COMIC CON(NECTION): ENVISAGING COMICS AS A MULTIMODAL ENSEMBLE THAT TEACHES CORE VISUAL WRITING

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Having students produce their own comics in the classroom teaches a uniquely powerful form of multimodal production and analysis that I label *core visual writing*. Core visual writing combines visual and verbal paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing—while incorporating the envisaging process of materiality and provenance (transferring materials from multiple modes)—into an ensemble that can be displayed in multiple media. My research project is an empirical classroom study that looks at the affordances found in teaching comics production as a way to teach students practical multimodal concepts.[1] My initial goal stemmed from helping students envisage a purely textual document into a multimodal product that combined visual, verbal, linguistic, and spatial modes through a simple production ensemble. I found comics to be a perfect fit for these goals and student responses verified this to some degree.

This paper looks at all the aspects that lead to my students' acquiring the concept of core visual writing. The literature review argues that comics function as a multimodal ensemble (as opposed to the more popular moniker *comics medium* or the problematic *comics genre*). The literature review also explains multimodal concepts that apply to comics as well as research that emphasizes production pedagogy. Then the paper discusses the study design, focusing on

the study parameters, reading list, and production schedule that informed the study. Next it covers core visual writing, which emerged from my coding of student responses. These are then analyzed to see what elements make teaching comics production unique to potentially benefit other instructors interested in teaching multimodal design in the classroom.

Literature Review

This literature review covers three major sections key to explaining why core visual writing matters. The first section introduces multimodality and how comics function as multimodal texts. The second section dives into multimodal theory that informs core visual writing and how my students envisaged their comics. The final section briefly addresses why having students produce comics instead of only using them as a literary primary text for analysis benefits students' multimodal understanding.

Comics as Multimodal Texts

Comic books have evolved since their modern inception,[2] but have been multimodal in nature since their beginning. Multimodality covers multiple concepts and the theory that informs it is expansive. For this brief discussion, I will cover only a few key concepts for my project: modes, media, and ensembles. These are the multimodal concepts that support the core visual writing (CVW) theme that my students discussed. The varied connections between comics and multimodality have been made in the *Composition Studies*' special issue on comics and could be of interest to the reader (Jacobs).

The key to understanding core visual writing lies in the namesake of multimodality: modes. What are modes? Simply put modes are "a way of communicating" (Arola et al. 3); modes are the things that enable the process of an idea transferring itself to the recipient. Modes are dependent on social and cultural norms and their meaning can vary depending on the reader. Will Gibson and Diane Mavers argue that modes depend on a combination of three Hallidayan criteria: the "subject matter," the constructed "social relations," and the textual coherence (MODE). Modes rarely exist

on their own, but are often combined, hence the term *multimodality*. The New London Group is often credited with the rise of the term *multimodality* in the 1990s, but Gene Lauer argues that the concept of multimodality can be found in composition scholarship since the 1970s under the moniker of multimedia (30). The New London Group focused on the concept of multiliteracies with its accompanying six modes (linguistic design, visual design, audio design, gestural design, spatial design, and multimodal design) of which multimodal "represents the patterns of interconnection among the other modes" (198). In 2018, when someone refers to multimodality they are likely referencing the interconnectedness of the first five multiliteracies (linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial design). Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress define modes as "socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, speech, moving image are examples of modes, all used in learning resources" (237). Aside from moving images comics[3] incorporate all of these additional modes that Bezemer and Kress define. Because of this, multiliteracies are commonly only referred to as modes. Yet, one shouldn't confuse multimodality with new media (technology-based theory) since the five grammars (modes) can exist in both new and old technologies: "In a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal" (New London Group 201). While multimodality and new media often accompany each other, they aren't inseparable. Comics, for this reason, function nicely as multimodal texts that don't require new media.

Creators design modes to be consumed in a readable output, or a medium. The differences between genres, media, and modes can snag many newcomers. A genre usually indicates a mode/story/style that includes like elements that an audience recognizes as being similar (e.g., fiction, poetry, drama). This definition doesn't consider rhetorical genre, a theory that considers the "specific structure and content" of materials and synthesizes them together (Cline). In the rhetorical sense, comics can be considered a genre (in the sense that essays and tweets are "genres" due to their like structure); Dale Jacobs concedes this as well in his multimodal definition of comics (*Graphic* 5). However, in the traditional sense of the definition of

genre, calling comics a genre is problematic.[4] Instead comics seem more like a medium that houses multiple genres; however, comics aren't quite a medium either. Within multimodal communication, a medium usually refers to the material where modes are both amalgamated and consumed (such as a computer, a book, or a smartphone). Kress explains the interconnectedness among all of these terms, clarifying media in the process:

> I use the term "mode" for the culturally and socially produced resources for representation and "medium" as the term for the culturally produced means for distribution of these representations-as-meanings, that is, as messages. These technologies—those of representation, the modes, and those of dissemination, the media—are always both independent of and interdependent with each other. ("Gains" 284)

As in all things within multimodality, the interconnectedness of all objects and how social cues affect their interpretation must be considered.

If comics are multimodal, but neither the modes nor media define them, how should they be referenced? I argue for *multimodal ensemble*, or the comics ensemble. An ensemble, which like much of multimodal phraseology stems from musical concepts, refers to "representations or communications that consist of more than one mode, brought together not randomly but with a view to collective and interrelated meaning" (MODE). Readers consume comics on multiple media (e.g., in glossy magazines, in books, or on digital devices like phones, tablets, and computers), so naming the ensemble *the comics medium* is problematic. And since comics have multiple modes (namely spatial, linguistic, gestural, and visual as defined by The New London Group), they are indeed a multimodal text. Since the combinations of the modes are intentional and often done in a similar fashion despite disparate literary genres (although the format itself could be considered genre-based in nature), the most appropriate terminology would be the *comics ensemble*. However, there is room for improvement on this phrase since its initial meaning

won't be clear to outside readers who might interpret the phrase *comics ensemble* as a collection of comedians. Yet it will serve our purpose here. That said, within comics studies scholars often refer to it as the comics medium.

Turning to art vocabulary clarifies the concept a bit more: artists use different media to create their message (such as oil on canvas—both would be considered media). However, the product could rely on multiple modes (like gestural, spatial, and linguistic for example) to express any art genre. The three differ but are interrelated. Let's look at Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* as an example. The media used were oil on wood. The modes used were gestural (the smile), spatial (how Mona Lisa juxtaposes with the background, her body positioning, the horizon, etc.), and visual (the use of sfumato among other artistic techniques). The genre chosen was a portrait.

Multimodal Concepts that Inform Core Visual Writing

I coined the phrase *core visual writing* when I began to notice a trend among my students' responses referring to multimodal concepts. While core visual writing could go by other names, it is essentially learning to paraphrase, summarize, or nutshell both textually and visually while focusing on the message's layout and juxtaposition. Essentially, it was students unknowingly describing the affordances of modes, materiality, and provenance as well as the layout of their document. It also shares some elements with remediation techniques (see J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin) and recomposing (see Steve Moline); however, it's not entirely in line with remediation because remediation often indicates that the earlier mode lacked something that the newer mode fixed. As students repurposed their argument from an essay to a comic, they learned to take a larger message and shrink it into a condensed version while also converting an alphabetic literacy into a multimodal one using both new and old media.

Multimodality doesn't infuse texts with automatic exceptionality. Instead, one must evaluate whether the modes working together benefit the readability of the message. Each design mode offers different capacities, advantages, and disadvantages in their meaning-

making—these "poten-tials and constraints" are known as *affordances* (Bezemer and Kress 237). Kress labels these affordances as "distinct potentials and limitations for representation of the various modes" ("Gains" 290). Anne Wysocki simplifies this concept by saying that affordances seek to understand what modes make possible and how they shape "the actions of others" (306–07). Diane Mavers and Martin Oliver argue that the possibilities and impossibilities of using a mode for communication are always offset by the changing social norms and conventions (MODE). I was curious what affordances comics production offered my students compared to other writing/design assignments that had similar goals and how the stereotypes of comics impacted students' learning.

A large part of affordances, and multimodality in general, refers to the concept of provenance and materiality. Provenance can be defined as how a particular mode is imported from one context to another or "by what it has been repeatedly used to mean and do" (MODE). Kristian Tungol paraphrases Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen on provenance: "This concept of 'importing' one context into another allows people to signify ideas and values associated with that other context by those who do the importing." In order to use multiple modes within media, the producer (or writer) must grapple with materiality. Materiality refers to the decisions of a producer about which modes they incorporated to meet the communicative deficit they were addressing; Sara Price et al. explain: "modes are taken to be the product of the work of social agents shaping material, physical 'stuff' into meaningful stuff" (MODE). Bezemer and Kress define materiality as "the ability to 'move' the semiotic material or content of a textual entity from one mode or modal ensemble to another" (241). As instructors, we should consider what materiality best complements the rhetorical situation we assign. When students both consider these elements and synthesize the modes into an ensemble that has meaning for both them and their readers, they are invoking materiality. Provence and materiality work hand-in-hand to clarify affordances. Since the three are nouns, it becomes a bit cumbersome to explain them in writing; because of this, I use the verb *envisage* to refer to the three when I discuss them in this

essay. I chose the verb *envisage* due to its uniqueness and because it means looking forward to an imagined possibility while considering an object—or concept—with social cues applied to it. I am adding the idea that *envisage* could also mean producing the imagined possibility into an object understood by receivers.

While layout isn't considered a canonical mode by all, many scholars (including Kress) see it as one. Whether it's a traditional mode or not, having students understand layout and how juxtaposing images and words next to each other effects understanding became an important lesson in this unit. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*[5] expertly describes gutters, panels, and how we interpret these devices. Layout was a major portion of students' decision making, and I included the following in the assignment description: "Make sure the visuals have been employed with care and in a way that shows you have given thought to how to best convey your argument."[6] Layout ended up playing a significant role in core visual writing and how students designed their comics.

In multimodal scholarship, the term *design* is often used as a synonym for composition, document creation, or writing. Lauer argues that using *design* allows the word *composition* to both become a verb and broaden its traditional, alphanumeric meaning to include all modes of writing (34). Bezemer and Kress define *design* as "principles of composition" (233). This distinction matters within multimodality because as new writing strategies appear with new technology, it's "increasingly difficult to categorize writing in terms of the old, familiar modes" (Lunsford 65–66). The New London Group assert that "All written text is also visually designed" (201). Therefore, when referring to the modes of writing as design, it's important for the reader to not confuse it with the traditional, visually centered meaning of design—but as a combination of the visual, spatial, linguistic, audio, and gestural meanings of multimodal design. When students design, they become producers.

Producing Multimodal Texts

Typically, comics studies[7] research theorizes that reading comics can aid students in understanding advanced topics (see Talon, Heer

and Worcester, McGrath, Hosler, etc.). My argument goes beyond having students read comics in the classroom (although I promote that as well) to having students produce their own comics. Comics production has also been explored (see Morrison et al.; Comer; and Burg), yet much of it covers pre-collegiate students or an instructor's analysis of students' work without input from the students. In comics studies the vast majority of research lies in analyzing specific comics according to the paradigms of each academic tradition and arguing for comics' inclusion in both the classroom and as primary texts worth studying. Writing studies often treats comics similarly: as a tool for analysis or as an additional canonical text to explore (many rely on the quasi-canon of *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *Fun Home*, *100 Demons*, a myriad of graphic memoirs, and the occasional Alan Moore or Chris Ware sprinkled on top). To clarify, when I say comics analysis, I mean making rhetorical, or other analytical, arguments using comics as the primary text. There is absolutely nothing wrong with comics analysis.[8] What I sought to do in my research was make students producers of comics. When I say comics production, I refer to students composing (i.e., drawing, creating, juxtaposing) their own comics and not just writing about comics. However, since many of my students were unfamiliar with the ensemble of comics (and multimodal composition in general), I also introduced them to comics through a specific sequence of exemplar comics (detailed in the reading section and Appendix A). Students focused on analysis and ways to transfer what they learned from the professional comics to their own production. Other scholars have focused on moving beyond analysis in comics studies and their work makes up the bulk of this section.

Having students envisage and create comics to teach similar concepts to core visual writing has been explored by other authors as well. Jerome Burg has students summarize literature readings by creating comic reports (qtd. in Burmark 12). Lynell Burmark says this concept functions because comic books "are restricted to only a very few 'cells' and to very abbreviated dialogue" which forces students to amalgamate broader elements into their "essence" (14). Timothy G. Morrison et al. write: "Constructing a comic book requires students to determine what is most important from their readings,

to re-phrase it succinctly, and then to organize it logically" (760). While not explicitly mentioning it, they are referencing materiality, provenance, and what I labeled core visual writing. While their findings, and the story-retelling strategy, are aimed at primary students—these results indicate that a similar approach may benefit post-secondary students as well. In either case, students worked on creating core visual writing through the comics ensemble.

Convincing students to produce comics may not be as difficult as encouraging unwilling instructors to experiment. Yet, having students envisage their writing through comics production can be rooted in firm theory. Diana George speaks to the reluctance of instructors to make students producers in various media. She writes that we rarely encourage students to move from visual critics to being visual producers (213). She worries that while the profession would be comfortable with students studying visuals (such as comics), producing them makes many feel uncomfortable: "As a tool for literacy instruction … visual media [is] little more than a prompt for student essays and stories, a substitute for more traditional literary forms, or a subject of scrutiny" (216). Richard Marback combines George's argument with James Berlin's work from the 80s to encourage students to engage in design and production (259–61). While using comics as a hermeneutic tool creates effective pedagogy, I wanted to follow George's production technique.

Comics can be read in print or in digital form (in a book, a magazine, a newspaper, a poster, as well as on a computer, a tablet, and a smartphone), and can be used on both expensive and inexpensive media. Comics combine text, visuals, language, and spatial placement (as well as materiality, provenance, and layout) in sophisticated ways that are still being explored. It also offers unique mode affordances—like the intuitive way it represents gestural cues through visual caricatures done in a sequence where readers seem to be able to interpret gestures and expressions with little difficulty. Comics show facial expressions and gestures in visual ways that cannot be done as effectively in pure text due to the abstract quality of alphanumeric modes. While a gesture could be represented

in a single image, portraying a wide range of gestures in single images becomes much more cumbersome. The most effective way to represent the sufficient number of gestures in single images would be to turn the images into a still-frame cinematic mode—which happens to be a synonym for comics. Jacobs solidifies this with his emphasis that comics combine "visual, gestural, and spatial elements" effortlessly and the modes cannot stand alone but must be interpreted together (*Graphic* 6–15). Comics visually display gestures while also using graphical representations of speech and facial features. They also use traditional writing with more progressive design than a traditional mode. While traditional writing can also add graphics, they're rarely more than a graphical representation of the written word. At times the graphics complement the text, but they don't often work together like they do in comics. The multimodal strength of comics contributed to my assigning them for my students to read and to produce.

The Study: Design and Methods

My project was not a traditional multimodal course, as *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* outlines, where I taught linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and linguistic modes as concepts to my students (Arola et al. 4). Aside from reading some McCloud, students didn't engage in these conversations about definition and theory. At the time, I didn't find it necessary for students to explicitly understand this terminology, but upon reflection I see value in teaching multimodal concepts (like the ones mentioned in the literature review). Teaching students to analyze and produce comics in order for them to understand multimodality was my goal at the time, but I wasn't clear which concepts would stick in students' minds. Once I identified core visual writing as the most significant result from students, I retroactively organized the key concepts previously mentioned. If I were to do this experiment again, I would lead with some of the multimodal vocabulary to help students have reference points to what they were creating. When I did my initial research I was concerned that the inundation of a new ensemble (comics) and vocabulary (multimodal concepts) would drown students. I'm not sure that would be the case. An argument

could be made that having students envisage their argument in multiple ensembles and modes did the work of teaching them the vocabulary in a hands-on fashion. Still, giving language to the moves they naturally stumbled on could have strengthened their understanding.

Because of this, my research isn't interested in analyzing students' final comics results for emerging themes as is sometimes done but seeks to give students a voice. An article that triangulated analysis of student work based on criteria (preferably by third-party researchers not involved in the teaching) along with coding of student responses would be useful in future studies.

Study Parameters

This section explains the parameters of the study, including the university and class details as well as the questionnaire and its distribution. Then I will look at the content taught in the course including the reading list and the production schedule. Iowa State University, a Carnegie-designated, very high research active university, rests among trees and landscaped lawns in Ames, Iowa—population around 60,000. This study was done in Spring 2011 in two composition classes with the same class schedule. It was a precursor to a similar study I performed in the technical communication classroom that would later become my dissertation. The total number of students in my study was 47, and only 33 students participated in the survey. The majority of students were primarily white, mid-western American students with an equal number of male and female participants. A few international students also populated my courses, the majority coming from China. The class met twice a week, one class in a regular classroom (with smart technology available) and one in a computer lab.

At the end of the semester, after both the analysis and design of comics had been completed, while stationed in the computer lab, students were issued an IRB-approved questionnaire that they had the option to either answer or ignore. Students were given ten open-ended questions in a Word file (see Figure 1). I left the room after administering the surveys. Students typed their responses, printed them, and turned in both a signed release form and their completed

questionnaires in different piles. A volunteer student stuffed the piles into an envelope while I was out of the room. Because of these steps, the answers remained anonymous. Before coding the questionnaires, I kept them stored in my work desk inside my office. The pages are identical and none of them have details that reveal the writers' identities.

Class Content and Schedule

My approach for teaching comics production was to have students change the materiality of their argumentative essay done earlier in the semester into an argumentative comic strip. In order for students to produce comics, I needed to introduce them to the comics ensemble and help them transfer concepts they gained reading comics and apply them toward their final production. This is evident by looking at questions one, two, seven, and eight from the questionnaire (see Figure 1). Before introducing comics, the course had covered traditional, argumentative research essays as covered in the textbook *Aims of Argument*. As part of the Department of English, ISUCOMM teaches composition courses based in a WOVE approach (meaning written, oral, visual, and electronic communication with its basis stemming from multimodality). In the program, a reasonable amount of time needed to be dedicated to all four branches of these types of communication. This assignment was experimental in nature (but covered the W-V-E- of WOVE); I didn't want it to take away from the major course assignments (which ranged from analysis and argument to evaluation and presentations) so I taught it as an additional unit. This meant spending less time on all assignments and giving students an additional assignment of comics. However, students didn't seem to mind being on a rushed schedule and doing extra work since studying comics seemed to some of them like they were getting away with something.[9] They created a traditional alphanumeric essay and received feedback from me. Then we stepped away from the alphanumeric form and students envisaged their comics. In order to do this, I used progymnasmata[10] to teach students how to read and write comics in incremental steps.

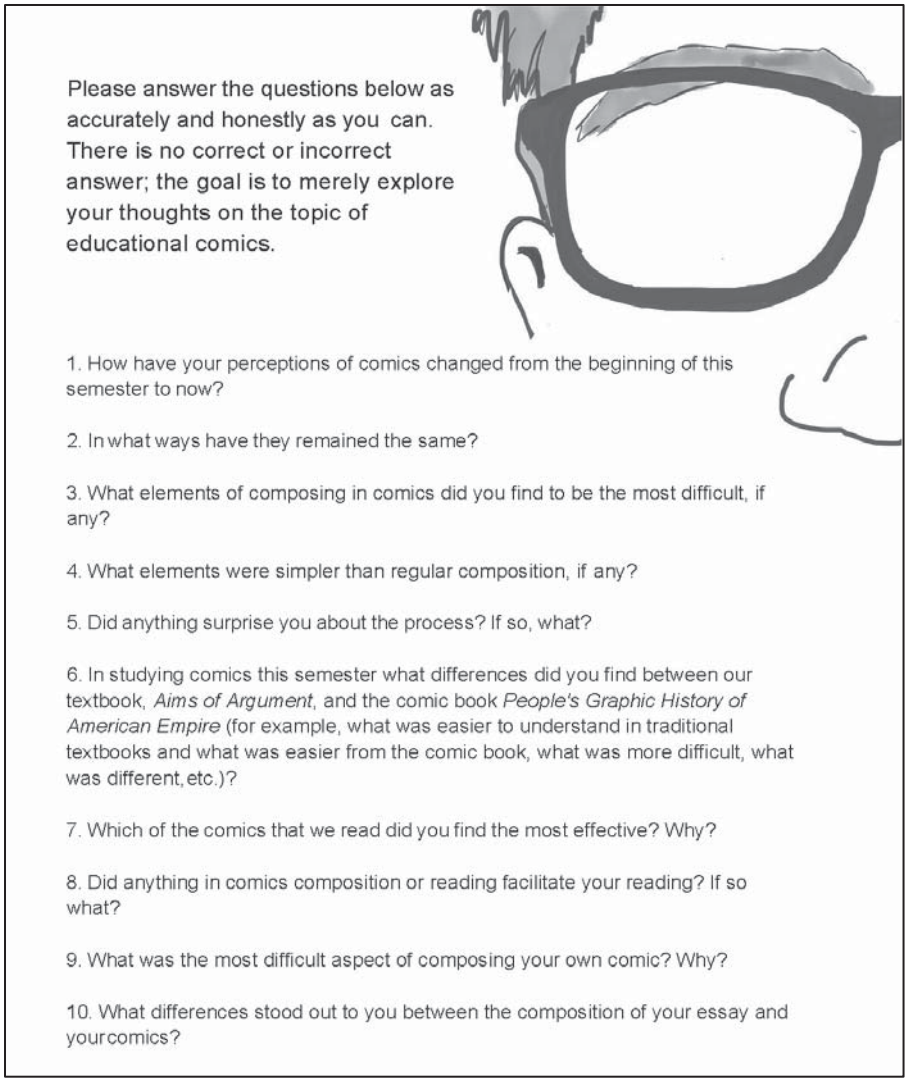

Figure 1: Questionnaire

Reading Comics in the Classroom

Students often came into the classroom with preconceived notions of what comics are. These notions were closer to prejudices than realities. But these notions matter when considering comics' affordances. While some students were familiar with comics—with a stray student or two being avid consumers—most were unfamiliar with the ensemble (aside from having read a few webcomics or

newspaper cartoons). I had them read familiar comics examples first and then we scaffolded into more complicated material from there. Engaging in production was my end goal, but in order for students to envisage a complete comic, they had to read comics and learn about the ensemble.

After justifying the pedagogical strengths of producing comics instead of just analyzing them, it may seem odd how much time I spent having students read. Part of this can be found in Jacobs' justification in his extensive comics pedagogy: "I want to advance two ideas: (1) reading comics involves a complex, multimodal literacy; and (2) by using comics in our classrooms, we can help students develop as critical and engaged readers of multimodal texts" ("More" 19). Before students can produce, they need to understand the genres, ensembles, and mediums they would be creating. Another study found something similar to mine. It had students produce multimodal texts from traditional essays; students were given pre- and post-questionnaires about what affordances were gained composing in multimodality. Their coded results share some similarities to my students' responses (the consensus was the multimodality improved some layering and appeals but weakened thesis clarity) (Kara Poe Alexander et al.). The lack of a combination of multimodal reading and production in the study partly informed my decision to rely heavily on reading even when my final results focused more on production. That said, my initial questioning still explored reading affordances, but I just didn't cover them much here because the codes mostly reaffirmed previous research that reading comics affords certain learning skills (see Talon, Heer and Worcester, McGrath, Hosler, etc.).

What follows is an abbreviated version of the assigned readings and my justification for them. For a detailed listing, the reader can turn to Appendix A. On the first day of the comics unit, I introduced students to various webcomics and traditional newspaper gag strips and comic strips. I began with comics students might have been familiar with and moved into less familiar examples. I also showed them that not all comics have to be humorous, something many students believed before our unit. For homework, students read a

longer comic at home. The next reading was a full-length graphic novel. For this assignment I used Gene Luen Yang's 2006 National Book Award nominee *American Born Chinese*. After this, students read portions of McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to introduce them to comics vocabulary and functionality. The final reading was *A People's History of American Empire*, a graphic adaptation of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of United States* by Mike Konopacki and Paul Buhle. In each step of reading, we analyzed the material through multimodal approaches (but not with specific vocabulary) and discussed how this knowledge would benefit their own creations. Students began producing their own comics while we finished the reading section.

Producing Comics in the Classroom

While learning to analyze comics as a medium, students began adapting their own alphabetic essays into comics. Their first step was to write a purely alphabetic text script, which they began while we were in the reading phase of studying comics. In order for them to do this, they had to imagine a visual representation of their argument. They weren't just presenting their argument in alphabetic text but discovering ways to add narrative and visual transitions to a nonfiction essay. Would they add a narrator like McCloud? Would they have an omniscient presence tell the story through caption boxes like Rick Geary or *Hip-Hop Family Tree*? Would they create a story that captured the essence of the argument? How were they going to cite their claims both visually and textually? How were they going to design and choose graphics that matched and juxtaposed their text? Additionally, they had to find the essence of their argument and create a much more condensed version (core visual writing). This isn't to say that comics need to be condensed. Students had seen that long-form fiction and nonfiction comics exist. However, we were limited with a finite amount of time and experience. In order to accomplish the assignment's goals, they needed to create panels for around three pages' worth of work. In the assignment description, I asked them to consider some of the following: What elements of my argument are the most essential and how will I include them in my comics? How am I going to turn this abstract argument into a more coherent story? What images should

I choose to represent my ideas and why will I choose those images? What will my audience expect? How is this different from the audience for my original essay? How will I keep visual and textual grammar on a college level? How will I have the visuals be representative of my topic and relate to the overall argument?

In order to describe the genre of script to students I focused on advice given by script writer Tim Mucci on his website *timmucci.com*. We looked at how the genre of script-writing worked, going over the conventions and expectations. However, the goal here wasn't to make them expert scriptwriters but to help them move their textual argument into another textual medium that combined their previously written work with their visual ideas. Working with the more familiar alphanumeric text of the script was a buffer to make the visuals less intimidating (see Appendix B for the assignment description).

The steps to produce the artistic side of things began with students' hand-drawing their drafts during class and at home. Next, I introduced them to various free software for approaches to design while also emphasizing that the medium they chose to present their comics didn't matter for the final assignment.[11] For the final step, they applied the analytical framework they'd learned from studying comics, the information they'd discussed about essays, and the feedback they'd gotten from me and their peers on the script and designed their own comics. It's important to note that both the design element and the reading analysis element overlapped for the script, but the focus on the production occupied the last week of the unit.

The comics I received from students ranged from professional to amateur, but I delighted in reading them all. Some students engaged heavily in new media, scanning their hand-drawn comics and digitizing them before creating a formatted comic with multiple panels. Some combined the two, often leaning heavily on older technology. Others used the avatar websites available online making their whole comic digital (albeit a bit flat in execution). Others used hand-drawn comics. The artistic ability of some students was truly impressive, while others did the best they could with lines and stick-figure drawings. Execution of narrative, argument, and juxtaposition of text and visuals also

varied in effectiveness. Some students relied mostly on photographs and created a montage of photographs to create a photo-essay comic. To students' relief, I evaluated their comics on their process and application of criteria more than on any artistic ability. I relied on Thomas Wolsey's comics pedagogical tools where he recommends grading on the process more than the finished product (127). While analyzing their comics would be fun, I was more curious about their own perception of the process. Additionally, I didn't consider that analyzing their finished products might be useful when I created the IRB approval, so I neither got permission nor access to their finished products.

Results and Analysis

Upon completing my classroom study, I had many questionnaire responses that I needed to make sense of—so I turned to coding. My research lies under the categorization of qualitative empirical research because my research question was best understood by collecting "diverse data" from human beings (Creswell 18). Since objectivity and qualitative aren't exactly synonyms, I had to rely on what Juliet Corbin and Anslem Strauss label as "subtle clues" in my results to create themes to answer my research questions (27). This concept, referred to as sensitivity, relies heavily on the researcher's previous hunches as well as careful analysis of collected data (Corbin and Strauss 41). Research is a mixture of art and science and more than one story can emerge from data (Corbin and Strauss 50). While this approach has problems, it's important to note that qualitative studies justify such an approach, which is what I'm attempting with this study (Corbin and Strauss 42). While the coding I did was heuristic (as Saldaña suggests, 8), my questions originated from a hypothesis that producing comics could help students understand multimodal concepts, not from probing students and looking for the emerging story. While many interesting themes emerged as I coded, I focused only on those that fit my initial goal of teaching core visual writing concepts. The other codes were interesting to me (and some reaffirmed previously established support for reading comics), but they neither add to the conversation on core visual writing in

multimodality nor contradict the results I present next. Additionally, I analyzed the number of responses that corresponded with core visual writing and the overall usefulness of reading and producing comics as well as the unique pedagogical affordances comics offer.

Core Visual Writing

As I defined earlier, core visual writing combines visual and verbal paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing—while incorporating the envisaging process of materiality and provenance (transferring materials from multiple modes)—into an ensemble that can be displayed in multiple media. The responses that I placed into this category varied and covered differing aspects of that definition.

For five students, the idea of cutting the word count was the most difficult aspect of core visual writing. One student writes, *"It was hard to take so much text and cut it down significantly, while still incorporating my whole idea."* Another student adds a similar response: *"taking a big document like an essay and boiling it down into like maybe a couple hundred words"* was the most challenging aspect. A third student agreed, indicating the difficulty *"was in saying what you want to in such limited space."* A fourth student adds that the challenge was in *"present[ing] small amounts of information in a given box and not everything that you wanted to say."* Cutting the word count helped students envisage comics and aided their core visual writing and general writing skills.

Two students struggled with trimming their previous writings in the core visual writing process. One student writes that one of the most difficult parts of compiling the comic was "*deciding what to put in the comic and what to leave out because you have to rip apart your paper and decide what isn't as important*." This student adds that cutting isn't just about deciding what to delete, but in making sure the remaining sections make sense: "*You also have to make sure the pieces that you take make sense without the rest of the information and still flow nicely*." A second student had a similar response but was also focused on the visualizing process: "*While making my comic from my essay, I had to cut out some parts, and I had to choose which important parts to visualize*." These challenges mirror Jerome Burg's classroom activities

of having students create comics to adapt their knowledge into their "essence" (Burmark 14). But as one student warns about visuals: "*The visual part and the limitations on text content were very frustrating.*" These students grappled with affordances, materiality, and provenance to make core visual writing.

The core visual writing process wasn't a challenge for all students with at least four students appreciating the approach. One student writes, "*It was nice to just get to the point in the comics and not have to worry about all the fancy jargon that goes into writing a paper.*" A second student expressed surprise at "*just how fast and easy it was. I was able to pick out the main points of my essay and decide which ones needed to go into my comic and which ones could be left out.*" A third student writes about the difficulty in adaptation: it was difficult "*deciding what to put in the comic and what to leave out and it is somewhat time consuming to actually draw a comic but not exactly difficult.*" A fourth student seemed to appreciate the multimodal aspect of comics: "*Complex ideas that would normally require multiple sentences to explain could sometimes be expressed with a picture and a caption or text dialogue.*" While this can be taught with other formats, teaching comics production forces students to find the essence of their argument while focusing on how each academic move affects the whole article, while also infusing a visual narrative.

Analysis by the Numbers

To put some of these themes in context, it may help to have some overall numbers and comparisons. While I focused on the students' responses in the results, a numerical analysis might help the reader put them in context. I will cover the numbers involved in core visual writing and the overall numbers of students' opinions on whether comics aided reading or writing in any way.

Overall, of the 33 students that responded, at least 18 individual students raised a concern, offered praise, or discussed what could be defined as core visual writing. This meant that fifty-four percent of students who responded commented on the skillset I labeled core visual writing. This tied into my goal of teaching visual, verbal, linguistic, and spatial modes through a simple production ensemble.

The concept of core visual writing was coined after the coding so students weren't prodded to respond to this subject aside from the potential of it naturally having occurred in classroom discussions.

While I didn't explicitly ask a question that could result in quantitative data of how students perceived their learning with a positive, neutral, or negative response, I instead gathered general cues and responses from the 33 respondents to gauge whether comics production and reading aided their learning. What I primarily looked for were sentences that indicated either a positive or negative reaction to the reading of comics as well as the students envisaging their final document through the production of comics. If the responses seemed to fall somewhere in the middle or were more observational in tone I marked them as neutral. While a different researcher might observe the data and reach different conclusions, I was conservative in my assessment and I imagine the interpretations wouldn't differ by much.

Overall, the results are quite positive with only a small number reacting negatively, as shown in Figure 2. For the subject of comics helping students with writing in some fashion, 20 of the 33 responses could be considered positive (60%), 11 neutral (around 33%), and only two negative (6%). If I combine the neutral with the positive and label it as *students not having a negative reaction to writing-in-comics*, 93% of those who responded would fit into that category. For reading, 25 of 33 (75%) found the experience positive, seven were neutral (21%) and only one was negative (3%). This means that 32 (96%) could be labeled as *students not having a negative reaction to reading-in-comics*.

Conclusion

Comic production teaches multimodal concepts to students without requiring extensive technical knowledge, access to hardware/software, or excessive time in a typical semester. Judging by students' responses, they gained valuable skills from reading comics and learned multimodal skills without having to delve into theory. While these responses represent only a portion of those gathered from the questionnaires, they help illustrate how core visual writing helps students learn multimodality. Core visual writing techniques can be taught by other

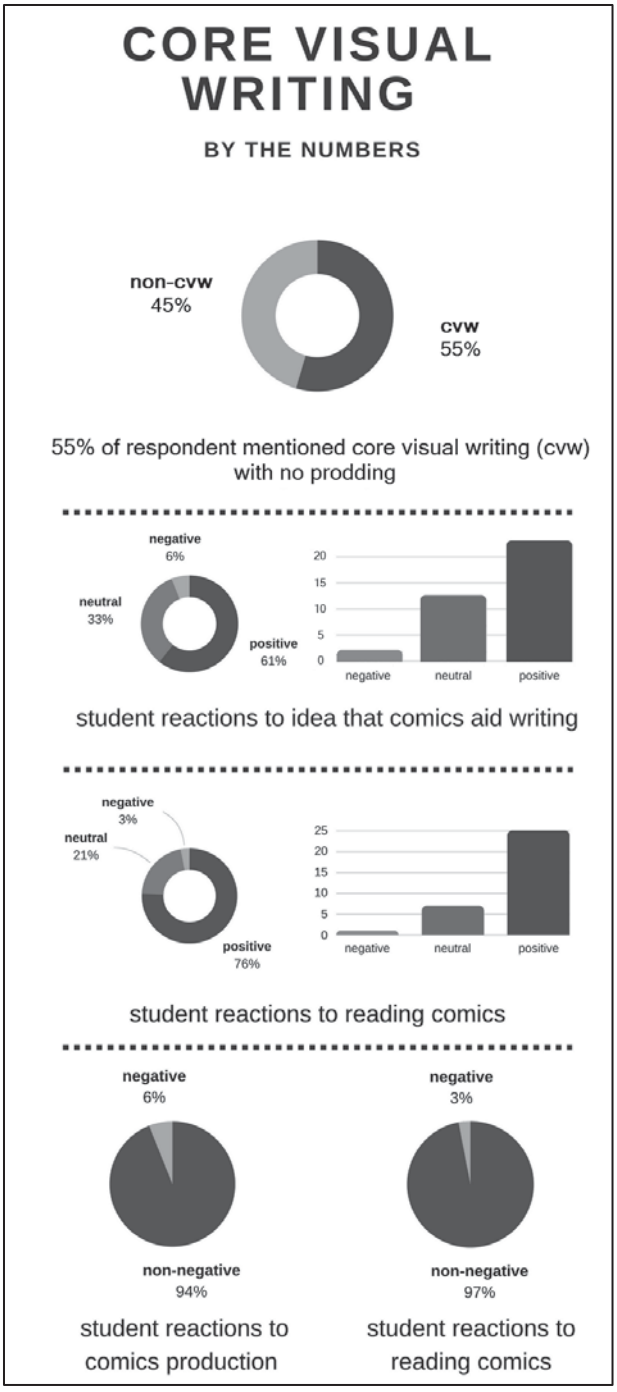

Figure 2: Simple Infographic Displaying Student Reactions

assignments, but comic production adds mandatory concise writing, multi- modal revision skills, and a process that curbs plagiarism—skills which may be unique to the medium. Panels limit the amount of text, and students have to plan at every stage to adapt their message both visually and textually. Multimodal revision skills and materiality engagement appear due to multiple adaptations of students' own work at varying stages and in multiple media. Plagiarism curbing occurs due to the rarity of composition comics available on the internet as well as the three-step process of writing (essay, script, comic), thus making it next-to-impossible for students to plagiarize this assignment.

Comics production seems to be an effective format for teaching students multimodal acquisition while they learn valuable writing skills. I hope that this research can begin to offset what Rolf T. Wigand argues about comics scholarship sometimes being "spotty," dated, primarily anecdotal, and lacking sophisticated social science research (30, 56). While this study was a qualitative classroom study and not based in social science, it is a step toward quantifying how comics production informs learning. This study demonstrates that comics production does afford at least some multimodal design lessons. Perhaps a praxis-approached application of this research would be to teach comics production and reading in the classroom while supplementing it with multimodal theory. It would be interesting to see if students' understanding of the principles would be more heightened than doing either alone. This study could expand in multiple directions: a broader student population size, a control class being taught visual rhetoric without comics, expanding the reading list (many options for this exist), and doing specific comparative readability testing on particular comics come to mind. I'm excited to see how comics production will continue to be used in the classroom and to watch what directions it will take.

Notes

[1]This study offshoots from my dissertation (available at: https://search.proquest.com/docview/1627787066?pq-origsite=gscholar) and includes some of its justification.

[2]A long debate over what comics are, when they first appeared, and what separates a comic from other art forms exists.
[3]Digital media have begun to change this, though, as many web comics have experimented with movement.

[4]Comics as a genre is particularly troublesome because some label superhero movies "comic book movies" as if the two were synonyms. While superheroes are one of the most popular genres (or subgenres) of comic books, comics actually cover many literary genres ranging from gag strips to complex nonfiction dissertations (see Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story* for a great demonstration of genre in comics). This theme, or at least readers' surprise that comics and superheroes aren't synonyms, appeared in my students' responses as well. In many ways, this is an affordance concern of comics since people bring in their preconceived notions of what comics are whenever they discuss them. My students responded to this frequently in their questionnaires, mostly in their surprise to learn comics weren't just superheroes and jokes.

[5]*Understanding Comics* often unites the comics studies movement as a quasi ur-text. For those unfamiliar, it's a comic book that discusses how comic books work, delving into philosophy, visual literacy, and rhetoric—among other elements. Famed business author Daniel H. Pink recommends everyone read it and calls it a masterpiece (127).

[6]If the reader is interested in the entire assignment descriptions (warts and all), I've included them (the script and comics) in their entirety in Appendix B.

[7]Comics studies isn't a unified field like the name might imply. Instead, it spans disciplines and departments all with disparate approaches and goals. The only real unifying aspect is using comics as either a primary text or, as in this study, a means of production.

[8]Stephanie Vie and Brandy Dieterle published an exemplar of this approach that includes a helpful literature review of comics studies within writing studies and culminates in a multimodal, critical-analysis assignment scaffolding in "Minding the Gap: Comics as Scaffolding for Critical Literacy Skills in the Classroom."

[9]This language stems from general student comments.

[10]Progymnasmata is an ancient rhetorical practice, championed by Quintilian, that teaches rhetorical exercises in a specific order where each new activity scaffolds upon the previous. The idea is that students begin with the rhetorically familiar and graduate by mastering the rhetorically strange.

[11]The software ranged from the complex InDesign (to use this usually meant students would hand-draw their art, scan it, digitize it, and then organize it in Adobe's open-

ended design software, often relying on Adobe's month-long, free trial) and ComicLife (a software, also available in a one-month free trial, that offers comic page and panel placement templates that allow photo-comics, digitized drawings, or online drawings to be placed into pages and speech bubbles to be added) to Pixton (a webpage which allows users to draw on stock backgrounds and avatar designs that they can manipulate to perform actions from their script), and others like Pixton (such as ToonDoo).

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APPENDIX A
DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF READINGS WITH LINKS

A detailed list of the reading assignments makes up Appendix A. On day one of the reading section of comics, I shared a mixture of funny webcomics and newspaper strips. I used *The Far Side* as one of the early examples due to its ubiquitous presence in U.S. society and because after thirty years it still packs a punch. I also relied on webcomics like *xkcd*—a stick-figure based, multi-panel comic strip that covers pop culture on a more sophisticated angle, including engineering and mathematical takes. *Xkcd* (https://xkcd.com) appears on social media and some students recognized the comic by look if not by name. (Additionally, the author Randall Munroe recently released a comic-art, how-to book *Thing Explainer* that I currently use in my technical communication classroom to teach document design and technical descriptions.) I supplemented this with the equally popular *Cyanide and Happiness* (http://explosm.net), which also has a simple style, but carries a more sarcastic, sardonic take on life. While less prescient on popular culture and rooted in more base humor, it is also a webcomic many students had seen, even if they didn't know the name. Then I left the familiar webcomics into the unfamiliar by introducing *Chainsawsuit* (http://chainsawsuit.com/comic/), which has more complex art than *xkcd* or *Cyanide and Happiness* but relies on the classic three-panel gag setup, *Amazing Super Powers* (http://www.amazingsuperpowers.com), similar to *Chainsawsuit* but more silly, and *The Perry Bible Fellowship* (http://pbfcomics.com), the title shouldn't fool the reader—this irreverent comic is religious only in the sense that it could be considered Gary Larson's spiritual successor. Many other smart webcomics exist that could be interchanged with these (e.g., *Hark, A Vagrant*: http://www.harkavagrant.com, *Poorly Drawn Lines*: http://www.poorlydrawnlines.com, and *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*: https://www. smbc-comics.com).

Day one's next step was to show students that not all comics have to be humorous. I started by showing traditional comics like *Calvin and Hobbes*, which weaves humor and seriousness while also being culturally familiar to students. I expanded on this with comics like *Lunarbaboon* (http://www.lunarbaboon.com), a comic that mixes heartbreak, nostalgia, and humor while discussing childhood and parenthood. Others in this vein are *Deep Dark Fears* (http://deep-dark-fears.tumblr.com), now an Eisner-nominated book that I used with success in a recent composition class, which chronicles submitted fears by readers that are both humorous and terrifying, and *Romantically Apocalyptic* (http://romanticallyapocalyptic.com), a breathtakingly beautiful but disorienting comic where art comes before storytelling. All of these are covered in one class period. While discussing each comic, I also taught medium elements such as panels, speech balloons, etc.

Their first homework was to read a slightly longer and more experimental comic strip called "Some People" by Luke Pearson. A complex comic strip, this long-form online comic features different characters in varying timelines that intersect. The goal is for them to draw on their webcomic knowledge from class and grapple with unfamiliar elements. In class the next day we discuss this comic and look for connections.

After this, their next assigned homework was to read a full-length fictional graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. *American Born Chinese*, the first graphic novel nominated for a National Book Award, covers themes of race, identity, American culture, and religion. With a deceptively simple design (large margins with usually

fewer than five panels per page), the complex message manifests itself in beautiful simplicity. We discussed these elements in class the following day.

Up to this point, students had been introduced to primarily fictional comics, but in order for the students to produce an academic, research-driven comic they needed to read non-fiction comics. While some students had read fictional comics before and most were at least familiar with them, the move into nonfiction was unfamiliar for most all of them. Even in conversations with comics fans, the knowledge that complex, nonfiction graphic novels exist isn't always widespread information (aside from semi-autobiographical memoirs).

Their first nonfiction comics were selections from McCloud's *Understanding Comics* —chapters one and two specifically—that cover the definition of comics and the vocabulary of comics. McCloud's work is often touted in academic circles inside and outside of comics studies with these two chapters often being exemplars. The complex definition of comics used by McCloud in chapter one led to philosophical questions in the classroom about medium and the meaning of words in the classroom. It also led to conversations about using avatars in nonfiction comics, since McCloud's self-aware narrator is an avatar of himself and he guides the reader. McCloud's approach is often imitated, similarly with Larry Gonick, in other nonfiction comics. However, nonfiction comics with no avatar have begun to gain traction (see *Hip-Hop Family Tree* or any of Rick Geary's work).

Students had now experienced nonfiction comics, so the final step was a full-length, nonfiction, argumentative comic book: *A People's History of American Empire*. Mike Konopacki and Paul Buhle rooted Howard Zinn's agenda-fueled history into a graphic textbook of sorts based on Zinn's popular alterna-history *A People's History of the United States* as well as biographical elements from Zinn's personal life. *American Empire* is fascinating to analyze due to its caricature choices of famous real people and the cartoon emotions it often depicts. It often—either intentionally or unintentionally—whittles complex historical stories into very basic good vs. bad narrative (e.g., Teddy Roosevelt's face is scrunched up like a super villain's when behaving contrary to Zinn's thesis). We discussed how visuals shape argument and tone just as much as words do. We also talked about how students would represent their topics. During the reading process and as we finished the reading, students began comics production.

APPENDIX B
ORIGINAL ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION

What follows are two assignment descriptions that I gave students. The first is for writing a script where they did the first envisaging of their comic. The second is for the comics production assignment, where they completed the production side of envisaging. I don't advocate the descriptions as being particularly well done on any level. Instead, I'm including them so the reader can understand what the students were working from.

Script Assignment Description

It's time to begin your comic. The first step towards creating visual comics is purely writing. This stage is the script. Like an outline to a paper or an annotated bibliography

to a research project, the script is the drafting stage of your finished product. Most of you have probably never created a document like this. Further on there are some great tips (provided by [i.e., stolen from] Tim Mucci). Though this assignment will stand on its own, it's really the first half of your final comics assignment.

Essentially, you're summarizing your documented essay (including revisions) into a three to five page comics presentation (how many panels you end up using will be up to you). Now is the time to begin planning how you can take seven pages of written research and turning that into only a few pages of graphical representation. Will you follow McCloud and *American Empire*'s approach of having a drawn narrator? Though this isn't necessary, it probably will make things easiest (what will this narrator be?). Will you create a straightforward comics or will you rely more on an abstract representation? These will be the things you need to justify and think about.

Following Mucci's example, format your script to look like this:

Page 1
Panel 1
Here is where you write what is happening in this panel.
Character dialog
"This is a character speaking."
Panel 2
Something else is happening now.

Mucci also points out that, "you're in control page by page and panel to panel. Each page of comic script allows for about one to nine panels; often less but rarely ever more. Do not try to pack too much into a page unless it serves your story to do so" (Mucci). Have fun with this and use the examples in class (or look for some on the internet) to base your argument on.

Aside from following the above format, this assignment won't have many specific requirements, so long as it covers your argument. Having said that, your target length of the script should be around two to three pages.

Comics Production Assignment Description

The purpose of this assignment is to take your documented essay and adapt it into a comics format. You have already created a script/summary of your argument, so now it's time to take the next step by creating the actual visual representation.

Purpose

Obviously a seven-page argument being shifted into a three-page comics essay means a lot of your information will have to be shifted and adapted to fit this new format. Aside from that, your audience may be broader now, so you'll also have to consider what this new audience expects. You'll have to engage critically and put yourself in their shoes to aid this. Think of your audience like this: they are either a group, like you, who are engaging academically with texts and are experimenting with a comics format—or—they are comics fans who expect to be entertained by the medium. Think of ways to address both of these audiences.

Planning

The first step to this is adapting any needed revisions from your essay to fix your overall argument. The next step is creating the script. The third step is adapting that

script into comics. You'll probably find that your script and your finished product will not be exactly the same. Be willing and prepared to change your plans as you go if you find something isn't working. Some questions to consider as you do this are as follows:

- What elements of my argument are the most essential? How will I include them in my comics?
- How will I cite information? (Look at some of the examples we've used for advice.)
- How am I going to turn this abstract argument into a more coherent story? (Will I follow the McCloud/Zinn method of having a narrator? Will I use a more abstract format?)
- What images should I choose to represent my ideas? Why will I choose those images?
- What will my audience expect? What will they be expecting from my argument? How is this different from the audience for my original essay? How will I adapt my arguments to meet this new audience and fit this new medium?

Drafting

How you create this is up to you, but here are some easy methods to try out:

1. You can draw (either digitally or by hand and then scan) your images and organize them in a program like InDesign.
2. You can use one of the following programs (or a combination of them):
   - Comic Life 2 (you can download a free month trial for Mac or Windows at plasq.com)
   - Toon Doo (it's free but costs to export images, so you can just use a screenshot and put them into a different program)
   - Pixton (this one has some capabilities but seems weaker than the others)

Requirements

The comics should:

1. be between three to five pages
2. have between three to nine panels per page (you can justify more or less if needed)
3. have a combination of box texts and dialog texts
4. be either printed or created in a pdf format (it does *not* have to be in color)
5. have a works cited page at the end (not in the comics format, just the traditional MLA)

Evaluation

- Have a focused topic with either an implicit or explicit thesis statement
- Have a general awareness of your audience and creating a balance between the two expected audiences
- Make sure your introduction/conclusion engages audience
- Allow the structure of the comics to flow in a logical format with good transitions
- Keep grammar (both visual and textual) on a college-level

- Be sure that outside information is cited in a way that works for the comics and that your works cited page is in proper MLA
- Have the visuals be representative of your topic and relate to the overall argument
- Make sure the visuals have been employed with care and in a way that shows you have given thought to how to best convey your argument