How a Comic Book Assignment Can Help Students Learn the Value of Research Evidence

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"Do your students write their own comic books?" When an audience member asked me this question after my conference presentation, I paused, replied with "no," and then began to articulate reasons why I focus my students' attention on reading, rather than producing, comic books. This moment at the 2014 *Conference on College Composition and Communication* has stayed with me as I redesigned my first-year composition (FYC) courses in subsequent semesters. My conference presentation had focused on how I provide graphic narratives as reading assignments for my students. My goal has been to show students that arguments are not only found in formal academic papers, but also in a variety of genres including those that are creative, entertaining, and emotionally engaging. By reading graphic narratives with attention toward purpose, audience, and rhetorical appeals, students consider how arguments are constructed through both words and images, and how an author may persuade his or her readers without an overt thesis statement. Over the past several years, incorporating multimodal argumentation into the FYC classroom as well as the upper-level writing classroom has allowed me to promote visual and textual literacy among my students while also engaging their interests in topics such as eating disorders, personal illness, and mental health. Since graphic narratives often tackle important topics that students may have on their minds but rarely have a chance to

discuss with peers in an academic context, I have believed in this genre's potential not only for promoting language skills but also for fostering empathy and awareness of social issues.

However, I previously had not assigned a graphic narrative or comic book as a writing assignment. Partly, this hesitation stemmed from the anticipation of students' objections ("I can't draw!"), and partly, I was concerned that the task might not be the most effective option for supporting students' academic writing skills. Then, in the Fall 2016 semester, I met with a media specialist at my university's library with the intention of developing a multimodal assignment. He immediately suggested a comic book and introduced me to Comic Life, a computer program that allows students to create comic books without concern for drawing ability. After extensive discussion, he and I developed a prompt that fit with my course theme, helped to promote the FYC course outcomes for academic writing, and would be manageable within the semester's time constraints. That semester, I began asking students to produce comic books as a writing assignment and my pedagogy in this regard has continued to evolve ever since.

In this article, I will discuss this assignment in greater detail to demonstrate the pedagogical benefits of teaching comics in the writing classroom. I argue that by assigning students a comic book project, writing instructors can promote competence in academic discourse by helping students learn and evaluate different forms of evidence. As a common outcome in FYC classes, the ability to assess and use evidence often presents a challenge to students who struggle to distinguish between academic sources and anecdotal evidence drawn from personal experience or conversations with others. I suggest that a comic book assignment recognizes and deems important the stories and personal experiences students bring to the

classroom. It gives them a space for writing and sharing these stories, but it also guides them toward adapting the claims they make in the comic book to a formal academic paper that draws upon formal academic research. In this way, the comic book makes apparent the difference between the statements "this is the case because I believe it" and "this is the case because research tells us so."

At first glance, a comic book does not appear to be a tool for helping students learn academic discourse, or more specifically, the argumentative-based research essay that has become the ultimate mark of students' acculturation into the broader academic community as well as individual disciplinary communities. A comic book does not contain paragraphs or a traditional thesis statement; it contains speech bubbles rather than direct quotations; it uses informal language; and it does not include source citations. Indeed, emerging scholarship in composition studies has urged us to think critically about the use of comics in the writing classroom. As Gabriel Sealey-Morris notes in a recent issue of *Composition Studies:*

> Perhaps the primary objection to using comics in the composition classroom, either as reading assignments or as projects for evaluation… [is that] the writing is not equivalent to an essay. That objection stands in for a number of similar objections, all growing from the same, pressing question: Can comics present complex ideas in a rigorous, academically appropriate way? (Sealey-Morris, 38)

After posing this question, Sealey-Morris turns to a discussion of how comics can help students master the "'conventions of usage, specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation in their fields,'" knowledge listed in the WPA *Outcomes Statement* (38). Sealey-Morris ultimately

argues that the process of creating a comics essay helps students develop drafting, revision, and collaborative skills, but perhaps most importantly, such a task responds to the NCTE 2005 *Position Statement* by helping students acquire multimodal literacy and competence in digital media.

Sealey-Morris presents a compelling argument in favor of assigning comics essays in the classroom. However, I would like to take a step back and consider how the concerns he cites—including the worry over if comics "present complex ideas in a rigorous, academically appropriate way"—might ironically underscore one of the greatest strengths that comics can offer to our pedagogy. Students can write entertaining, engaging, and even persuasive comic books *without* concern for the academic conventions expected in other genres, such as the formal research paper. Instead, students can focus on creatively telling a story with both images and words to capture an audience's attention and change their beliefs in some way. In brief, I would like to suggest that a comic book *does not have to be* academically rigorous to warrant a place in the composition classroom! In other words, a comic book will not contain extended prose, organized paragraphs, a blatant thesis statement, or source citations—all the traditional academic conventions we expect students to produce in argumentative and research essays. However, to foster competence in those skills, the comic book should be carefully sequenced within the curriculum so that it is assigned early in the semester as students begin to identify topics of interest within the larger course theme. In this way, the comic book can serve as an extended act of brainstorming, wherein students identify topics they care about, determine what issues or problems exist within that larger topic, and begin to consider what claims they would like to

make in relation to that issue. The comic book thus offers a space for students to try out an argument without the pressure of conforming to academic conventions *before* developing a traditional academic essay.

By assigning a comic book and a research paper in the same semester, I have been able to lead class discussions in which students compare and contrast two incredibly disparate—yet in some ways similar—genres. For instance, we assess readers' expectations for a comic book as opposed to a research paper, and we consider how a comic book could still present an argument even without a stated thesis or formal essay structure. Such discussions and genre analyses are essential for helping students realize three key ideas: (1) arguments are routinely constructed in both academic and non-academic contexts, and within a variety of genres, including multimodal; (2) all forms of communication, whether written, spoken, visual, or some combination, need to be tailored to meet the needs and expectations of an audience; and (3) the use of credible, authoritative, and relevant evidence is a hallmark of formal academic writing. In discussing my specific assignment, I will focus on this third idea in order to demonstrate how comics can help students develop their academic writing skills.

My assignment takes place in the context of an FYC class for international students at a high level of language proficiency. The assignment that I developed in Fall 2016 in collaboration with our library's media specialist (see Appendix A) and revised in Fall 2017 (see Appendix B) asks students to create a persuasive comic book aimed at an audience of fellow international students. The course theme of "health and wellness" invites students to consider which health issues are relevant to college students, specifically, international students. Each student chooses

an issue of personal interest to form the basis of a comic book and research paper. In the past two semesters, students have identified health issues within a range of topics, including exercise, diet/nutrition, obesity, sleep, depression, anxiety, STDs, antibiotic use, and tinnitus. In class, I emphasize that the comics should not just entertain but also educate and persuade their readers to adopt certain beliefs and/or behaviors. While students may consult outside sources if they need a definition or clarification, I encourage them to base their comics on their personal beliefs and experiences at the time. In response, students have come up with creative ways to persuade their readers through the use of both images and words.

We discuss the need to have an implied thesis that informs the content and structure of the comic. Students articulate this thesis through what our media specialist calls a "pitch," or a one-sentence summary of the comic's purpose and importance. This pitch, included in the assignment prompt, helps students to develop a focused story relevant to their target audience. The pitch can easily be converted to a thesis statement through some adjustments in word choice. For instance, a pitch that reads: "I want to persuade female international students to adopt lifestyle changes rather than binge diets because I worry that too many girls are starving themselves to be skinny" could be converted to: "Rather than engage in dangerous binge dieting practices, female international students should adopt lifestyle changes that will help them maintain a healthy weight over the long term." Thus, the comic book pitch moves students toward the development of a formal academic argument. Once students in my Fall 2016 class had developed a pitch, crafted their comics, and reviewed their peers' comics, they were excited to find that they had already established the groundwork for a formal research essay. Sequencing

the curriculum such that the comic book precedes the research essay allows students to make connections between the work they have done previously (work that they largely see as fun and creative) and the new tasks being asked of them. Specifically, students must now conduct research to develop and support the "pitch" that had motivated their comics. As part of the research unit, students conduct a small research study to gather primary data. Concurrently, our class works with a research librarian to find secondary sources appropriate for students' individual topics.

Because this is a first-year writing class, students do not conduct extensive research. Rather, they find two or three outside sources using the library databases. A central source of evidence comes from their survey assignment, which requires that they distribute a questionnaire to at least 20 peers who fall within their target audience. For the Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 iterations of this assignment, each student crafted and disseminated a survey of eight to ten questions related to his or her chosen topic. However, for the Spring 2018 revised version of this assignment, students will collaboratively create one class survey that everyone is responsible for distributing. Using Google Forms to host the survey and tabulate results will allow us to gather data efficiently and accurately. We will be using the model of the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) as a guide in writing questions for the survey, but our class questions will focus specifically on international students' wellness. In this way, we will compare data gathered among international students at our university to national data on mostly American students; less than 5% of the national survey respondents are international students (ACHA-NCHA). This survey assignment helps students

learn how to write effective questions for gathering pertinent information. It also invites classroom discussion of the ethics of data collection[1], strategies for analyzing data, and vocabulary for discussing data trends as well as charts and graphs.

Since students conduct the survey after they have completed their comic books, they have an opportunity to assess how their survey evidence supports or challenges the assumptions and claims set forth in their comics. Often, students are surprised by what they learn through the survey. One student, whom I will call Timothy, crafted a comic book that sought to persuade his peers to believe that exercise could improve their overall well-being, which he defined as their academic performance and level of extracurricular involvement. In making this argument, he made several assumptions, including the belief that any amount of exercise would improve students' well-being. His survey revealed, however, that students who report working out do so at varying levels of consistency. He then closely analyzed his data and grouped the responses into students who worked out 0-2 times per week and those who worked out 3-5 times per week. He was surprised to find that although 95% of his respondents said they worked out, only about half of those reported working out 3-5 times per week. Based on this information, he refined his argument in his final paper to urge the need not just for exercise but for *consistent* exercise (3-5 times per week) for more substantial improvement in one's well-being, and he drew on secondary sources to bolster his claim. Only through gathering evidence could Timothy make this argument, and in a writing conference with me, he mentioned that the survey influenced his thinking about the topic and how he should present his argument in the final paper. Thus, Timothy grew aware of the difference between an argument based on personal assumptions and

beliefs and an argument based on evidence, and he came to see that the latter argument would be more precise and effective. He also realized that the argument he had made in his comic book may not be as effective at reaching his target audience because it did not focus on exercise consistency—the aspect about which his peers needed to be educated.

Another student, whom I will call Victoria, was interested in the topic of dieting among female freshmen. She crafted an engaging comic book on the topic, and she urged young women to avoid drastic dieting practices that could lead to malnourishment and hospitalization. While she based her comic on personal observations and beliefs about her peers, she was able to gather more substantial evidence through her survey and secondary research. In particular, by surveying women in her dorm, she learned that although 76% of respondents claimed not to be dieting at the moment, 66% of respondents said they only ate two meals per day, and 40% claimed to work out 4-5 times per week. Victoria found this evidence surprising since it seemed to suggest that some students are engaging in practices that she would classify as "dieting," but they do not classify their behavior as such. She then realized that peers who do not consider themselves as "dieting" still need to be informed and persuaded to adopt healthier behaviors. Her comic book may not have resonated with those individuals since it focused on drastic dieting practices. Victoria also learned from secondary sources that dieting is defined by medical professionals as alterations in one's eating habits or exercise routine. In our writing conference, Victoria and I discussed this primary and secondary evidence, and we considered how different people might define "dieting" in different ways. She hadn't previously considered this point when designing her comic book. Ultimately, she composed a research paper that contrasted healthy lifestyle

changes (consuming regular meals, avoiding junk food, and exercising regularly) with unhealthy dieting practices (such as skipping meals). Thus, Victoria's argument was extended and enriched as she moved from her comic book to her research paper and gathered evidence along the way.

While Timothy, Victoria, and other students could certainly benefit from a text-based assignment, such as a personal essay, the comic book offers students a chance not only to analyze and produce visual rhetoric but also to reproduce the same conversations that inform their personal experience. In other words, when students use an anecdote to support a claim, they usually begin with, "[This person] told me…" or "I've heard people say…" Often, personal anecdotes are dialogic, and while dialogue can certainly be captured in an essay, the comics medium inherently lends itself to the production and visualization of conversation. By asking students to create a comics-based story, then, we are not just allowing them, but *inviting* them to draw upon anecdotes. As such, the comic book necessarily becomes a space for trying out an argument based predominantly on personal experiences and assumptions, and as a result, students soon see both the affordances and the limitations of such an approach. Anecdotes can be compelling and emotionally powerful, and assumptions can guide us down a certain research path, but ultimately, students must use evidence appropriate to the genre and to readers' expectations. Whereas anecdotes are appropriate for an audience of comic book readers, peer-reviewed journal articles are typically the expected source of evidence for formal research papers. Thus, by opening up classroom discussion of the relationship between argumentation and evidence, the comic book assignment helps students to see that the use of credible, authoritative, and relevant evidence is a hallmark of formal academic writing. However, they also learn to

appreciate the role that anecdotal evidence can play in making an argument effective in a less formal context.

Appendix A

Comic Book Project

Deadlines

- "Pitch" due Monday, 10/3 (written in your Writing Journal and brought to class)
- 1st draft due Wednesday, 10/12 (bring 1 printed copy to class)
  We will review your drafts as a class and collaboratively offer feedback.
- Graded version due Wednesday, 10/19 (bring 1 printed copy to class + printed rationale)

Audience

You are writing the comic book for an audience of students at our university. You may choose to further narrow your audience (by gender, age, culture, etc.) if appropriate to your topic. The audience for your rationale is only your instructor.

Length & Format

Comic Book

- 8 pages, images + words

Rationale

- 1-2 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman size 12 font, 1-inch margins all around

Task

The premise of this assignment is to convince college students, or a particular subgroup, to believe _____ about a health issue relevant to their lives. This line has been intentionally left blank because it's up to YOU to decide your specific topic.

For example, you may want to persuade college students to believe in the importance of drinking 64 ounces of water every day or getting at least 6 hours of sleep each night, or avoiding alcohol. It's important to remember that simply telling your audience to do or *not* to do something usually isn't effective. Instead, you need to try to change their beliefs about the topic first, and that's the goal of this comic book. Your job is to use the visual narrative format to tell a story that will entertain, educate, and hopefully change the beliefs of your audience so that they ultimately may change their behaviors as well. Have fun and be creative.

Pitch: On Monday, October 3, you should come to class with the following sentence completed: "I'm going to persuade [target audience] to believe [??????] in 8 pages because [why you care]."

Rationale: After you compose and revise your comic book, write a brief essay explaining your narrative and design choices. How and why did you decide to tell this particular story? How and why did you use particular images? List any outside sources consulted at the end (APA format).

Assessment Rubric

	Exceeds expectations (23-25 pts.)	Meets expectations (20-22 pts.)	Does not meet expectations (0-19 pts.)
Persuasive storytelling (25 pts.) The comic tells a clear, coherent story that has a plot, identifiable characters, and a believable storyworld. The story is clearly aimed at a specific target audience and seeks to persuade that audience of a specific belief and/or action. The reasons why the audience should believe/act in that way are clearly stated or implied.			
Use of text & images (25 pts.) The comic uses good quality images that are clear, easy to understand, logical, and necessary to advance the story. All text (narrative and dialogue) complements the images. The comic is not too "text-heavy." Text is mostly free of grammatical errors.			
Engagement (25 pts.) The author seems to care about the topic. The story is engaging and entertaining to read. The author establishes a humorous and/or serious tone that keeps the reader interested.			
Rationale (25 pts.) Narrative & design choices are explained clearly and logically. Sources/credit given.			

Appendix B

Comic Book (100 points)

Deadlines

- Version 1 for in-class critique: Monday, October 9, 11:59 p.m.
- Version 2 (final) for assessment: Sunday, October 15, 11:59 p.m.

Submission Method

- Version 1: Canvas Discussions Thread; high-quality PDF
- Version 2: Canvas Assignment Link; high-quality PDF
- Submit your artist statement as a separate PDF. You do not need to submit the first version of your artist statement, but you may do so if you would like feedback.

Audience & Rhetorical Purpose

Your audience for this assignment includes current and future international students enrolled at our university. If you wish, you may target a more focused audience (for instance, a specific gender, cultural background, religious background, etc.).

Your rhetorical purpose is to persuade your readers to change their beliefs and/or actions related to a particular social or emotional wellness issue. You may adopt a serious or humorous tone, but it should be appropriate to the topic and your audience.

Length & Format

- 8 pages designed in Comic Life
- Format will be discussed further in our KSL session

Task

Create your own comic book! Draw upon your personal knowledge and experiences as well as our class readings to craft a story (fiction, nonfiction, or a combination of both) using images and words. The comic should convey an argument, either stated or implied, about a wellness issue of your choice within the social or emotional dimensions of wellness.

After you've created the comic, write a brief artist statement. This one-page, single-spaced essay should be written to me (not your peers). It should explain the narrative and design choices that guided the construction of your comic book. Why did you choose this topic? How did you find inspiration for and develop your story-world? How did you tailor your content to accomplish your rhetorical purpose and reach your target audience? List any resources consulted in the development of your comic at the end of your artist statement (APA or MLA format). Photo credits should be listed at the end of your comic, not on the artist statement.

Where to begin

Reflect on the first month of class and the dimensions of wellness we have addressed so far: emotional and social. Which dimension has been most interesting to you? Within that dimension, what specific topic or problem seems most important to you? Consider choosing a problem about which your peers (other first-year international students) may lack knowledge, awareness, or concern. Think about what beliefs or actions you want to change among your peers.

To help solidify your purpose, audience, and personal stake, complete the following statement. We'll discuss this "pitch" in class. Just like a sales pitch, your statement should convince your instructor and classmates that your comic book is worthy of printing and distribution.

Pitch: "I'm going to persuade [audience] to believe [??] in 8 pages because [why you care]."

Building your storyworld

Think about your favorite stories—the ones you could read over and over again, or the ones that you read late into the night because you just have to know what happens next. Good stories grab our attention and keep our attention. However, some of the best stories not only entertain us but also impart a "moral" or larger message that makes us think differently about ourselves, other people, or the world around us. *That's* the kind of story I want you to tell here. But first, you have to create your storyworld. In other words, you need to get creative and think about the setting for your story, the characters (don't choose more than 2 or 3 since you have limited space), and the plot (including exposition, conflict, and resolution). It's alright if you've never written a story before. Now is your chance to experiment and perhaps discover a latent talent.

Making an argument

Your story should have a moral or larger message that stays with your readers after they've finished reading your comic. Essentially, you're making an argument without paragraphs or an overt thesis statement. You're attempting to persuade your readers to think differently about a certain topic or change their behaviors in some way. Your argument doesn't have to be obvious or preachy, though. In fact, when it comes to storytelling, some of the most effective arguments are never stated directly but instead implied through the story itself. Try to use your images and words wisely so that the argument reveals itself naturally. You may choose to state your argument directly, either within narrative text or dialogue, but make sure that its appearance is believable in the context of the story.

Tips to keep in mind

- Have fun, but remember that the story MUST be persuasive and have a clear message, whether it's implied or stated.
- You only have 8 pages, so space is limited. Make sure each page and each panel are used wisely and purposefully. Don't waste space saying or showing something that is redundant or unnecessary to your larger message.

- Make your story engaging. That doesn't mean it has to be funny, but it should keep your readers interested because they care about what will happen next. If readers are bored or confused by page two, your message will not be persuasive or successful.
- The narrative can be true or fictional.
- Since you're writing a comic book and not a formal essay, images should take priority in getting your message across. In other words, the images should guide the story forward, with words supplementing through narrative voice and dialogue as needed. Don't let your story be too text-heavy; otherwise, readers may get bogged down.

Assessment Rubric

	Outstanding (20 pts.)	Exceeds expectations (18 pts.)	Acceptable (15 pts.)	Poor (12 pts.)	Troll (0 pts.)
Persuasive storytelling (20 pts.) The comic tells a clear, coherent, and persuasive story that has a plot, identifiable characters, and a believable storyworld. The story is clearly aimed at a specific audience to accomplish a specific and significant rhetorical purpose.					
Use of images (20 pts.) The comic uses good quality images that are clear, easy to understand, logical, and necessary to advance the story.					
Use of words (20 pts.) All text (narrative and dialogue) complements the images. The comic is not too "text-heavy." The comic contains minimal grammatical errors.					
Engagement (20 pts.) The author seems to care about the topic. The story is engaging and entertaining to read. The author establishes a humorous and/or serious tone that keeps the reader interested. The comic shows evidence of time, attention, and care (not rushed).					

Artist Statement (20 pts.) Narrative & design choices are explained clearly and logically. Sources/credit given.					

Total: _____ / 100

Appendix C

Building Your Storyworld

The first step toward writing your comic book involves building your storyworld. In other words, you need to decide the story's location, characters, and basic plot. We'll begin with some of our "Insta-Story" questions to help you think about these elements. However, since you're telling a visual story, you need to think about how you'll use pictures to tell your story, not just words. In fact, you should try to use fewer words and instead let the pictures convey to your readers most of the action. Once you outline the details of your storyworld, you can begin designing the comic book itself by taking pictures, arranging the pictures, and adding your narration and dialogue. Remember that your comic book must be 8 pages (no more, no fewer).

Context (see assignment prompt): What is your topic? _____

Who is your audience? _____ Your purpose? _____

Background Brainstorming: What story do you want to tell? Or, put another way, whose story do you want to tell? How can you most effectively reach your audience and accomplish your purpose? Will you need to consult any outside sources, and if so, which?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Step 1: Choose your tone:

humorous serious

Step 2: Choose your setting (note: you may have multiple settings depending on your story)

cafeteria	dorm room	dorm lounge	classroom	outdoors
gym	restaurant	car	bus	store
doctor's office	hospital	library	cafe	museum
Other: _____				

Step 3: Choose your timeframe:

present day (year: 2017) future (year: _____) past (year: _____)

Step 4: Create your characters (and consider: human or animal? some of each?):

Protagonist: Name: _____ Age: _____ Gender: _____
Physical appearance: _____
Personality traits: _____

Antagonist: Name: _____ Age: _____ Gender: _____
Physical appearance: _____
Personality traits: _____

Minor Char.1: Name: _____ Age: _____ Gender: _____
Physical appearance: _____
Personality traits: _____

Minor Char. 2: Name: _____ Age: _____ Gender: _____
Physical appearance: _____
Personality traits: _____

Step 5: Choose your narrator. Whose voice will tell the story?
Protagonist Antagonist Minor Char. 1 Minor Char. 2 Omniscient

Step 6: Identify: What is the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist?

Step 7: Create a conflict. Consider: What problem should the protagonist have to overcome?

Step 8: Find resolution. Consider: What do you want to happen at the end of the story?

Step 9: Decide the balance you want to have between dialogue (characters talking to one another) and narration (the narrator describing events).

Step 10: Think about what pictures you need to take. Write down a couple of ideas here.

Appendix D

Narrative Terms

Provide a definition (1-2 sentences) for each of the following terms:

Characters

Protagonist

Narrator

Plot

Setting

Timeframe

Conflict

Resolution

Notes

[1] Beginning Spring 2018, my students will become certified in conducting Social and Behavioral Research through our university's Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative. This process will allow students more thoroughly to learn ethical research protocol. Our university's Institutional Review Board 1facilitates this process for students conducting small-scale primary research as part of classroom assignments so that may publicly present or publish their work to a wider audience beyond our class.

Works Cited

American College Health Association. (2016). *Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary*. Retrieved from http://www.acha-ncha.org/reports_ACHA-NCHAIIc.html

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