

THE GRAPHIC NARRATIVE

The graphic story (popularly, the comic book story) and the newspaper comic strip portray the universe and all the senses graphically.

That is, ideation, pictures, sound (including speech and sound effects), and the indicators (such as panel borders, denoting time, motion lines expressing movement, and impact bursts conveying transfers of energy), are all portrayed graphically in a single unified whole. These graphics do not simply “illustrate” the narrative. They are the means by which the narrative is told.

Although it has become so commonplace it is almost unperceived, the rock-bottom foundation of the graphic story and the newspaper strip is the panel border, which contains within it all of the other graphic elements, including speech and narration. Our modern concept of time is derived by analogy from the motion picture. We now perceive time as a series of discrete units, running backward into the past and forward into the future, like the frames of a reel of film, rather than as a continuous flow, as it was perceived before stop-motion photography and film. Newspaper strips, which followed the invention of the motion picture, were newsprint movies. Their borders were symbolic frames of film, representing increments of time. Some early newspaper strips actually portrayed them as motion picture frames.

This addition to the language of the graphic narrative separates graphic stories and newspaper strips from the earlier picture-stories, multi-panel cartoon spreads, and novels-in-woodcut, which have no structural time indicator, only an ill-defined and implied “before” and “after.” The border as an incremental time indicator has become so universally accepted that today it is often understood to be present even in its apparent absence, like other forms of implied language. However, where necessary, the incremental time indicator can be explicitly introduced into the graphic story and newspaper strip, unlike other forms of graphic narrative.

There is a difference between the graphic story and the newspaper strip, as well.

The panels of a newspaper strip are direct analogs of the frames of a motion picture, one panel following the other serially.

The multiple tiers of the graphic story page present each panel both serially, in a succession of frames, and as part of a gestalt, in which all the frames of the page or spread have further structural relationships, providing a greater range of potential artistic expression than can the newspaper strip.

Commonly, the graphic story is divided into two forms, the graphic short story and the graphic novel.

The graphic short story (often simply called the graphic story, following the analogy of the prose short story) is usually brief, and commonly deals with a single ideational experience.

The graphic novel (generally longer than the graphic short story, but sometimes not) portrays many ideational experiences, often integrating them into a larger universal statement, not unlike a complex equation. In this, it is similar to the prose novel.

—Richard Kyle, *January 12, 2001*