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Elizabeth Downey

Mississippi State University, emd93@msstate.edu

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# Teaching the Teachers: Introducing Comics with Library Instruction

Elizabeth M. Downey, Associate Professor, Mississippi State University Libraries



## Meeting the Demand

In 2010 we presented "Graphic Novels on Campus: Academic Outreach to the K-12 Community" at the American Library Association Annual Conference. At the time, we had just started to promote graphic novels and comics in our collections and collaborated with one professor. Since then, our collaboration has grown to involve many faculty members in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education (CISE). Requests for instruction on graphic novels increased in the fall following our poster, thanks to several factors, including increased visibility from one of the CISE heads with whom we had worked previously and the new "College and Career Readiness Standards" (what most colloquially have called "Common Core") being developed by the Mississippi Department of Education.

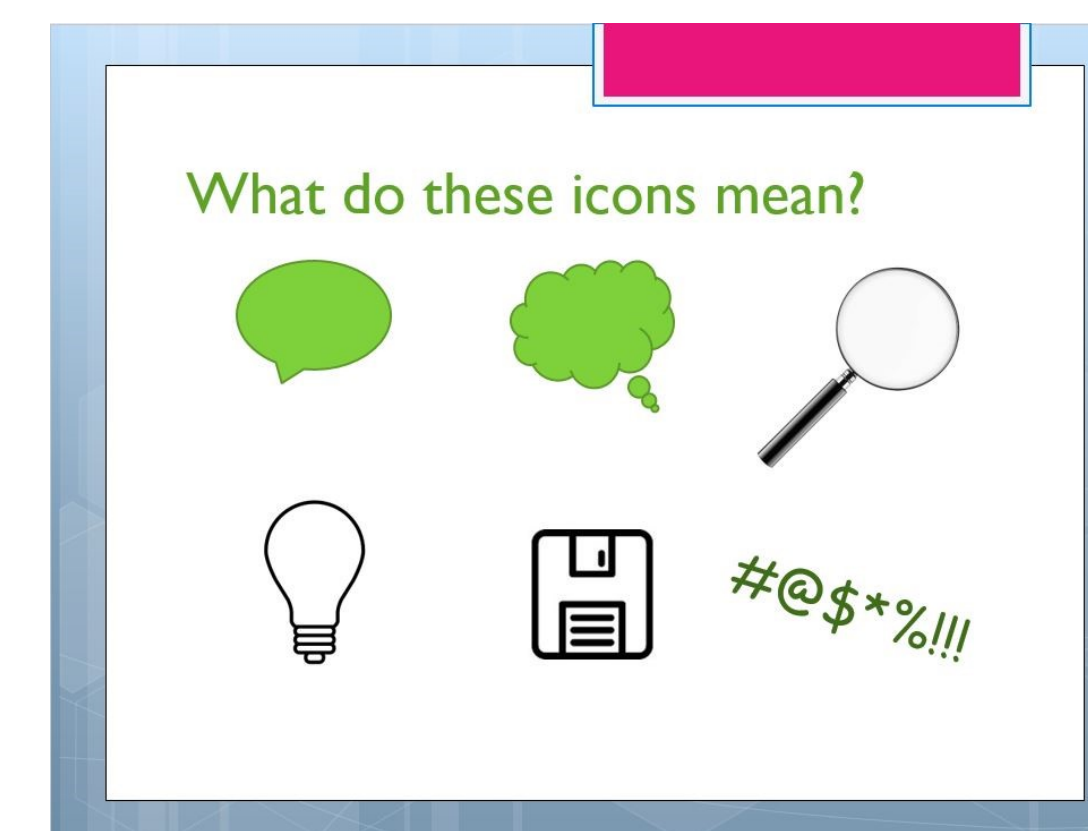
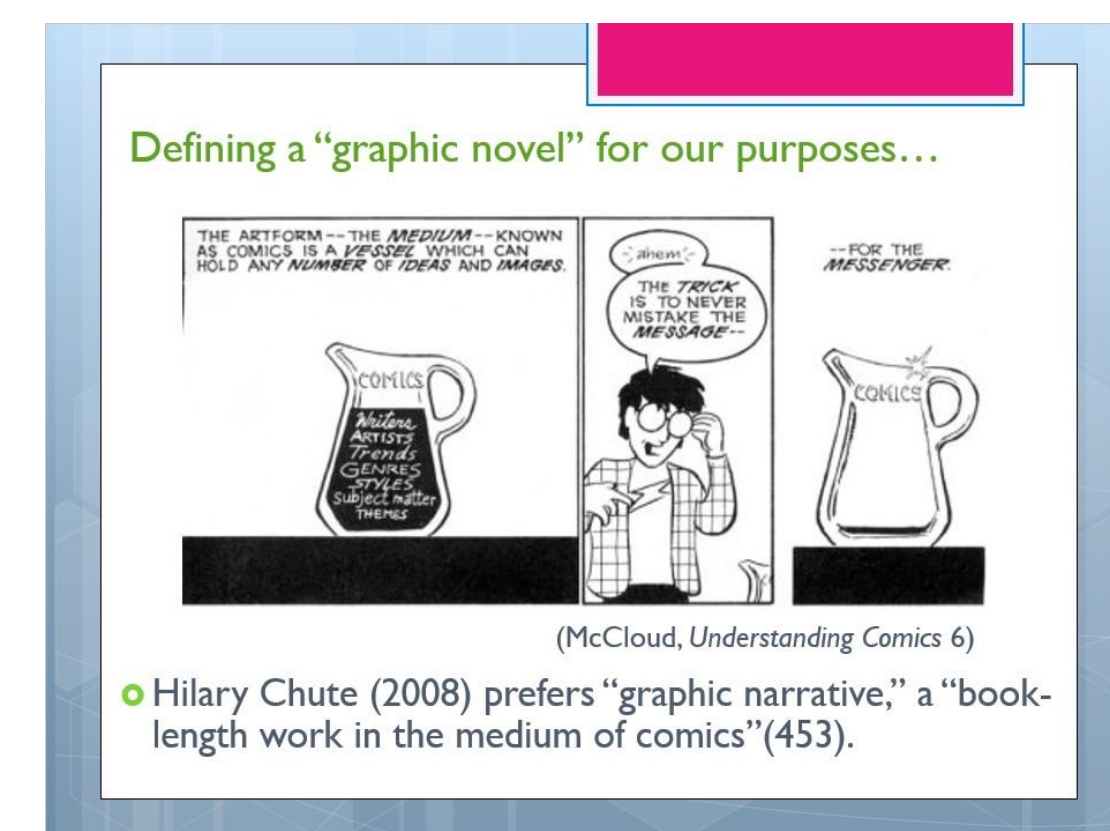
Our first graphic novel session that fall was presented to several sections of [Middle Level Literacy I](#), a class focused on teaching literacy for upper elementary and middle school grades. Sessions for [Teaching Children's Literature at the Elementary and Middle Levels](#) (with a focus on lower grades) followed. In both of those courses, students are asked to select their own texts to read. The reading is different in [Teaching Adolescent Literature](#) and the presentation is adjusted as a result; students are pre-assigned a text, and in past semesters has included Gene Luen Yang's *American-Born Chinese*, Sid Jacobson's *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, and the Guy Sims' adaptation of *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (in a pairing exercise with the original text). Our instruction has extended to professional development for current teachers; we were invited to conduct presentations to the grant-funded [SSILTT \(Science and Social Studies Integration with Literacy and Technology for Teachers\) Institute](#) in 2014 and 2015.



As our graphic novel instruction developed, we also adjusted to organizational changes in our library, one of which came to our advantage; the relocation of our Juvenile Collection. For several years, the collection (which contains most of our graphic novels) had been located on an upper floor in a quiet study area (above), making touring and discussing the collection to a class of thirty students inconvenient to other patrons. When a shift in departments and collections freed a busy area near the coffee shop and the main entrance on the second floor, the Juvenile Collection was moved there and merged with the State Adopted Textbooks to create the [Educational Resources Collection \(ERC\)](#). Now it was easy to take students from the classroom to the collections without disruption.

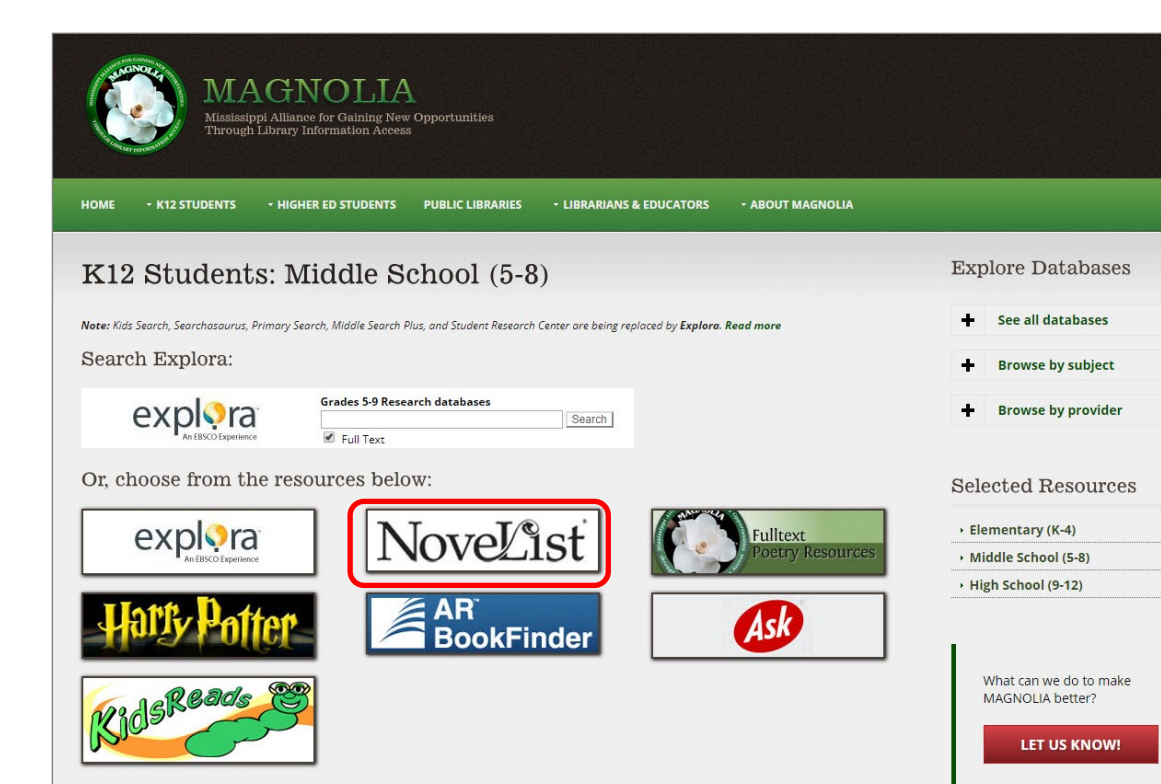
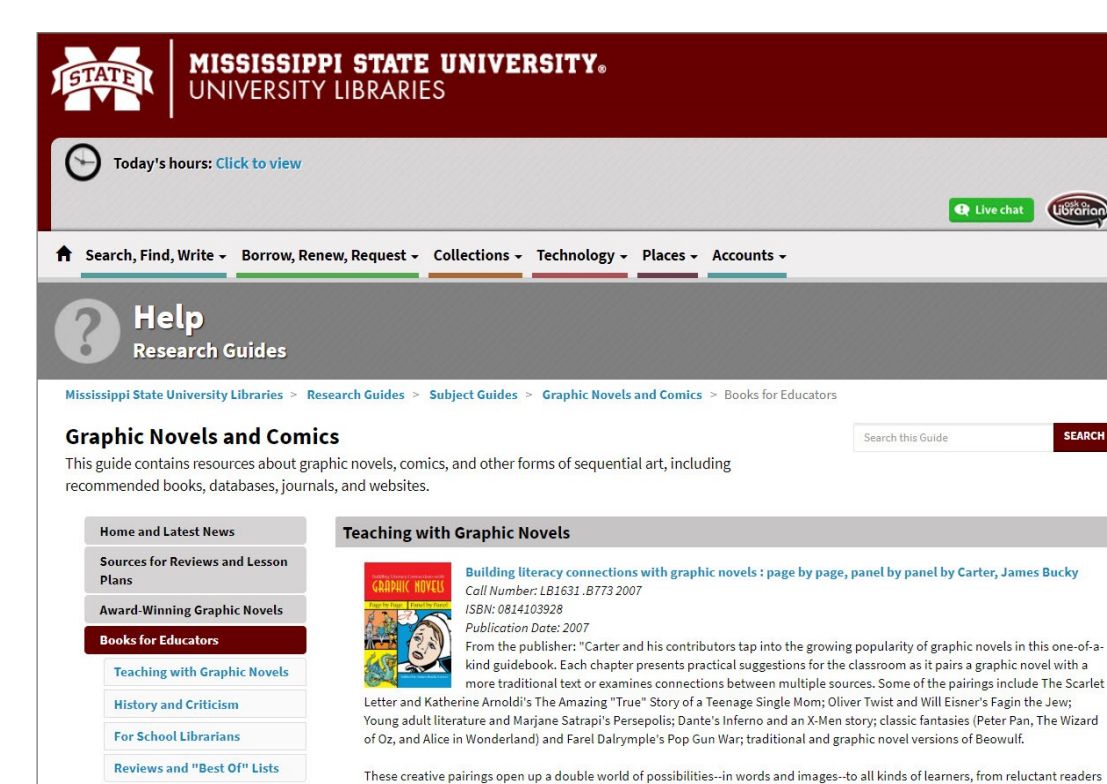
## Class Content

We begin with a question; *what is a graphic novel?* After some discussion we land on "sequential art narrative," and use Scott McCloud's pitcher analogy (l.) of the "artform...known as comics [as] a vessel" for content (6). We discuss Eisner's "grammar of Sequential Art" (8) and show how icons, panels, and gutters combine to tell a story, or establish a mood. In a class exercise, we show simple icons (r.) and ask students for their interpretation; they often respond with *speaking, thinking, idea, cursing, etc.*



We then tackle the [myths and misconceptions](#) of the graphic novel format:

- 1. They are more than picture books.** Graphic novels aren't necessarily easier to read, they just read differently, requiring textual and visual literacy. They can help in developing deductive reasoning abilities, illustrate literary devices, and benefit several of Gardner's multiple intelligences. In a related activity, we project one of Andy Runyon's *Owly* comics (r.), known to be non-textual; we ask students to tell the story in their own words, based solely on icons, facial expressions, etc.
  - 2. They aren't just for kids, and aren't just superheroes.** Some graphic novels are indeed *graphic*, making them the most challenged books in libraries. But the graphics also make for a powerful narrative, leading to many winning awards. Establishing the narrative and literary merit of these works creates one more myth to tackle:
  - 3. They can only be used for language arts classes.** This is a misconception even among open-minded students who are familiar with graphic novels. Here we show how comics are used in the humanities, the social sciences, STEM, foreign language learning, and ESL instruction.
- We also demonstrate searches in our Online Catalog before taking them to visit the ERC. Our new-and-improved [Graphic Novels and Comics LibGuide](#) (l.) can be a post-class resource all year long. Included in the LibGuide is a link to [NovelList](#), where students can browse Recommended Read lists and read-alikes or search by Lexile and AR. Students working in Mississippi after graduation still have access to NovelList via the [MAGNOLIA](#) statewide consortium (r.).



## Feedback from Students and Professors

*"The presentation on graphic novels was extremely useful because this was a genre I went into the presentation knowing absolutely nothing about and came out with a good idea on what this genre is. I learned that it is a great outlet for students who don't particularly like to read and the use of these can re-engage them. I will definitely want to use these in the future in my classroom."* -Student



*"Ms. Downey did a wonderful job! She was very knowledgeable which made this class very useful for my graphic novel project."* - Student

*"This class is integral to assisting me to prepare future teachers to use forms of literature for their classrooms... I always come away with something new and current from this session that I can add to my classroom instruction."* -CISE Instructor

*"Through your instruction, many of my students were able to experience graphic novels for the first time. The overview of graphic novels was informative for the students and for me. We were then able to engage with reading graphic novels with more understanding. Your instruction also helped students to understand the academic relevance of graphic novels to the classroom. Several of my students became avid readers of graphic novels. They also loved the informational graphic novels. I learned how to present and teach graphic novels through your presentations as well."* -Manya Chappell, CISE Instructor

*"Students in the undergraduate classes, as well as the in-service teachers involved in the summer institute [SSILTT], all share that they enjoyed your session and learned quite a bit. They come away better understanding what a graphic text is, that there are various types of graphic texts, and that you can use them in different ways...the students were interested and happy with the discussion, and they said they learned a lot that they didn't know."* -Dr. Kathleen Alley, Assistant Professor, CISE

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## Contact:

Elizabeth M. "Beth" Downey, Associate Professor & Instruction Librarian  
Mississippi State University Libraries, P.O. Box 5408, Mississippi State, MS 39762  
662-325-3834 | [edowney@library.msstate.edu](mailto:edowney@library.msstate.edu)  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2109-8820> | <https://twitter.com/MSUComLib>



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