MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES

I've grown accustomed to being cornered by teachers who like what I have to say but still have concerns that the actual topics and pictures found in graphica are inappropriate for young readers. In my experience, this is probably one of the biggest barriers to educators welcoming graphica into the classroom. Even after we've covered the issues surrounding its invalid bad reputation and reviewed the professional literature that shows its educational validity, this one worry about graphica seems to remain. And it's a big one! What makes this apprehension so problematic is the fact that, although the other concerns about graphica can be addressed with relative ease, this one has a ring of truth to it.

Have you ever walked into a comic book store? The novice visitor is often surprised by how risqué some of the displays and posters can be. Along with the expected child-friendly and colorful juvenile themes, you might see realistic depictions of violence and exaggerated representations of body image. The guys are all bulked up, and the women are . . . well . . . busty. Depending on what titles you browse, comic books written for adult readers can be quite racy; although *some* of them may be appropriate for younger readers, most were not written with children in mind.

So, are comic books appropriate for your students? Yes. And no. Many comic books are appropriate for children, but you will want to be a responsible consumer. There's no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater—there are plenty of resources out there to steer you toward graphica that is more than

appropriate for your students and your classroom. All it takes is a little patience and a point in the right direction.

Ensuring appropriateness is a two-part process: 1) you need to know where to find suitable options, and 2) you need to screen what you do find for acceptability. Locating child-friendly comics today isn't nearly as difficult as it was just a decade ago, and it isn't as complicated as you might think. Some of the titles that are offered in comic shops, though not written specifically for children, are still appropriate for elementary school students, and a day spent shopping around could yield some really great results. But there's really no need to go spelunking through a comic book store trying to find suitable materials. Many of the bigger names in the industry, such as Marvel and DC Comics, currently publish comic books and trade paperbacks written with children in mind, and some of the lesser-known publishers, such as Tokyopop and Papercutz, produce graphic novels written specifically for children. Even some of the publishers you've trusted for years to provide quality guided reading and classroom library books—such as Rosen Classroom Materials, Steck-Vaughn, and Red Brick Learning—are getting into the act and offering graphica written not only with children in mind but specifically for use in the classroom. In fact, so many new titles are being produced especially for the elementary school student that it can be difficult to stay abreast of them all! As a starting point, I've listed several publishers and their contact information in Appendix E to help you in your search for kid-friendly comics.

Another way to find appropriate graphica for your class is to check out book reviews. Most of the well-known library and review publications, such as *Booklist* and *Publisher's Weekly*, regularly dedicate space to updating readers on the newest graphic novels. Many of these discuss quality and age range, as well. The Internet offers a lot of blogs and websites that review comics; my favorite by far is www.noflyingnotights.com, the brainchild of graphica advocate Robin Brenner. Finding a review publication or website that you like and trust is the easiest way to keep up with the constant influx of new arrivals (I've included more places to locate reviews in Appendix C). But take heed: just because a title is written especially for children or has been reviewed by a respected source doesn't ensure its acceptability. You'll still want to move through the second part of the process and take a closer look at the material for yourself.

When you screen graphica, examine your selections for appropriate representations of body image and violence, and diligently weed out any other questionable materials. However, don't be fooled into thinking that's all there is to it. Another part of the screening process is ensuring that the comics you

offer your students to read are appropriate academically. Just because it's popular doesn't mean it's appropriate, and just because it's engaging doesn't mean it's educational. You'll want to consider themes, text level, and vocabulary, as well as picture support and layout. As with any medium, when you choose graphica for the classroom, you must be deliberate in your selection process.

If you're unsure about how to select suitable comics, or you just want a bit of reassurance that you are on the right track, consider using the suggested selection guide in Figure 10.1 (also available in Appendix B) as you preview a title to determine whether it is appropriate for your readers. I would suggest that you start out with your students in mind. Think about where they are as children and as readers. What are they ready to take on? What kind of support will they need from a piece in order for it to become a successful read? With that in mind, you can use this guide more efficiently. If you are still unsure about your selections for any reason, consult with a colleague.

I trust that you will have no problem finding graphica that is suitable for your classroom. Part of being a good literacy instructor is offering students quality reading material that fosters growth and learning but is also appropriate and intriguing. Ultimately, it's up to you. You choose what you consider acceptable for your students. You control what's allowed in your classroom. Don't settle for just anything. Be picky! Graphica is just like any other resource: there are good and bad options. Hold it to the same high standards you hold those other media, and concerns about graphica's appropriateness will evaporate.

CHECK THE ADVERTISEMENTS, TOO

Publishers of comic books often include advertisement pages from outside entities to keep their prices down. When you are screening comic books for placement in your classroom, remember to screen any of the advertisements embedded in the pages as well. Every now and then, you'll encounter a comic book that has a perfectly appropriate story line, but the pages include advertisements that could be deemed inappropriate for the classroom. If you're uncomfortable with this issue, I suggest you stick with trade paperbacks. Titles in this format allow for inclusion of comic book titles, but they are generally published without outside advertisements.

FIGURE 10.1
Selection Guide

	No	Unsure	Yes
Interest Consider the piece as a whole. Is this an area or theme that your students will find interesting enough to motivate them through any rough patches?	No	Unsure	Yes
Topic Think about the overall topic as well as the topics presented throughout the text. Are both appropriate for your students?	No	Unsure	Yes
Vocabulary As you read through the text, are the more difficult vocabulary words supported through the illustrations, context, or the content of the piece?	No	Unsure	Yes
Panels and Gutters Look at the panels and gutters. Are they set up in a way that supports your readers in tending to directionality and making meaning?	No	Unsure	Yes
Illustrations Take a look at the illustrations. Do they offer the right amount of support for your readers to understand the context?	No	Unsure	Yes
Illustrations Are all of the illustrations appropriate (consider representations of violence, body image, mature themes, etc.)?	No	Unsure	Yes
Activity Think about how "busy" the overall feel of the piece is. When you look at the panels and pages, how much is going on? Could your students continue to maintain meaning without becoming confused about where their attention should be focused?	No	Unsure	Yes
Suitability Consider your students' age level and maturity as well as other areas, such as their familiarity with the genre being presented. Is this a suitable text for the intended audience?	No	Unsure	Yes
Overall Quality Consider the overall quality of the piece. Is it well written? Are the illustrations well done? Does it look and read as if it were well thought-out as opposed to simply thrown together?	No	Unsure	Yes