

Lesson plan title: Teaching Research and Writing through Graphic Texts

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**Abstract:** In this unit students will work in groups to research and write a graphic novel set during the American Civil War. Using online resources and working under the premise that a story plot can be a metaphor for a thesis statement, students will create a historically possible story based on their understanding of the period.

### Overview:

Literature on how to use the popular genre known as graphic novels in the classroom is growing. However, most of this literature focuses on how to use graphic texts to engage reluctant readers. In this unit we will present a model that focuses on the ways graphic texts can be used to teach research and writing. This unit was originally planned for a United States history course with a focus on the Civil War. However, it can be easily adapted to any historical or literary period.

Grade Band: 6-12

**State Goal 16:** Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations.

Estimated Lesson Time: Ten 55 minute sessions.

### From Theory to Practice:

Donald Graves observed that “Children want to write in the genre they are reading” (304). Ask any librarian what the most popular genres are for middle and high school students and graphic novels will be at the top of the list. This interest provides writing teachers with an opportunity to engage students in a research and writing project that students will have an interest in working on. The relationship between image and text is well established. Donald Murray even suggests that writers should, “Start by drawing a picture. Writing is, after all, a visual art” (181). Through this unit, students will work together in research groups to study not only texts (both primary and secondary) but also images of place, leading up to the production of an authentic piece of literature of their own construction. They have ownership of the text; it is not a simple cut and paste research report. Finally, the very nature of this unit leads to an experience that falls within the realm of what Amy Goodman suggests when she observed “Learning about language should be a social activity, not a lonely pursuit” (xvii).

### Further Reading:

Graves, Donald. *A Fresh Look at Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.

Murray, Donald. “Teach Writing Your Way.” *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice*. Eds.

Kylene Beers, Robert Probst, and Linda Rief. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007, pp. 179-187.

Goodman, Amy and Tom Olivia. *Engaging Grammar: Practical Advice for Real Classrooms*. Urbana:

National Council of Teachers of English, 2007.

## Student Objectives

Students will:

- Explore the relationship between text and image.
- Identify relevant primary and secondary texts from a specific historical period.
- Understand the relationship between a thesis and a plot.
- Work in a social group to create a graphic novel (using image and text) that is both historically possible and yet completely original.

## Instructional Plan

Resources:

Anderson, Ho Che. *King*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2002.

Eisner, Will. *Last day in Vietnam: A Memory*. Milwaukee: Dark Horse Comics, 2000.

Geary, Rick. *The Murder of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Nantier, Beall, Minoustchine, 2005.

Preparation:

- Familiarize yourself with the graphic novel genre.
- Discuss the project with your school librarian. Be sure the library has a variety of sources available for students to research, including books, online resources, primary documents and images. Have a selection of books pulled and available.
- Familiarize yourself with the American Memory page at the Library of Congress website.
- Make copies of the following handouts: The Traditional Research Report, Adapting the Research Report Model to Writing a Graphic Novel, and Thesis as Plot.
- Scan images from *King*; *Last Day in Vietnam*; and *The Murder of Abraham Lincoln* for classroom display and discussion. Save images to a zip drive.
- Check out an LCD projector from your technology department and make sure you understand how to connect it to a computer and display the images you have saved.

## Instruction and Activities

Session One:

1. Begin the unit by giving students an overview of what they will be doing over the next few weeks.
2. Break students into groups of 5 and assign the following subtopics (as they relate to the Civil War) to each member of each group:

Popular Culture

Politics

Economics

Religion

Battles

3. Discuss how to locate a book source, and ask students to begin thinking about a topic/story their group will write about.
4. Students will write a one page narrative to share with their group on their subtopic. So if a student's subtopic is popular culture they will need to research the pop culture of the 1860s.
5. Remind students that they will be an expert in their group on their subtopic. Tell them to keep asking themselves, "What would people alive in the 1860s have known about my topic?"

#### Session Two:

1. Take class to the library to find a book on their subtopic.
2. During this time the librarian could talk to the class about the resources in the library. While each student in class should consult one print source, the bulk of their research will come from information from the Library of Congress American Memory pages. Show students how to access this site at this time.

#### Session Three:

1. Pass out The Traditional Research Report hand out and discuss the questions. Walk students through the research report process.
2. After completing a discussion of this handout, point out to the students that researching and writing a graphic text will require more in depth research than a tradition research paper.
3. Pass out the Adapt the Research Report Model to Writing a Graphic Novel handout.
4. Walk them through the process involved in how writers choose a subject, narrow the subject, develop a question, and finally use the question to formulate a thesis. Refer to the example on the hand out.
5. Refer students to the last section of the handout where they are prompted to "Brainstorm a list below on what you need to know about the following topics to write a graphic novel." When going over this section students will clearly see that they will need to do a much more thorough job researching their story than if they were writing a traditional research report.
6. Give students time to sit in their groups and talk about what they are finding in their independent research. They can begin to talk about a possible story they will tell.

#### Session Four:

1. Pass out the Thesis as Plot handout 2 and the Rubric handout 3.
2. Review the hand out and use it to facilitate a discussion that illustrates the similarities to a thesis statement and a plot of a story.
3. Now that students have an understanding that the plot of a historical graphic novel can be read as a metaphor for a thesis, illustrate this point with the following examples.
4. Put slides of Ho Che Anderson's *King* graphic novel up on the screen. Show them page 11 from the text and ask them "What did the author need to know to compose this page of text?" There is a wealth of information on this page. In one of the four panels Dr. King is depicted giving a speech. The text is from the actual speech. At the bottom of the frame is the year 1961. The final frame on the page shows people talking about the content of the speech. Facilitate this discussion by talking about how the author of this text would have approached these frames.
5. Discuss with students how the author would have needed knowledge of the actual text from the speech. The author would also have needed to research how the crowd actually responded. Indicate to students that the text of the speech is a matter of historical record, but in order to compose the conversation of two people who heard the speech the author would need to research how that speech was received by the audience. This page of text is a great illustration of interposing historical research with creative expression.
6. Put up a few pages from *Last Day in Vietnam* and discuss the same kinds of issues. Ask students "What did the author need to know to compose this text and create these images?"
7. Put up a few pages from *The Murder of Abraham Lincoln* and ask the same question.

#### Session Five

1. Take students to the library or a computer lab and allow them to continue their research on their individual topic (Popular Culture, Politics, Economics, Religion, and Battles).
2. Indicate to students that in the following session they will be asked to meet as a group and begin to brainstorm possible plots for a story they will compose and illustrate.

#### Session 6

1. Groups meet to discuss their research. At this point each member of the group is becoming an expert on their topic. Now is the time that they begin fleshing out possible stories they want to tell.
2. At the end of this session each group should have finalized a plot line for a story.
3. Have the members of each group decide specific roles they will occupy for the final product they create. There should be at least one writer, one researcher, and one illustrator in each group.

## Sessions 7-10

1. Over the next 1-3 sessions allow students to work on producing their final product ( the amount of time you give the groups can vary). I have found that doing these sessions in the library or computer lab helps. As the writers need facts for the story they can ask the researchers in the group to look up information that will help make the story historically possible. As the illustrators need images of things that will have to be drawn in the story researchers can look up relevant images.

## Final Session:

1. Students share their graphic novel with the class and then turn it in for final assessment.

## Web Resources:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

[http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/investigations/era\\_civilwar.html](http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/investigations/era_civilwar.html)

## Student Assessment:

Students turn in a graphic novel that shows evidence that every member of the group worked on the final product. The final product should conform to all rubric requirements.

## Standards:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

## Handout 1 (Traditional Research Report)

The traditional historical research report (adapted from: Mary Lynn Rampolla. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. Boston: St. Martin's, 2007).

1. Choose a subject to research.
2. Narrow the subject to a workable topic.
3. Develop a research question that you will answer through the text you create.
4. Use your research question to formulate your thesis (a good thesis is an answer to a question and is arguable).
5. The reader should feel the risks and want to argue with your text.
6. Gather and manage your sources:
  - a. Primary
  - b. Secondary
7. Keep a working bibliography.
8. Keep your research question as your focus (in historical writing the question is the basis for the thesis).

Adapt the above model to writing a graphic novel graphic novel:

1. Choose a subject to research.
  - a. Ex: President Lincoln.
2. Narrow the subject to a workable story.
  - a. Ex: John Wilkes Booth's role in Lincoln's assassination.
3. Develop a question that you will answer through the text you create.
  - a. Ex: Why did Booth go into Ford's Theatre on April 14<sup>th</sup> and shoot Lincoln?
4. Use your research question to formulate your thesis (a good thesis is an answer to a question and is arguable).
  - a. Ex: Five days after Robert E. Lee surrendered ending the Civil War, John Wilkes Booth seeking revenge, shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre. Through this act, Booth actually created a martyr for northerners to rally around, creating further hardship for the South.
5. Gather your sources:
  - a. Primary: texts and images (photographs, paintings)
  - b. Secondary: texts, images, film

6. Keep a working bibliography of these sources. If you are using online sources (like from the Library of Congress) simply cut and past the web address into a word document.
7. Keep your research question/thesis/plot as your focus. Let's examine this concept further.

## Handout 2 Thesis as Plot (yes this is a metaphor).

A brief comparison:

A thesis : (adapted from: Mary Lynn Rampolla. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. Boston: St. Martin's, 2007).

1. A thesis reflects what you have concluded about the topic of your writing.
2. A thesis is a reflection based on critical analysis about the topic and your interpretations of the source materials under examination.
3. A thesis is based on a question you pose of the texts you are reading.
4. A thesis is arguable—a conclusion that a reader might disagree with.

Notes on Plot:

1. "A plot is a way of thinking, an activity, a scheming out of a story" (Novakovich 43).WF
2. "Plot is the key event of your story and the logic between the event and the supporting events, which serve to illuminate it. Plot establishes the cause and the consequences" (Novakovich 71). Fww
3. "Work from a conflict."Ibid. 75
4. "The primary generators of plots are characters and setting..."ibid 82
5. "Characters in one hand, a conflict in the other—this is the point where you begin structuring a story" (Lucke 69).
6. "The best plots develop out of character" (Stein 83).

Let's tie it together:

1. In historical writing the author (that's you) writes about events/conflicts and people/characters that actually existed.
2. In historical graphic novel writing the author (that's you again) writes about events/conflicts and people/characters that actually existed.

What's the difference?

1. In the historical research report the writer states a thesis and then provides several paragraphs of historical evidence to support their thesis statement.
2. With the historical graphic novel the writer will produce a text that illustrates (both with words and images) the conflicts, events, decisions, emotions, the outcomes of the people from a particular era—all this is still supported by historical evidence.

3. The end products are quite different: The former a bland slab of writing that feels like busy work to the student. The latter a, just as thoroughly researched, creative expression of a key moment in someone's life.

## Handout 3

Your text must have the following characteristics (this is the evaluation rubric):

1. At least one instance of dialog that is historically accurate.
2. At least one reference to an actual date that your story takes place.
3. At least one reference to a place that is historically accurate.
4. At least one reference to a historical event.

### Tips:

Write as you read.

Keep a working bibliography for your notes

Summarize your notes

Quotes copied accurately.

### GN format:

#### Intro:

Incite the reader's interest.

The opening of your story should establish (although probably tacitly) the thesis. A full understanding of the writers argument will not come until the entire text has been read and the reader can see the outcome of the story.

#### Body:

Conflict

Best plots (and I would argue—thesis') develop out of character and conflict. You must know the characters in your story. They will be the ones who move your story toward the conclusion where the reader will gain an understanding of your thesis.

#### Conclusion:

Resolution and the celebration of a thesis well argued (i.e. a story well told—a story that clearly illustrates a historical moment).