

Not Just Pictures: A Beginner's Guide to Graphic Novels and Comics as A Teaching and Learning Tool for Culture and Identity

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2. Preface

Preface

This self-guided tutorial on using graphic novels as a tool for teaching and learning. It has been made for beginners with little or no experience in this area. However, there is a selection of recommended readings at the end of the guide for further self-edification.

This guide uses some comic books available in the public domain dated from the mid 20th century. These comics were chosen to reflect the structural components of graphic novels. However, the creator in no way endorses the subject matter of those publications nor their creators.

This guide is also the first in what I expect to be several iterations. Consequently, this guide may be imperfect in some ways and I invite you to share your feedback and suggestions.

Preface

By bringing graphic novels more into the “mainstream” as an acceptable teaching and learning tool, it is my hope that this will increase the representation of more diverse groups in mainstream literature. In my own experience as a student in K-12 and higher education, I often had difficulty connecting with the characters in the stories we read. For me, the premise of *Romeo and Juliet* seemed as silly now as it did as a kid, if not more so. In contrast, reading books like *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui and *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen helped me to feel a connectedness with the characters, but also with others who felt the same way about those stories.

3. About the Author

About the Author

Ming Lei is an Assistant Professor of Educational Studies at Knox College. He completed his doctorate at Michigan State University in Educational Psychology and Educational Technology and his Bachelor of Science in Education at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. His background in education is grounded in K-12 education, having taught and designed curriculum for middle and high school mathematics, science, English, social studies, and visual-performing arts. Ming has also trained in-service and preservice educators in elementary, secondary, early childhood, and special education from the United States and from abroad in a wide range of issues ranging from adolescent development to universal design for learning.

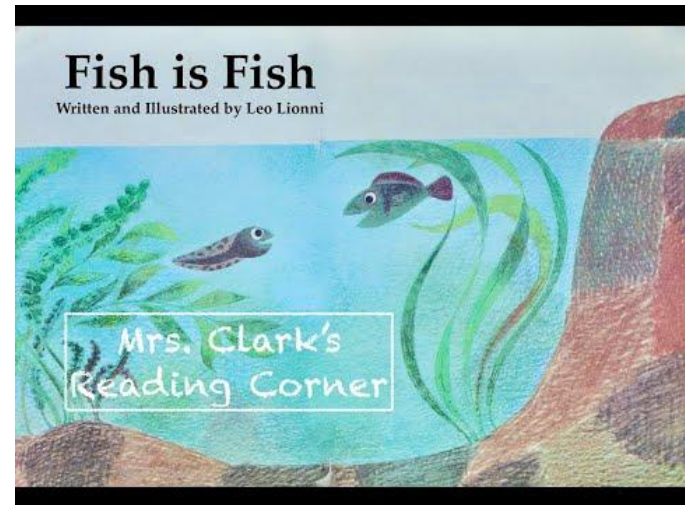
4. Defining Graphic Novels

Definition of Graphic Novels

The scholarly discussions on what counts as graphic novels are too widely debated and discussed to be thoroughly addressed within the scope of this workshop. As such, we will use a simplified definition of graphic novels as: “sequential art, the arrangement of pictures or images and word to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (Eisner, 1985, p. 5). Graphic novels have been related to films due to their sequential nature (Hoover, 2012), but described as a hybrid medium due their use of both text and visual media (Corner & Clark, 2007). Graphic novels have been described as being more closely related to film rather than print media because of “dramatic use of shifts in scale, perspective, point of view, or other graphic markers of cognitive frame changes” (Drucker, 2008, p. 41). By this definition, comic books would be a type of graphic novel, as they have been defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McLoud, 1993, p. 9).

Definition of Graphic Novels

“Picture books” are one form of graphic novels, such as, Leo Lionni’s *Fish is Fish*, which demonstrates how one’s environment shapes how we perceive difference and the world at large, such as a fish who sees a cow as a fish with spots or a bird as a fish with wings.



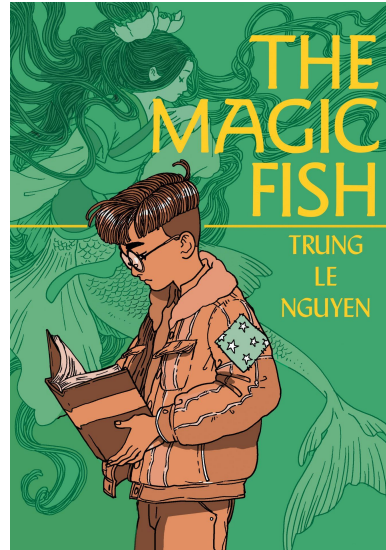
Definition of Graphic Novels

Comics and comic strips can also be considered a form of graphic novel under our current definition. This includes samples like the *Dizzy Duck* comic (Chambers, 1995).



Definition of Graphic Novels

Longer publications such as full-length graphic novels, novellas, or vignettes that use a visual and textual component in tandem would also be examples of graphic novels, such as *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen



5. The Educational Psychology Behind Graphic Novels

The Educational Psychology Behind Graphic Novels

Several schools of thought within educational psychology support the potential of graphic novels as a tool for teaching and learning. From the information processing model, the use of the combined visual and textual components of the graphic novel medium facilitates stronger memory formation through dual coding theory, in which the combination of encoding and storing information as both verbal + nonverbal information results in stronger memories (Clark & Paivio, 1991). Writing and drawing are immersive experiences where the creators are actively involved in the process, which involves the holistic combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and has been characterized by John Dewey as “learning by doing” (Wallace, 1993).

The Educational Psychology Behind Graphic Novels

In other words, the creation of graphic novels “is an active process, both for creators and for readers who by necessity engage in the active production of meaning and who use all resources available to them based on their familiarity with the comics medium and its inherent grammars, their histories, life experience, and interests.”(Jacobs, 2007, p. 5)

6. Graphic Novels as a Part of Teaching and Learning About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

6. Graphic Novels as a Part of Teaching and Learning About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In preparing educators and professionals to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within schools, the workplace, and communities at large, there are several frameworks that have been commonly used (see next slide). However, a common aspect of these frameworks is the necessity to understand the *cultural other*. However, as highlighted by the book *Fish is Fish*, the way one views the world, particularly other cultures, is bounded by ones own experiences and cultural framework. Therefore, in order to truly understand others, it is first necessary to understand what is our own culture and how that shapes our worldview. Many people not aware of their own culture, which Rogoff (2003) likened to a fish being unaware of its water, therefore it is necessary to make visible that which is invisible as a foundational step to understanding others by first understanding the self.

6. Graphic Novels as a Part of Teaching and Learning About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

List of frameworks used to guide practice that advances diversity, equity, and inclusion

- Culturally responsive teaching: Familiarity with belief and value systems (Gay, 2000)
- Culturally relevant pedagogy: Belief in the abilities of all people (Ladson-Billings, 1995)
- Culturally sustaining pedagogy: Maintain cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012)
- intercultural effectiveness: Manage stress, effective communication (Hammer et al., 1979)
- Global mindset: Desire to learn more about the world (Gupta & Govindrajan, 2002)
- Cultural intelligence: Culturally-appropriate behaviors (Peterson, 2004).

6. Graphic Novels as a Part of Teaching and Learning About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In order to achieve this goal of understanding one's own culture, we can use the affordances of the graphic novel medium to capture the beliefs, values, and practices which shape one's culture. The process of constructing a graphic novel becomes a scaffold for people to make that which is abstract into something that is concrete. And in making these ideas tangible and concrete to an audience, the creator themselves also gains a better understanding of their own culture.



6. Graphic Novels as a Part of Teaching and Learning About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

So it is at this point in the guide that we transition to learning about the components of graphic novels, offer some examples, and practice prototyping graphic novels.

7. Components of Graphic Novels and Integrated Practice

Components of Graphic Novels and Integrated Practice

The three components of graphic novels we will cover in this guide are as follows:

1. Panel design
2. Layout
3. Flow

This guide will present some basic definitions accompanied by examples, and self-guided practice for teaching with th

Panel Design

The basic building blocks of graphic novels are panels. From a literal perspective, panels are the space in which text and visual content are presented.

Panels are typically demarcated by a boundary line, like a rectangular box. The shape of panels may vary, and some panels will not include a border. The panel from a storytelling perspective typically represents a moment or a scene within a story.

Panel Design

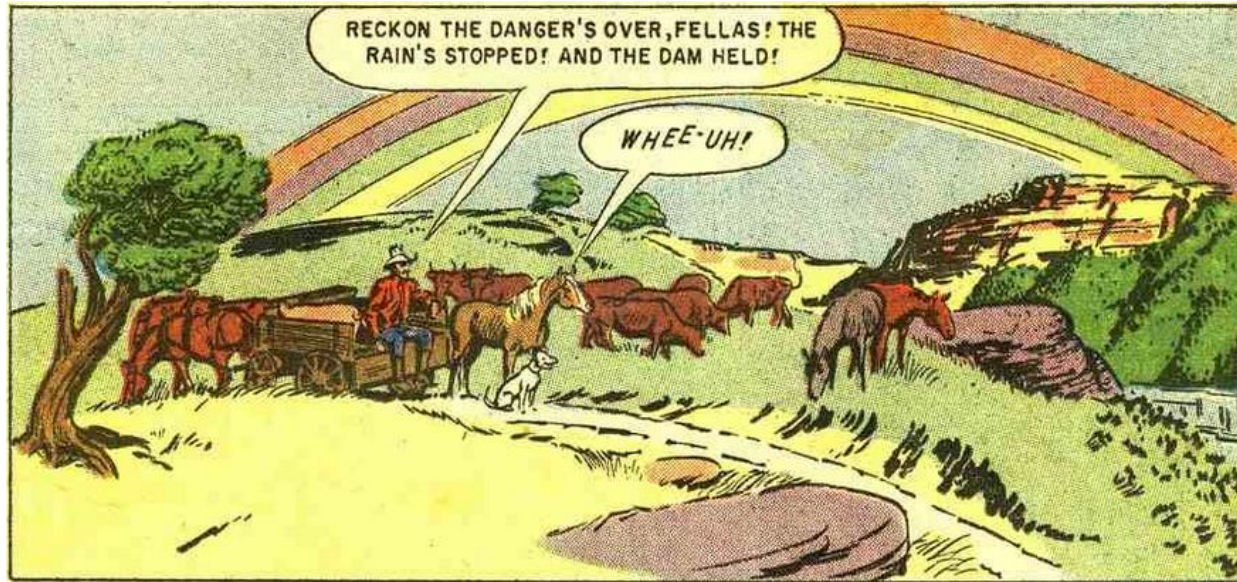
On the visual side, the composition of the panel shares similarities with composition in cinematography and photography and there are several common styles.

- Close up of a person/object
- A head shot
- Wide, establishing a setting

For more examples, see: [Steve Ellis](#)

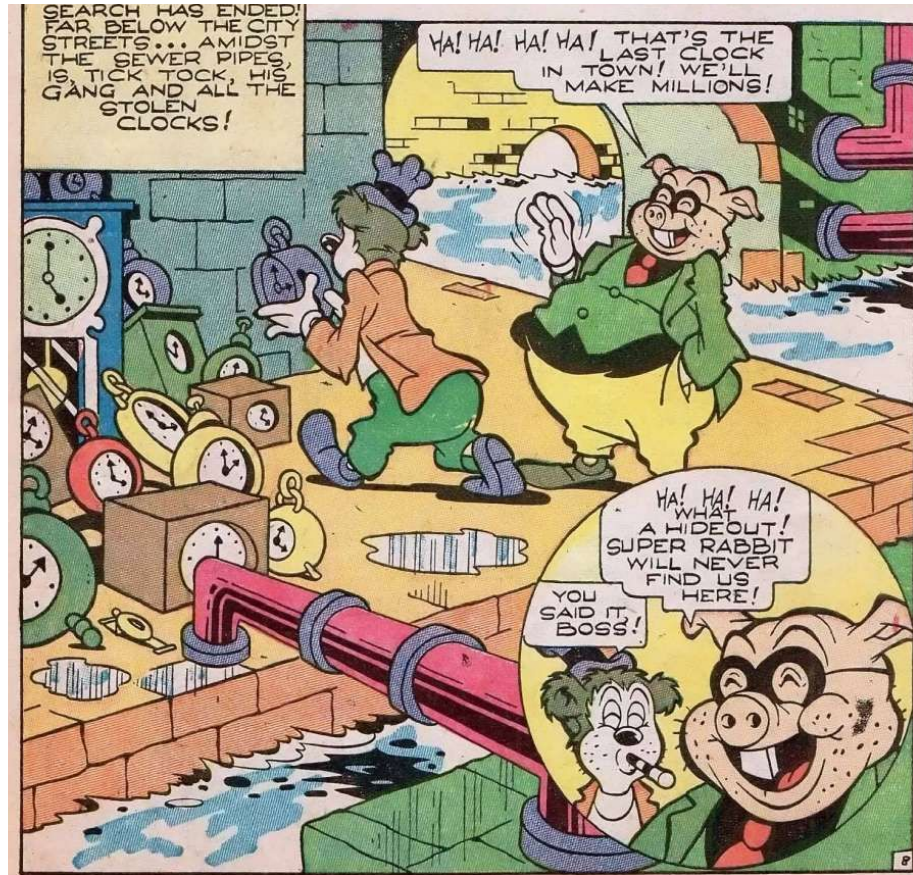
Panel Design

Wide, establishing a setting, such as a grassland with a rainbow and horses from *Gene Autry's Champion No. 19* (1955)



Panel Design

A panel that shows an embedded close up of a person/object from *Billy and Buggy Bear No. 1* (Grenet, 1958) in the bottom right corner. This panel emphasizes the emotional state of the characters and highlights their personal details



Panel Design Practice

1. Start with an 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper and use a portrait orientation
2. Pick a panel design
3. Pick an important memory from your life to make your **base** panel.
4. Sketch that memory in a panel, try to fill up your entire page if possible
(Note: Sketches are representations with sufficient detail for a reader to recognize and understand what is being conveyed. For more details on sketching, visit this [guide on sketching](#))

Layout

The layout of a graphic novel is the arrangement of the panels. There are single-panel layouts which contain a single scene represented by one panel. Within American media, the comic series *Non Sequitur* by Wiley Miller commonly used a single-panel design. Single-panel designs embody the “less-is-more” philosophy where a creator may convey large or numerous ideas with few materials.

Layout

The vertical panel on the left of this sample of Elmo's First Christmas from *Adventures in Wonderland No. 5* (Morsi, 1956) gives a sense of height, due to the orientation. The smaller subsequent panels show progress through a journey, which include Elmo the elephant on a flight who then stops at a candy and bakery store before being sent away by the owner.



Layout

The horizontal panels in this sample of Vacation vocation from *Beany and Cecil* (Clampett, 1962) gives a sense of size, particularly in the horizontal dimension. Panel five with the antagonist, Dishonest John, peaks around the corner and down the street toward Cecil (the child) and Beany (the dinosaur).

For more ideas on layout, visit: [Page layout ideas](#)



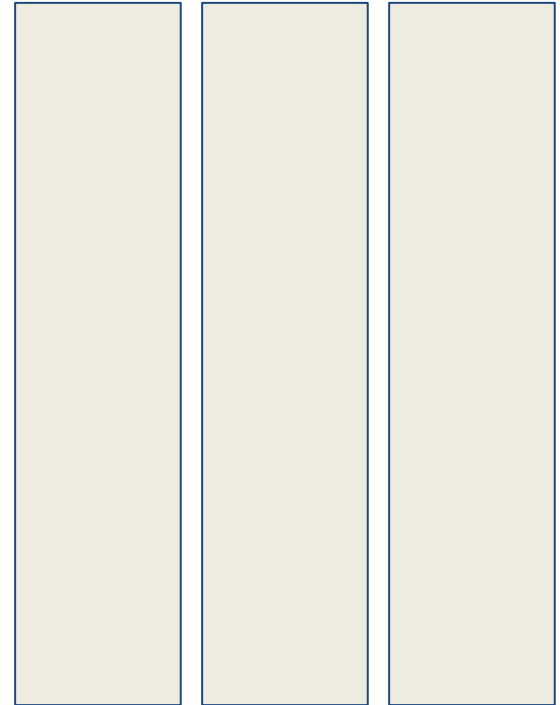
Layout Practice

In this practice, start with one of the single panel sketches from the previous section. We will refer to this single panel as the **base panel** from this point forward.

You will take that single panel and divide it up into multiple panels and experiment with how the layout affects the overall message and feel of the original design.

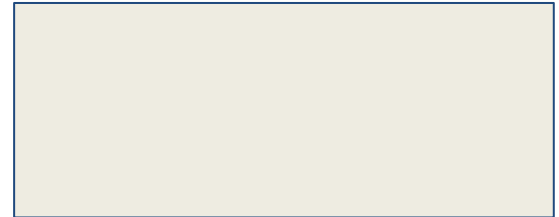
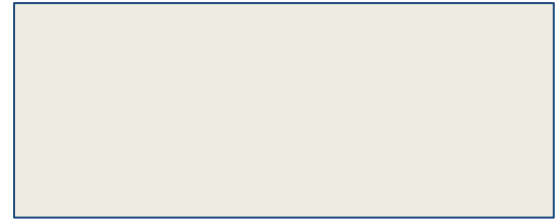
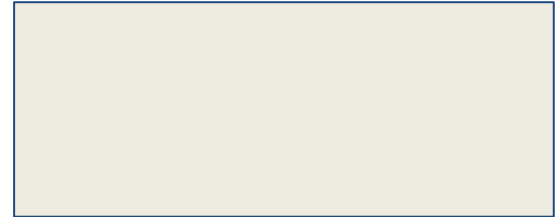
Layout Practice

1. Start by creating three vertical panels that approximately fill a page sized 8.5" x 11"
2. Next, recreate the chosen scene in your **base panel** using this new layout, refer to the result as the **3-tower panel**
3. How does this layout affect your story?



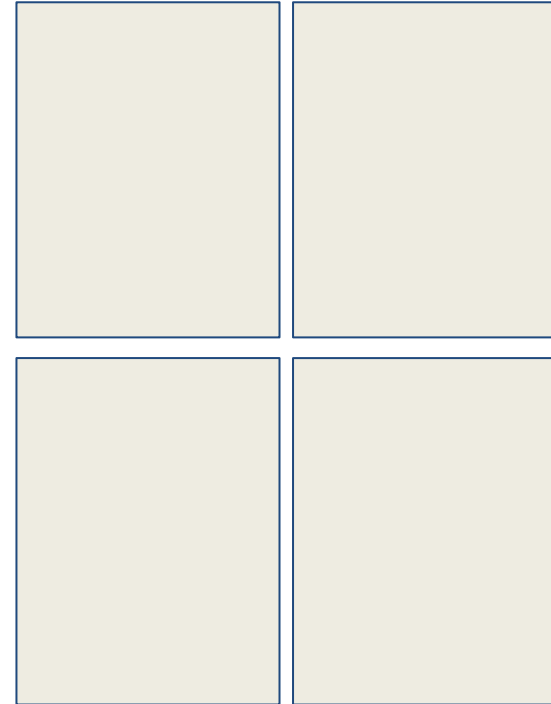
Layout Practice

1. Start by creating three horizontal panels that approximately fill a page sized 8.5" x 11"
2. Next, recreate the chosen scene in your **base panel** using this new layout, refer to the result as the **3-stack** layout.
3. How does the **3-stack** layout compare to your **base panel**?
4. How does the **3-stack** panel layout compare to the **3-tower** layout?



Layout Practice

1. Start by creating three horizontal panels that approximately fill a page sized 8.5" x 11"
2. Next, recreate the chosen scene in your **base panel** using this new layout, refer to the result as the **4-box** layout.
3. How does the **4-box** layout compare to your **base panel**?
4. How does the **4-box** panel layout compare to the **3-tower** and **3-stack** layouts?



Flow

Flow is the direction and sequence of a story that is shaped by panel design and layout design. Flow can be thought of from the literal perspective as the path by which the eyes of a reader will move as they read the story.

Flow can be dictated by cultural components. In the United States, graphic novels typically read from left to right, top to bottom. In Japan, graphic novels not adapted for American audiences typically read from right to left, top to bottom.



Flow

Beyond cultural norms, the visual arrangement of content can act as a cue for readers. A typical flow pattern adopts an S or Z shape, but intentionally “rough” flow may be used to intentionally create a feeling of disorganization to match the feelings within a scene. This kind of meta-level detail is similar to cinematography, which may use “shaky cam” techniques to provoke a feeling of chaos in the viewer.

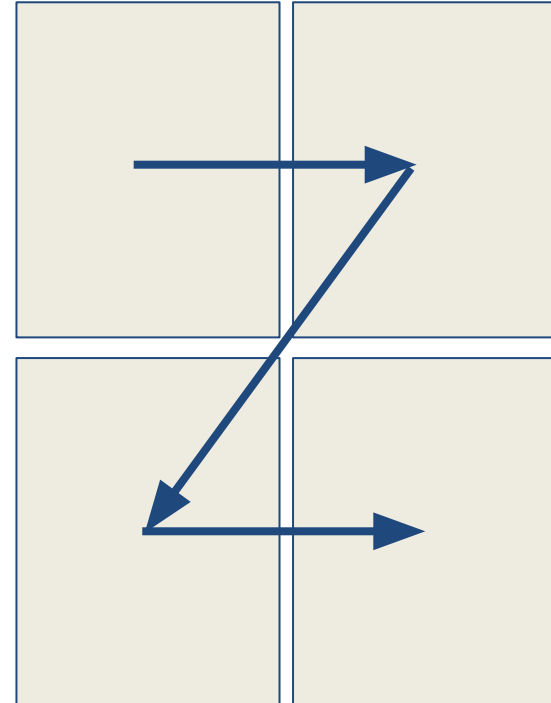
Flow

The layout of a graphic novel can influence flow because their construction dictates the movement of a reader through the story, both in the literal sense in terms of the length of time a person's eyes focus on a portion of a story, the amount of time they spend in a panel. The construction of panels can influence these factors in the following ways.

- Equal Sizes = regular cadence and equal significance of events
- Large + Small or Long + Short = Emphasize an event over a longer, can draw emphasis to some scenes and highlight the significance of some moments over others

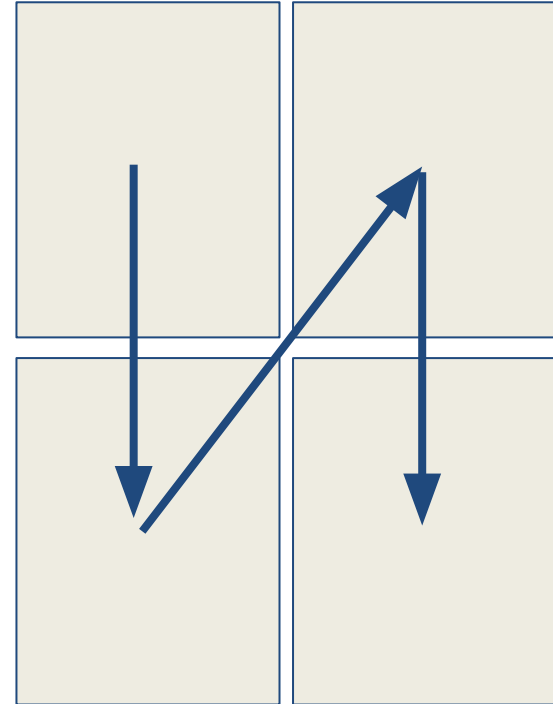
Flow Practice

Start with your **base** panel and add three more moments or events to your story. Piece them together using the **z-flow** shown on the right.



Flow Practice

Start with your **base** panel and add three more moments or events to your story. Piece them together using the **modified s-flow** shown on the right.



Flow Practice

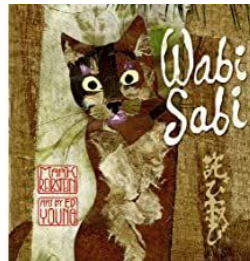
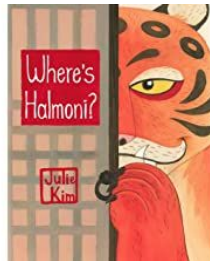
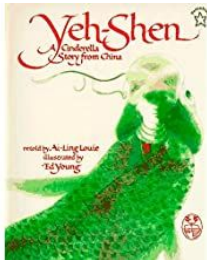
Experiment with different layouts and flow patterns to find one that you think best conveys the key ideas of the story you want to tell.

Putting It All Together

- Think about what is an important, belief, value or practice that is a part of your culture.
- Then think about an important moment or series of moments in your life that influenced the development of this belief, value, or practice
- Tell the story of this experience using no more than three pages (8.5” x 11”) using any combination of panel design, page layout, and flow that you think would best represent your experiences.
-

Considerations for Implementation

This guide provided exemplars of the structural components of graphic novels that were created by predominantly American authors, although several Asian authors were used as well. However, a successful implementation of graphic novels as a teaching and learning tool will require the search and procurement of a wide range of sample texts to act as a reference point for learners. Some books I can offer to represent Asian graphic novels include: *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China* by Ai-Ling Louie, *Where is Halmoni* by Julie Kim, *Wabi Sabi* by Mark Rebstein, *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China* by Ed Young, *The Shadow Hero* by Gene Luen Yang. However, this list is not meant to be comprehensive.



8. Recommended Readings

Recommended Readings

- *Writing for Story: Craft Secrets of Dramatic Nonfiction* by Jon Franklin
- *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* by Scott McCloud
- *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing Comics: How to Create and Sell Comic Books, Manga, and Webcomics* by Comfort Love and Adam Withers
- *Will Eisner's Shop Talk* by Will Eisner
- *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud

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