

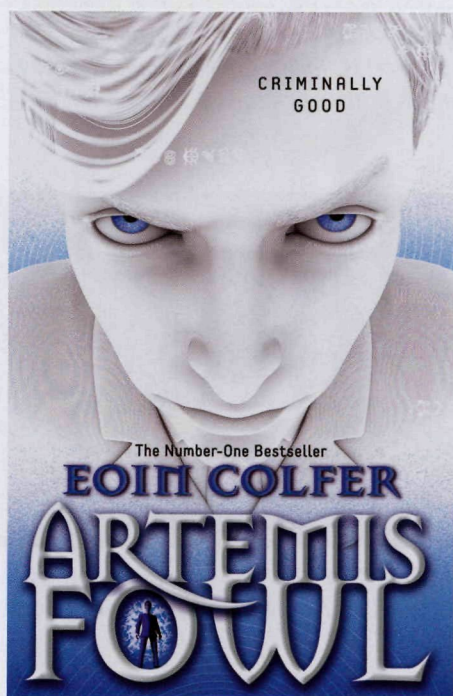
Are comics the villains or heroes of classroom reading?

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Traditionally comics may have been overlooked as a vehicle for developing pupils' literacy. In this article Liam Benjamin describes their potential, arguing that comics have a place in the English curriculum and providing examples of how he has used them to develop response to text.

I love using comic books in the classroom but I think my students love using them more. While some see comics as less than worthy reading material there are many rich and interesting advantages for using them within the classroom.

Comics offer an appeal that some texts do not. Their vibrant visual content makes them seem easier to access while still teaching the skills of decoding and meaning making. They provide a great transition from picture fiction to the paperback. Children in key stage 2 can progress from comics such as *Spiderman*, to graphic novels such as *Count Karlstein* by Phillip Pullman (2007) and even to classic texts written in the graphic novel form, like *Great Expectations*. One of the most alluring factors about comics is the wide range of different styles available: paper comics such as the *Beano* or *Hello Kitty* aimed at younger readers, to more glossy formats such as *TinTin*, *Artemis Fowl* (Colfer 2011) or *Asterix* and finally the serious texts, the graphic novels – the heavy hitters that feature a huge story arc over hundreds of pages usually made up of several glossy issues.



When I introduced comics to my class I did it with a degree of subtlety, placing them at the centre of the reading area so as to lure everyone's attention. Slowly they began to filter around the room, boys sharing them with friends and girls engrossed. Subsequently I was often asked if they could take them home to finish.

Many of my students, both boys and girls, enjoy dipping into comics, often reading the illustrations more than the text but all the while strengthening their decoding techniques. For some who access the paper comics, the stories are shorter but richly detailed to allow for quicker digestion and the feeling of accomplishment. Students recognise familiar characters in different issues and enthusiastically seek out other copies.

Comics are not just about superheroes either; there are many different types that appeal to all audiences. A linear storyline still exists; furthermore comics are able to flashback or relocate with greater ease than most texts... the classic use of 'meanwhile'. The only element that may appear to be nonlinear would be the order that the text boxes and tiles are read in. It is the responsibility of the reader to mentally place these in the correct order, here the ability to decode and sequence comes into play. Who speaks first? Is it thought or spoken aloud? A set of tiles or a strip works really well for exploring this in a guided reading session.

Guided reading with comics

I have used the strengths of comic books with positive results in my guided reading and writing sessions. By carefully choosing a panel from a comic I might provide the students with the illustrations but with the text removed from the bubbles. I then ask the students to 'read' the image, to think of the body language, scene, expressions and to decipher what might be said by these characters. After a discussion and allowing them to write their ideas in their own speech/thought bubbles, I provide them with the missing text, but before revealing what each character is actually saying, I ask for predictions. An alternative approach is to use the more mainstream comics available in different languages; *TinTin* for example is published worldwide. It is quite surprising how much language decoding and story structuring pupils can engage in before an actual translation takes place.

An extension of this use of speech and thought bubbles, is to link it directly to role play or hot-seating, for example, having a main character from the text at the front of the classroom, while students work together to fill in speech or thought bubbles that can be held above their heads. 'What would he/she be thinking in this moment?' As with Concept Cartoon, a simple approach where three students, through speech and thought bubbles, propose their scientific ideas, speech bubbles can be used to promote thought and discussion in the context of comics.

After working on speech, it is also interesting to encourage students to read with expression, as they have talked about attitudes and character emotions before learning how it is being said. Comic books make very good use of onomatopoeia as well as punctuation and this can lead to some wonderful performances.

What I also love about the comic book characters is that they usually always offer an origin story that explains what motivates the character and sometimes how they gained their super powers. This back-story is something that promotes the overcoming of fear, loss or tragedy. A great discussion point in guided reading sessions is when students try to understand the motives of the main character.

Developing writing from comics

For extended pieces of writing I provide my class with a standalone image for them to write in a certain style, as predominantly the artwork alone is all that is needed for inspiration. As a class we talk about what can be seen in the image to help stimulate ideas. They are then encouraged to write a story linked to the clues in the image, leaving enough freedom for individual creativity but allowing a certain level of consistency when marking their work.

The images within comic books are not usually referenced as illustrations but rather as artwork, created by an artist. The skill of 'reading' an image is a powerful tool and something that picture fiction increasingly requires us to do; take Anthony Browne for example who layers his illustrations with hidden meaning and suggestive elements prompting us to stop and think about what we are looking at. While comics might seem more illustrative than textual you may be surprised by some of the language used within comic books. There are some simply stunning monologues that make fantastic use of language and tone but go on for pages at a time. Check out Wonder Woman, The Joker and even Snoopy as prime examples of this.

Challenging themes

It would be impossible to ignore the massive influx of superhero movies that dominate the cinema at the moment. All these characters originated in comic book form. This provides a great excuse to explore the back-story of these characters, especially when they promote a positive message while addressing some serious issues. Both Batman and Spiderman have dealt with the death of their parents; the loss and grief of loved ones. Superman deals with the isolation of being the only one of his kind (depending on which comic book universe you read). This weakness is often exploited by his enemies.

Comics address many significant issues of real life such as death, adoption, murder, love, crime, family, corruption, sacrifice, responsibility, truth, homosexuality, rage and revenge and all the while encouraging readers to do right in the world. Bruce Wayne (Batman) was there to witness his parents' demise while Peter Parker (Spiderman) was forced to watch as the love of his life was killed before him. Last year the decision was made to provide the Green Lantern with a homosexual back-story. In Calvin and Hobbes, the young protagonist often contemplates the meaning of life.

Despite there being an injustice or crime committed in many of these hero stories, the main hero or heroine chooses not to kill but instead fights for truth and justice; Wonder Woman has a lasso of truth! How handy would that be in the playground? These characters represent huge positive role models and although there is a tinge of violence linked to their adventures and fight for survival, there is also the inner strength that these people exude. The villain never quite gets away with it and Dennis never quite gets to be a menace. The wide variety of moral codes that characters follow, opens a doorway to discussions or wider social topics. I have found these to be quite helpful in PSHE lessons. Most Sunday newspaper strips feature a tongue in cheek reference to current affairs, which can be explored with older students.

Digital comics

Comic books are evolving; as with many texts now, they are available digitally. This is where they stand out against most digital texts, the images, colours and text literally 'pop' and 'kapow' off the page. They look great on the whiteboard and even better on tablets. *Marvel*, *Beano*, DC Comics, *Dr Who*, Disney and *Horrible Histories* all have digital downloadable content. There are also a wide range of comic style apps that can manipulate bubbles and images allowing students to create their own written work. Importing photographs of students conducting a science experiment or recapping the events of a field trip allows the addition of speech bubbles to explain their learning. Comic Life, ComicBook, POW, Halftone are just some of the apps available for creating your own strips. A few of these are also free to download via various app stores.

Attitudes towards comics are changing and if used for a specific purpose within classrooms they can be effective tools for developing literacy. As we encourage students to explore many different text types, comics should also be included within the breadth of study. Comics are no longer fleeting phases that children pass through on their way to the paperback but are becoming more credible sources of content. Whether used as an entire text, as a single strip, or a standalone title the comic is not to be underestimated. It seems only fair that these texts share space in our classrooms amongst the many other well-established literary heroes.

Children's books

Pullman, P. (2003) *Count Karlstein*. Corgi Books. ISBN 9780552557306.
Colfer, E. (2011) *Artemis Fowl*. Puffin. ISBN 9780141339092.

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