

A dark silhouette of a person sitting and reading a book, set against a dark blue background. The person's head is bowed, and their hands are holding an open book.

MAINE DEPARTMENT  
OF EDUCATION

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# Graphic Novels: The Architecture of Meaning

**Presented by:** Sam Jenkins, Kathy Bertini & Heather D. Martin





### ✓ Professional Development

Learn the science behind  
Graphic Novels as tools for  
Literacy

### ✓ Learning Outcomes

Gain an appreciation for  
the genre - and become  
familiar with some stellar  
examples

### ✓ Contact Hours

2

What's this all about?

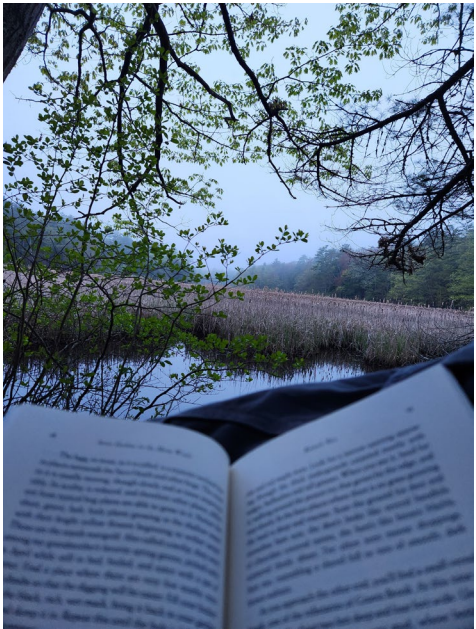
# Learning Objectives

Today, we are going to ...

- Explore what Graphic Novels are;
- Unpack some preconceptions and misconceptions;
- Right (or write) the story;
- Do some drawing!



# Who Are We?







# Who Are We?





# Who Are We?



# Self Portrait

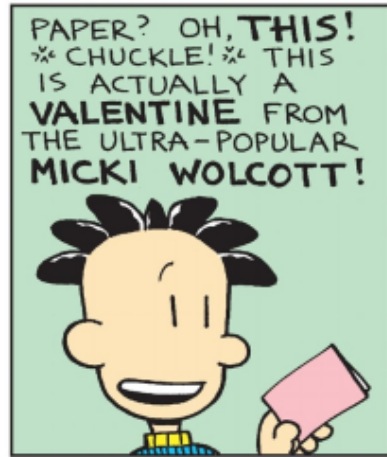




# The Golden Age

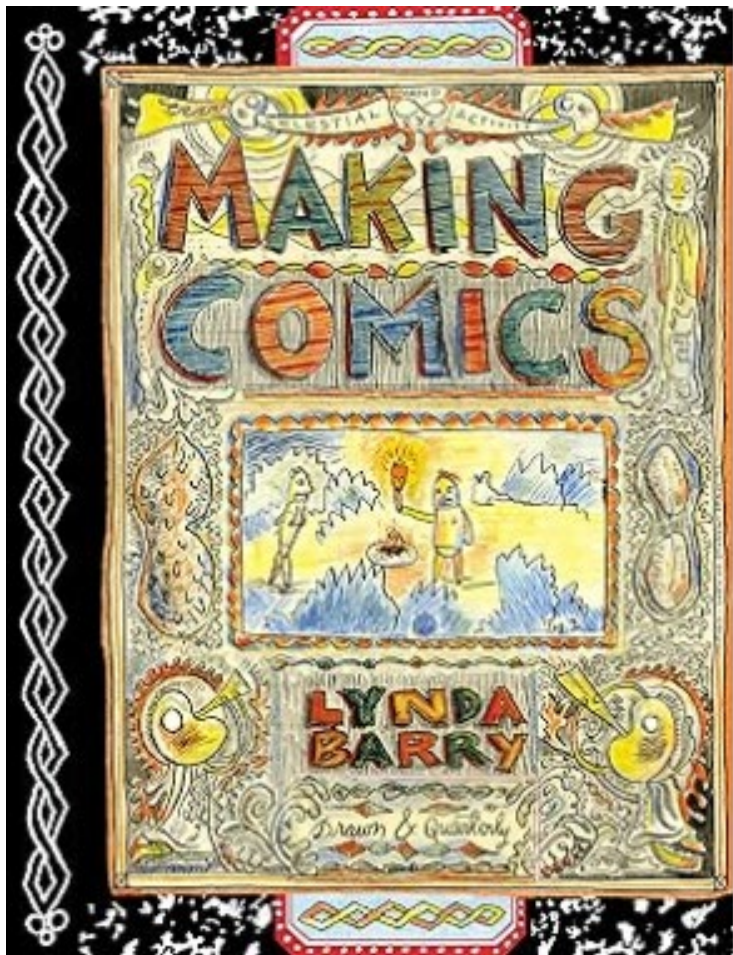
## This Was Our Pact





# Big Nate

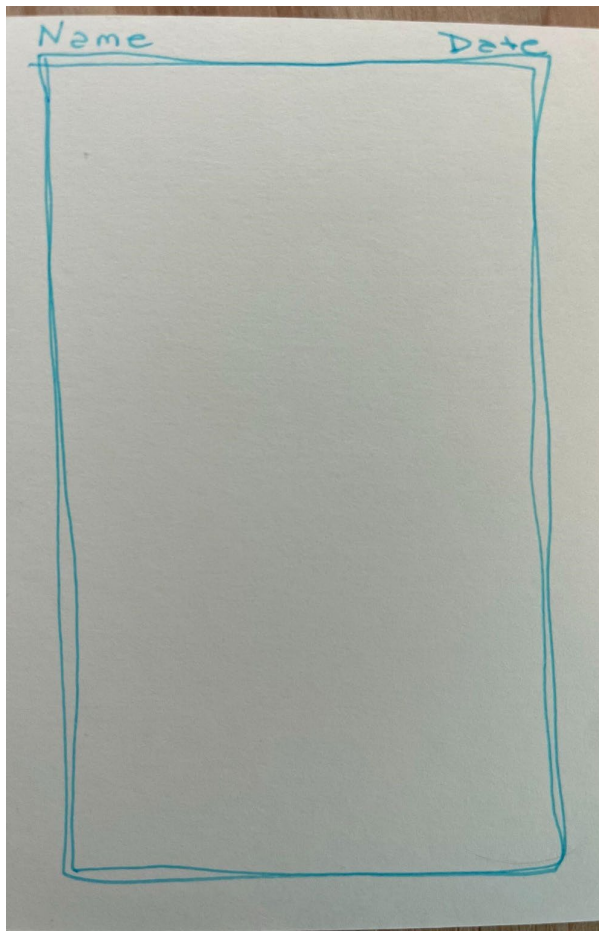




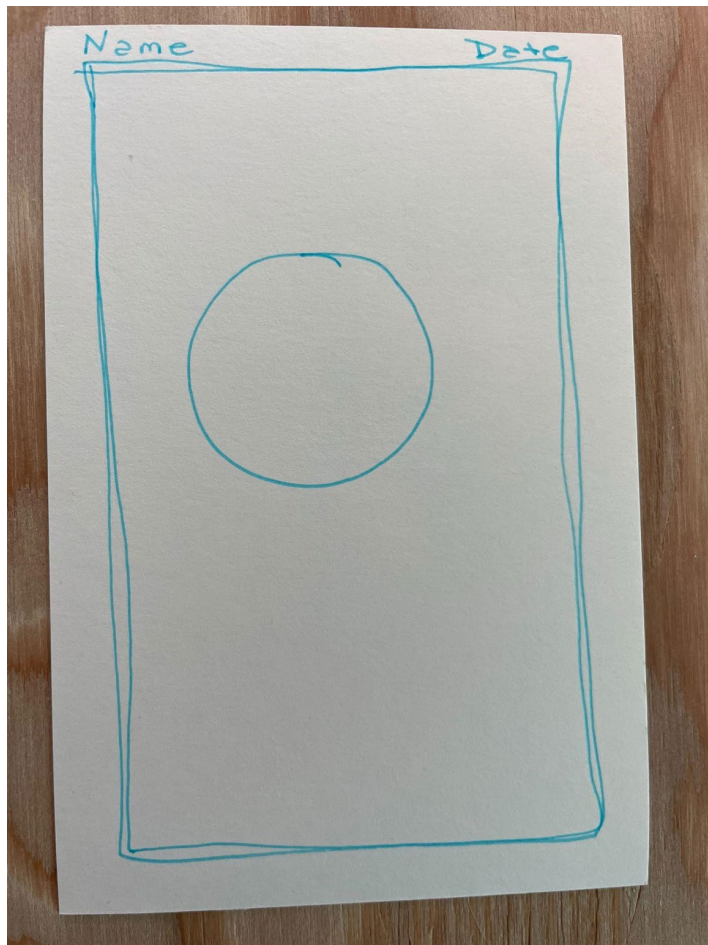
# Making Comics

by

## Lynda Barry



- Basic frame
- Your name
- Today's date



Then it's just shapes.

Start with an  
outsized circle for  
the head...





Then you add this little gumdrop-ish shape for a body, some squiggly arms and legs - then snowball hands & some shoes, then fingers, details, hair...

?

# “Not Real Books”

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# Literacy:



## How Is it Built?

Vocabulary

Phonemic  
Awareness

Phonics

Fluency

Background  
Knowledge



Soil

Sunlight

Water

Food

Temperature

# Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are stories written and illustrated in the style of a comic:

- Vivid illustrations combine with short bursts of text, often presented in a series of rectangular panels
- The story unfolds in a clear sequence, and is often action-packed (and funny)
- Graphic novels can be fiction (for example: historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction, fairytales) or nonfiction (for example: history, biography, informational)
- The main characters don't have to be superheroes!

- [Reading Rockets](#)



# Graphic Novels

## Reading motivation

Graphic novels are very popular and especially appealing to readers who may not pick up a more traditional book on their own. They can be a “welcoming door” for reluctant or struggling readers (especially boys) who are drawn to the lively storylines and illustrations, and the smart but limited text. Quick, fun reads build confidence!

- [Reading Rockets](#)

# Graphic Novels

## Visual literacy

The pictures in graphic novels are expressive, simple, and rich all at the same time. The images provide big clues about character and plot and encourage readers to look closely. Some graphic novels (such as *Owly* and *The Adventures of Polo*) are wordless, so the pictures must carry the full story.

# Graphic Novels

## Story structure

Most graphic novels for young readers have easy-to-follow plots. This can help children learn about how a story is stitched together. After sharing a graphic novel together, ask your child to tell you the basic plot of the story: “First this happened, then this ... and at the end ...”



# Graphic Novels

## Word learning for struggling readers and English language learners

Although individual words in a graphic novel can be sophisticated, the side-by-side illustrations and text provide strong clues to their meaning.

Don't forget to share graphic novels together — they make great read alouds!

- [Reading Rockets](#)

# Graphic Novels

"Graphic novels are a great way to help struggling readers strengthen vocabulary, build reading confidence and stamina, and develop a deeper appreciation of storytelling."

- [Reading Rockets](#)

# Vocabulary

- \* Jason DeHart, *Edutopia*, September 8, 2022: "The visual nature of comics leads to both verbal/word level vocabulary and meaning-making "
- \* [Reading.com](https://www.reading.com/): "Graphic novels often include sophisticated vocabulary in manageable text chunks."
- \* Dina ElBoghdady, "The Allure of Graphic Novels": "A widely cited study from the University of Oregon found that comics even help build vocabulary, averaging **53.5 rare words per 1,000**—more than adult books."

# Phonics

## Scaffolding for Emerging Readers

For children still developing decoding skills, graphic novels offer natural scaffolding:

- **Visual context clues:** Images help readers predict and confirm unknown words
- **Manageable text chunks:** Speech bubbles contain brief, conversational language
- **High-interest content:** Engaging stories motivate children to persist through challenging words
- **Repeated exposure:** Common words appear frequently across panels

[Phonics.org](https://www.phonics.org)

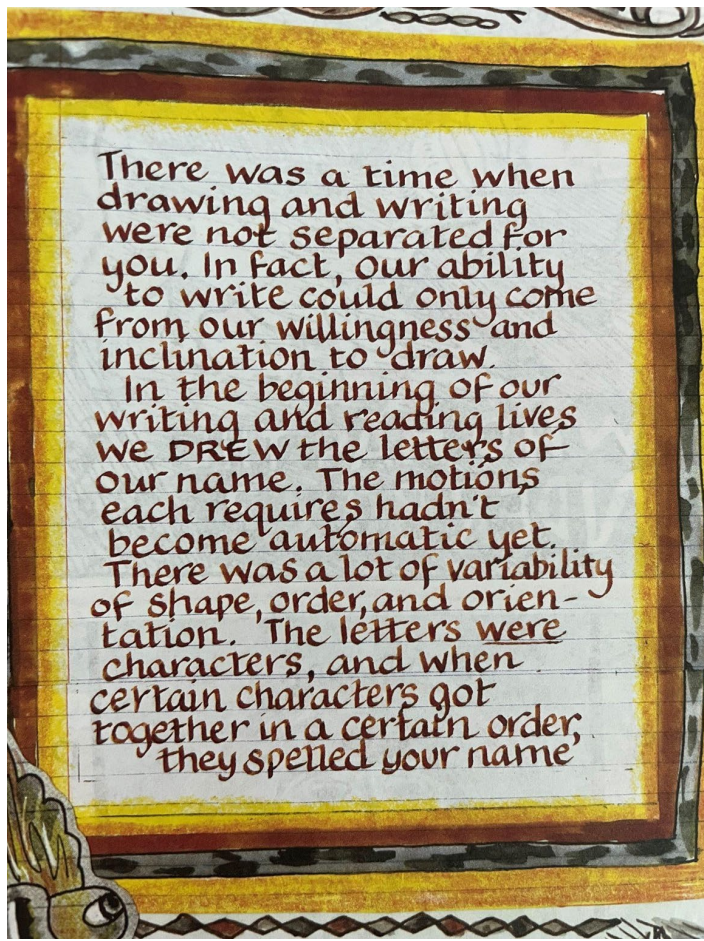


# Comprehension

"When it comes to comprehension, comics and graphic novels are helpful, rather, for building schema and locating concepts within wider conceptualizations of a range of words and ideas."

- Jason DeHart, *Edutopia* September 8, 2022

# What Else?



- Lynda Barry

# Bison Cave Painting

Altamira (Spain)

approx. 22,000  
years ago

[Smithsonian](#)





# Red Cow & First Chinese Horse

Lascaux  
(France)

approx. 20,000  
years ago



[Bradshaw Foundation](#)

# Black Bull

Lascaux  
(France)

approx. 20,000  
years ago



[Bradshaw Foundation](#)



# Hall of the Bulls

Lascaux  
(France)

approx. 20,000  
years ago



[Bradshaw Foundation](#)

# Large Black Stag

Lascaux  
(France)

approx. 20,000  
years ago



[Bradshaw Foundation](#)



# Pig & hands

Sulawesi  
(Indonesia)

approx. 44,000  
years ago



[BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-44000-years-old-pig-painting)

# What's the connection?

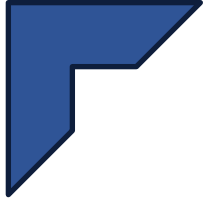
Cave paintings – Literacy... From what we've studied so far...

# Ancient Cave Drawings and Early Human Language Linked in New Study

"Our research suggests that the cognitive mechanisms necessary for the development of cave and rock art are likely to be analogous to those employed in the expression of the symbolic thinking required for language,"

- Cora Lesure, a linguist at MIT and one of the study's authors.

[National Geographic](#), 2018



# Faster, Faster, Faster...

# 10 minutes...



# What Does the Science Say?

# “Wall of Misconceptions”

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# Research

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["The Allure of Graphic Novels"](#) by Dina ElBoghdady

["The Benefits of Graphic Novels: Why They Count as Reading"](#) - United Through Reading

["3 Ways Graphic Novels Benefit Kids"](#) - Scholastic

['Harvard Thinking: What's Driving decline in US literacy rates?'](#) - Harvard Review, September 24, 2025

["Navigating Literacy Challenges: Fostering a Love of Reading"](#)

["The Research Behind Graphic Novels and Young Learners"](#)

["Literacy and the Graphic Novel."](#) - EBSCO, 2024

["Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Support Literacy."](#) *Edutopia*, September 2022

["Don't Underestimate the Power of Graphic Novels for the Classroom."](#) *Education Week*, April, 2025



# Reporting Back

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# The Books!



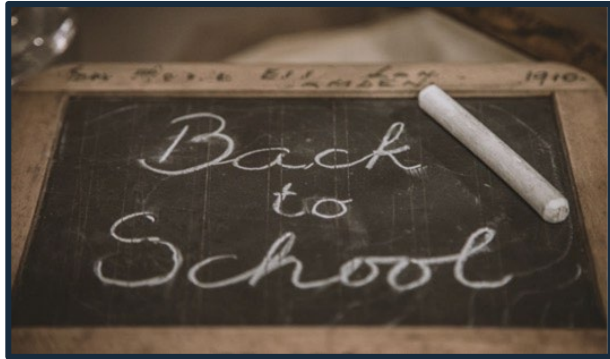
# Ancient Chinese book of Cosmos - *illuminated*



Beyond this presentation

# Book Lists

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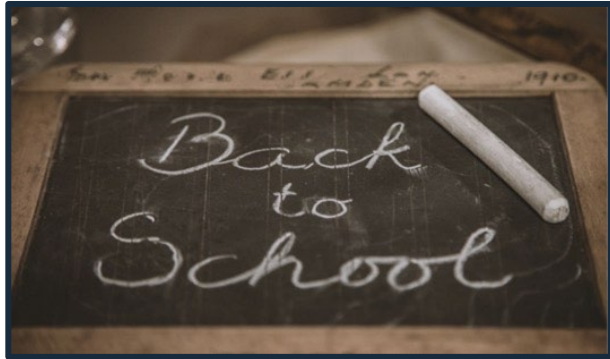
American Library  
Association

Epic Reads

Teaching Books

Beyond this presentation

# Opportunities



- [Maine Digital Library](#)
- [Osher Map Library:](#)  
Graphic Novel Discussion Group (Educators 5-12)
- Workshop with [Marek Bennett](#) : November 21,  
Rockland - 9 am – 4 pm

## II Resources

**Interdisciplinary  
Instruction Homepage**

## II Professional Learning Schedule

## II Professional Learning Page

## II Newsletter

## Hubs

## STEAM Hub

Numeracy Hub

Literacy Hub

## Civics Hub

## Arts & Humanities Hub - Coming Soon

## EnGiNE Learning Experiences

## Question Formulation Technique

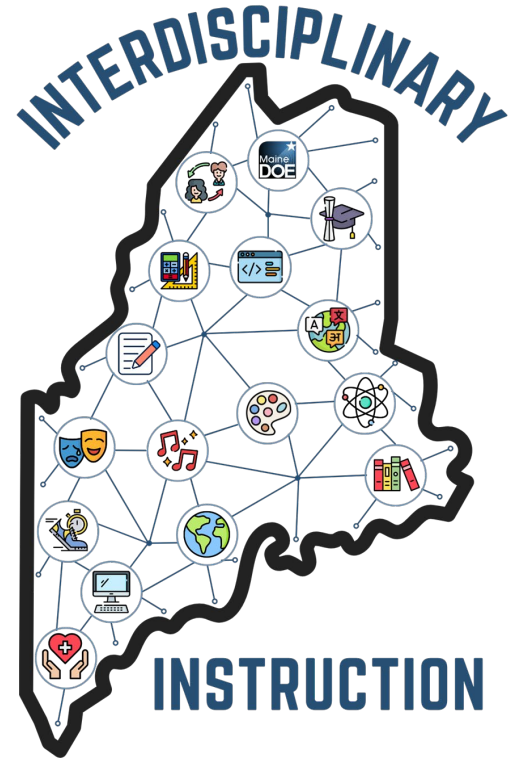
## Modern Literacies

## Teaching with Transfer

## Student Centered Learning

# Human Centered Learning

## Concept Based Instruction





Stay Connected!

# Find Us Online!

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[www.maine.gov/doe](http://www.maine.gov/doe)



[@MaineDOEComm](https://www.youtube.com/@MaineDOEComm)



[@mainedepted](https://www.instagram.com/mainedepted)



[@MaineDepartmentofEducation1](https://www.facebook.com/MaineDepartmentofEducation1)





Stay Connected!

# Feedback

October 10th EngageMEnt  
Feedback

