combine images and text in sequenced panels to tell a story. As one of the fastest growing text formats, they are a popular choice for students and offer an engaging alternative to more traditional articles and stories. When used with explicit teacher instruction, comics offer new opportunities for students to develop the literacy skills needed to meet the reading and writing demands of the curriculum.

There are many different genres of comics, including slice-of-life, humorous, non-fiction, historical, science fiction, and of course, superheroes. This teacher support material (TSM) unpacks the conventions, metalanguage, and visual and written language features of comics to support teachers in their use of comics for literacy instruction.



## How do comics support literacy learning?

Comics frequently elicit increased motivation and engagement from students. They also provide many opportunities for students to develop their close-reading skills, including inferencing, critical thinking, and sequencing. Many comics published as part of the School Journal series have corresponding TSM that outline specific activities and supporting strategies for that text. However, amplified opportunities to develop reading strategies can be found across the format.

### DRAWING INFERENCES

- In comics, the illustrations are just as important as the text – if not more. Students should slow down and read the pictures as closely as they read the words. They need to “read between the lines” and infer from visual features such as linework, colour, framing, symbolism, facial expressions, and typography to make meaning. They also need to integrate this information with the written text.
- Comics consist of individual panels linked together in a sequence. To build understanding, students need to infer what takes place in the blank spaces between the panels (the gutters). In doing so, they create the movement and action necessary to bring the comic to life.
- Students need to make inferences based on the context to interpret visual conventions, as these may change from comic to comic. For example, while some comics may use black and white to indicate something that has happened in the past, others may use black and white to convey atmosphere or tone.
- The importance of drawing inferences when reading comics will help students to develop this strategy and apply it in more traditional texts.

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Comics present many opportunities for students to make connections to their own lives and to the wider world. As a synthesis of different media, they also draw heavily from film and television conventions. Students need to make connections to these mediums to make sense of what they’re reading, for example, the effect of a close-up or establishing shot.

### SEQUENCING

- The sequential format of comics provides opportunities for students to develop their sequencing skills. The frame-by-frame progression supports their understanding of plot, pacing, structure, and setting.

### VISUALISING

- When reading comics, students need to interpret a variety of visual language features (see pages 5–6). In doing so, they are supported to practise their visualising skills. These skills can then be used to help students create mental pictures when reading more traditional texts.

### UNDERSTANDING COMPLEX PLOTS

- Comics frequently take advantage of their fluid structure to explore complex plots and themes. The combination of written and visual elements supports comprehension and offers many opportunities for different ideas to be linked or juxtaposed across space and time.

### SYNTHESISING INFORMATION

- Comics combine written text and visual images to convey meaning. When reading, students need to integrate the time sequence of written text with the spatial relations of visual images and synthesise this information with their prior knowledge to make meaning. They also need to navigate the different ways that the text and illustrations work together (for more information, see pages 6–7).

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

Comics combine a unique mix of literacy challenges. There are common strategies that can be used across all comics to support the development of students' literacy progression.

- Create or co-construct charts that document comic features and their purpose with students.
- Use mini-lessons to focus on specific visual elements in comics.
- Provide opportunities for students to identify and understand complexities in comics by engaging in a scavenger hunt, where students locate specific features in the text and talk about them in small and whole groups.
- Discuss activities with your school librarian that showcase comics and graphic novels\*. Identify comics and graphic novels which might appeal to students who need encouragement in developing a regular reading routine.
- Provide extended time for students to closely explore the illustrations. Comics are often perceived by students as being easy and quick because of their limited use of text. This can cause students to overlook important details in the illustrations. Encourage the students to slow down and pay attention to every visual detail. Remind students of strategies such as re-reading, examining colour and line, noticing facial expressions, and looking across and within frames.
- Have students discuss the comic in pairs or small groups. Students could record questions they have about the text as they read and then come together to negotiate the answers. Talking about their interpretations together can help students to notice visual and written language features they might otherwise overlook and arrive at a deeper level of understanding.

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\* Graphic novels are generally longer than comic books and have complete, non-serialised narratives.

## LEARNING PROGRESSION FRAMEWORKS

Comics provide unique opportunities for students to develop expertise and make progress in specific aspects of the reading and writing Learning Progression Frameworks (LPF). Reading aspects include “Making sense of text: using knowledge of text structure and features”, “Making sense of text: reading critically”, and “Reading for literary experience”. Writing aspects include “Writing meaningful text: using knowledge of text structure and features” and “Creating texts for literary purposes”.



Learning Progression Frameworks

# What types of comics are available in the School Journal series?

## AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND HISTORY



**Te Tiriti o Waitangi,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 4, 2018



**Bok Choy,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 3, 2015

## HUMOUR



**Miri & Raru,**  
School Journal, Level 3,  
October 2015



**Speechless,**  
School Journal, Level 3,  
May 2019

## MEMOIR/BIOGRAPHY



**Something Alive,**  
School Journal, Level 4,  
June 2018



**My Name is Rez,**  
School Journal, Level 3,  
November 2017

## SCIENCE



**Betty Batham: Biologist,**  
Shifting Views, Connected,  
Level 3, 2019

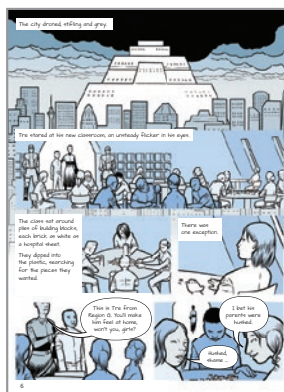


**The Subantarctic Islands,**  
School Journal, Level 3,  
August 2017

## SCIENCE FICTION



**Frogs,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 4, 2013



**Wind Chimes,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 4, 2017

## SLICE OF LIFE



**Lost in the Bush,**  
School Journal, Level 2,  
November 2016



**The Bittern,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 3, 2012

Search all School Journal comics



# How do you read a comic?

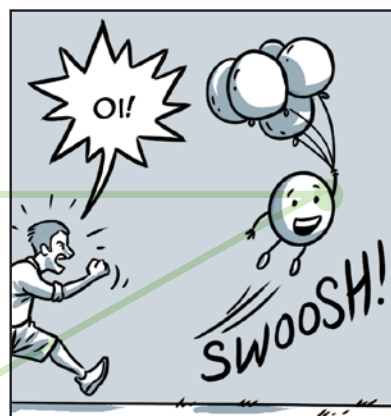
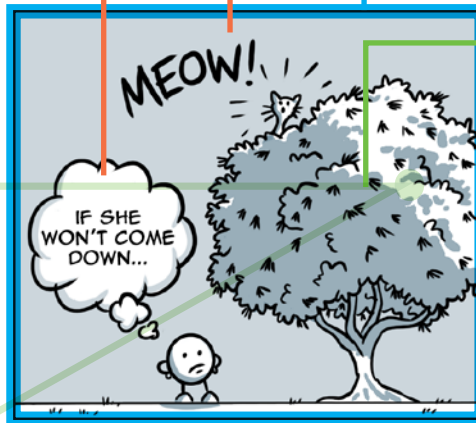
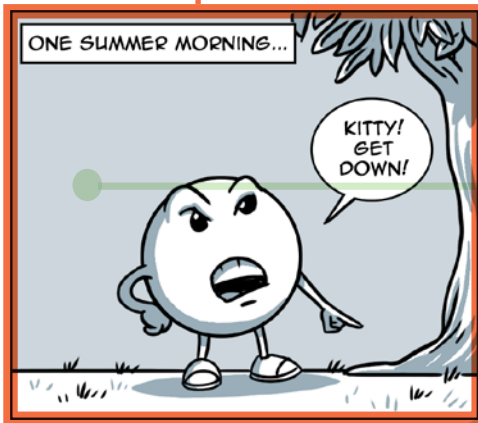
Comics are broken down into individual sections called **panels** or **frames**. Each panel contains one piece of action.

A panel usually consists of text and images, although not always together.

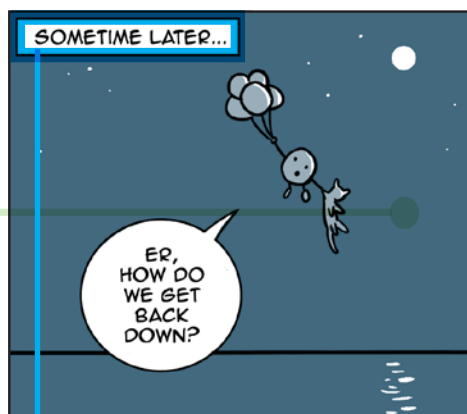
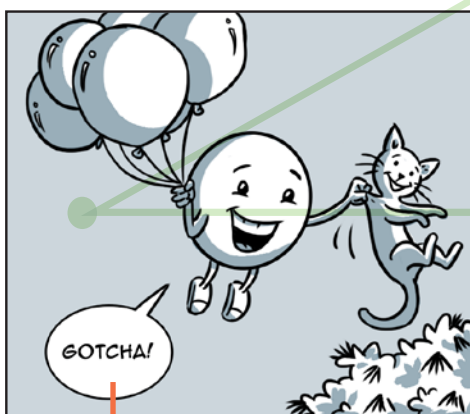
Panels are often surrounded by rectangular borders.

Panels are read from left to right and progress down the page in a zigzag direction.

The spaces between the panels are called **gutters**. They indicate where one action ends and another begins.



There are three forms of text commonly found in comics: **speech bubbles**, **captions**, and **sound effects**. Generally, you should read the text from top to bottom. If the text is about the same height, you should read from left to right.



The shape of the speech bubble can indicate how the character is talking. For example, a jagged, spikey speech bubble indicates that a character is shouting. Alternatively, a cloud shaped speech bubble signifies a character's thoughts.



Sound effects use onomatopoeia to indicate sound. They are not contained within a speech bubble or caption.

A speech bubble contains a character's dialogue and is linked directly to the illustration.

A caption usually appears in a box separate to the illustration. It often contains the story's narration, either in first or third person, but can also contain a character's thoughts or dialogue.



## Visual features: What to look out for

Reading a comic is a different experience to reading a written text. While they can appear simple on the surface, comics require the reader to incorporate a range of complex and sophisticated visual and written language features. Encourage students to slow down and read the illustrations as closely as they read the text.

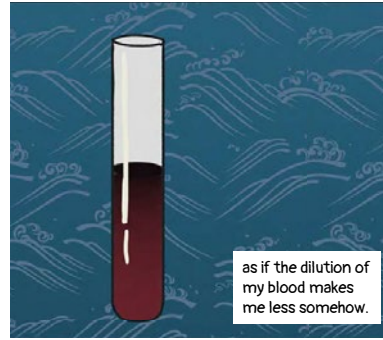
**Icons** - an icon is any image that is used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea. All comics are told using icons, and they can range in style from being hyper-realistic to highly abstract. In all cases, icons represent a simplified version of reality. This allows the illustrator to influence what the reader focuses on and amplify the importance of the details that are included. The ability of comics to focus the reader's attention towards a specific purpose is part of what makes them such a successful storytelling medium.



**Suzie and the Space Nuts,**  
School Journal, Part 2,  
Number 1, 2000



**In the End,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 3, 2014



**Something Alive,**  
School Journal, Level 4,  
June 2018



**Miri & Raru,**  
School Journal, Level 3,  
October 2015

**Colour** - the colour palette of a comic has a strong influence on the story. It can shape the tone, indicate a shift in time or location, or focus the reader's attention on a particular detail.



**Wind Chimes,**  
School Journal Story Library, Level 4, 2017



**Once a Panther,**  
School Journal Story Library, Level 4, 2019



**Detail** - different levels of detail can affect the tone of a story or direct the reader's attention. For example, stripped back illustrations can feel quieter and more focused, while highly detailed images can feel louder and more expressive or realistic.



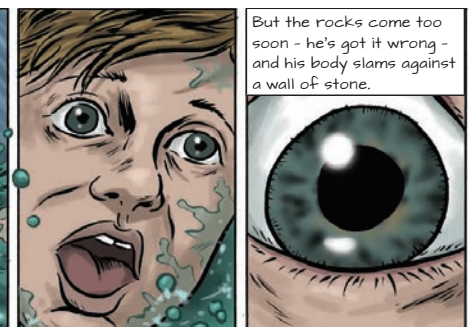
**In the End,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 3, 2014



**Frogs,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 4, 2013



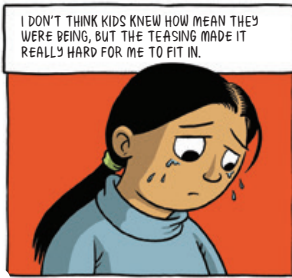
**Bok Choy,**  
School Journal Story Library,  
Level 3, 2015





## Visual features: What to look out for

**Expression** - the expression on a character's face shows the reader how the character is feeling. Characters' feelings are often not stated, so taking the time to notice their expressions is important.



**My Name is Rez**, School Journal, Level 3, November 2017



**Speechless**, School Journal, Level 3, May 2019

**Framing** - each illustration is drawn from a particular angle or perspective. Different angles lend themselves to different purposes, so pay attention to what the illustrator has chosen to show. For example, long-distance shots are often used to establish a location, while close-ups allow the illustrator to communicate emotion.



**Wind Chimes**, School Journal Story Library, Level 4, 2017



**Three Days at Te Awapātiki**, School Journal, Part 4, Number 3, 2010



**Something Alive**, School Journal, Level 4, June 2018

**Gutters** - comics require readers to make inferences and connections between panels using their imaginations. This is where the comic comes alive - in the spaces between the panels.



**Sky-High**, School Journal, Level 4, June 2014

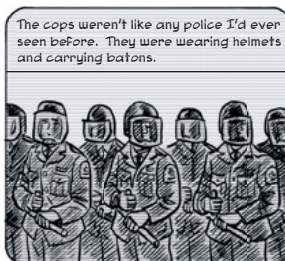


**Lost in the Bush**, School Journal, Level 2, November 2016



**Speechless**, School Journal, Level 3, May 2019

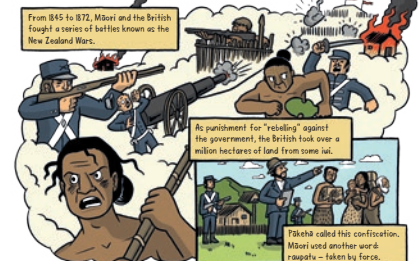
**Shape** - the shape and size of a panel can indicate the importance of a scene, shape the reader's perception of time, signify a dream or thought, or indicate the relationship between panels. The size of a panel can also signify how much attention should be paid to the illustration.



**Game Over**, School Journal, Part 4, Number 2, 2011



**Miri & Raru**, School Journal, Level 3, October 2015



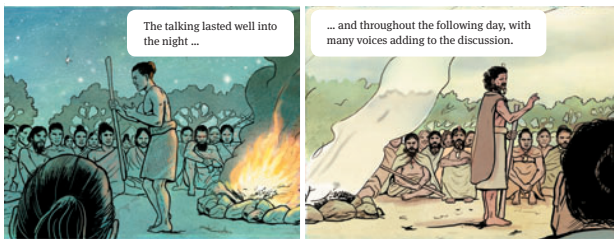
**Te Tiriti o Waitangi**, School Journal Story Library, Level 4, 2018



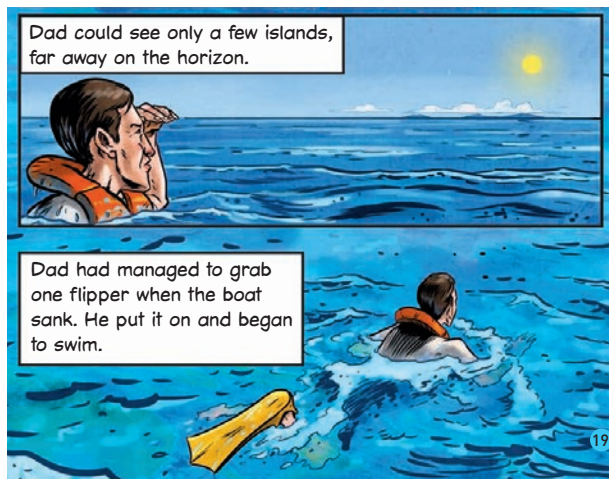
# How do the words and pictures work together?

Within a single panel, the text and illustrations can interact in different ways. For example:

## The illustrations can directly illustrate the text

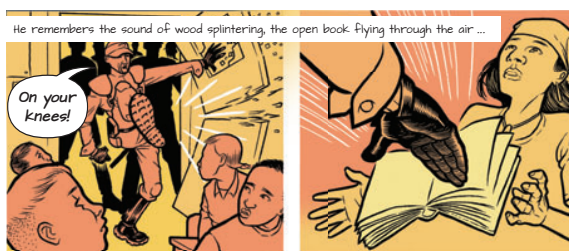


**Three Days at Te Awapātiki**, School Journal, Part 4, Number 3, 2010

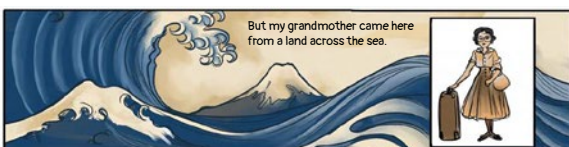


**Shipwrecked**, School Journal, Level 2, October 2013

## The illustrations can amplify the message in the text



**Wind Chimes**, School Journal, Story Library, Level 4, 2017



**Something Alive**, School Journal, Level 4, June 2018



**The Bullet**, School Journal Story Library, Years 7–8, 2011

## The text can add sound to the illustrations

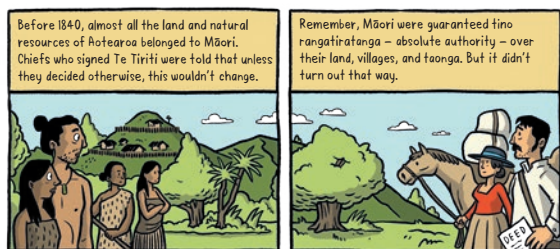


**Once a Panther**, School Journal Story Library, Level 4, 2019

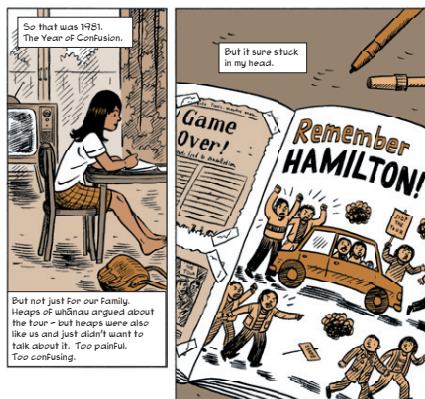


**Miri & Raru**, School Journal, Level 3, October 2015

## The text and illustrations can tell two stories simultaneously that combine to communicate something bigger together.



**Te Tiriti o Waitangi**, School Journal Story Library, Level 4, 2018



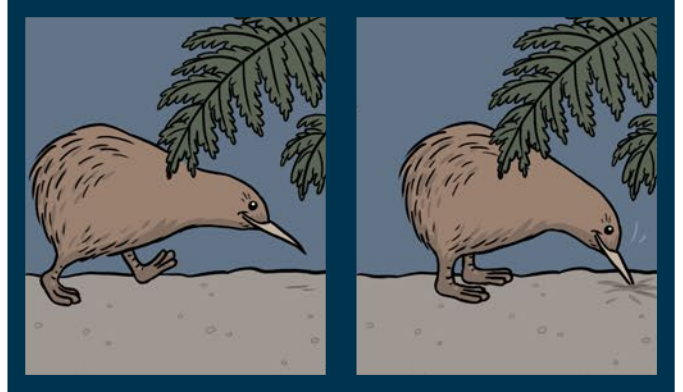
**Game Over**, School Journal, Part 4, Number 2, 2011



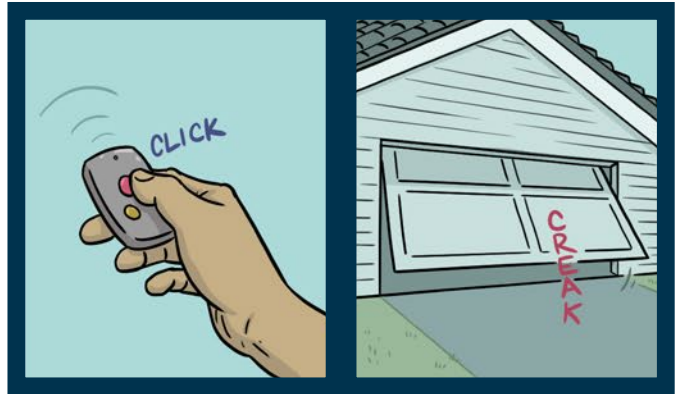
# How do the words and pictures work together?

There are also a range of different connections a reader will need to make between panels. Here are four of the most common transiti

## MOMENT-TO-MOMENT



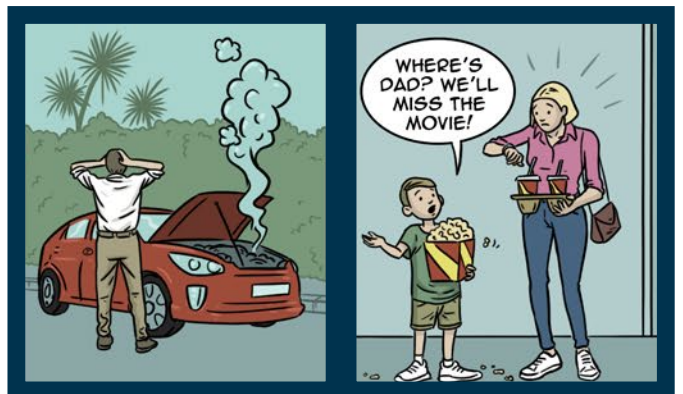
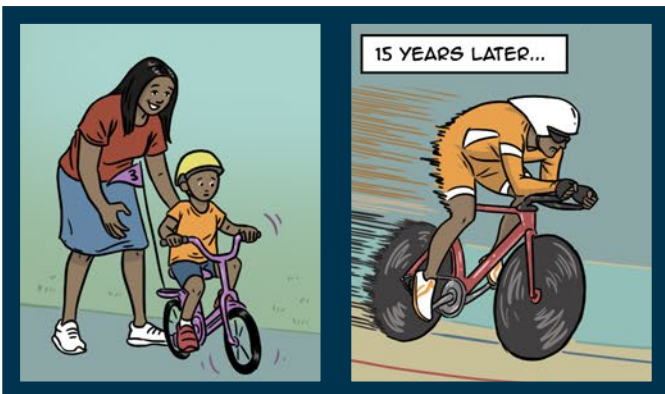
## SUBJECT-TO-SUBJECT



## ACTION-TO-ACTION



## SCENE-TO-SCENE



# Where can I find out more?

## WEBSITES

*Raising a Reader: How Comics and Graphic Novels Can Help Your Kids Love To Read* by Dr Meryl Jaffe <http://cblfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015-CBLDF-Raising-a-Reader-ComicBook-FINAL-PRINT-sm.pdf>

*No flying, no tights* – Website that reviews and does features on current and classic graphic novels <http://www.noflyingnotights.com/>

*Bookshelf from Diamond Comics* – A great start for using comics and graphic novels in schools, including articles, lesson plans, and core lists <https://diamondbookshelf.com/?tag=schools>

*Reading Lessons: Graphic Novels 101* by Hollis Margaret Rudiger <http://25m2oh3xnqyj3i3gq43gv3m4.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Reading-Lessons-Graphic-Novels-101-Rudiger.pdf>

*More Ways to Pitch Graphic Novels* by John Schumacher <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2014/08/12/more-ways-to-pitch-graphic-novels>

*A Guide to using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens* by Scholastic.com [http://www.scholastic.com/graphix\\_teacher/pdf/Graphix%20Teachers%20guide.pdf](http://www.scholastic.com/graphix_teacher/pdf/Graphix%20Teachers%20guide.pdf)

*Going Graphic* by James Bucky Carter <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar09/vol66/num06/Going-Graphic.aspx>

*Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels in the Language Arts Classroom* by Kym Francis <https://gettinggraphic.weebly.com/>

*Drawing Words Writing Pictures* by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden <https://dw-wp.com/>

## BOOKS

*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud

*Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* by Stephen Cary

*Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* by James Bucky Carter

*Teaching Graphic Novels in the Classroom: Building Literacy and Comprehension* by Ryan Novak

*Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide* by Allyson and Barry Lyga

*The Librarian's Guide to Graphic Novels for Children and Tweens* by David S. Serchay

*Adventures in Graphica* by Terry Thompson

*Reading With Pictures: Comics That Make Kids Smarter* by Josh Elder

## JOURNAL ARTICLES

*The Comic Book Project: Forging Alternative Pathways to Literacy* by Michael Bitz. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Vol. 47, No. 7 (Apr., 2004), pp. 574-586

## VIDEOS

Communicating through Comics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeQjio9eBho>

Dav Pilkey – The importance of graphic novels in the classroom! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOLzG9yyF40>

How Comic Books Can Transform Student Learning Illya Kowalchuk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYA8Yxlar3E>