

7-20-2017

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Recommended Citation

Lisa Smith. "Beyond Strunk & White: Using Comics to Teach Students to Write Analytically" Comic Arts Conference at Comic-Con International 2017 (2017) Available at: http://works.bepress.com/lisa_smith2/12/

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Comic Arts Conference, Comic-Con International 2017

San Diego, CA

July 20-23, 2017

Beyond Strunk & White: Using Comics to Teach Students to Write Analytically

A couple years ago, as I was walking through my house, I saw something that stopped me dead in my tracks. My teenage son Ryan was sitting in a chair, reading a book. This shocked me because what I usually see teenagers doing when books are involved, at least in the classroom, is more like this. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of a book would make my teenage son put down his phone and actually read? Well, obviously, it was a comic book. As I left the room, I was already brainstorming ways to work these obviously engaging pieces of writing into my college classes.

Since I am not a comics scholar and my specialty area is colonial American literature, I didn't see comic books as candidates for inclusion in my literature classes, but I thought that perhaps they would work well in my first-year writing courses at Pepperdine. [Challenges] If you teach writing at any level, you know the challenges that come with that type of class—students are often young and diverse in their writing experience and preparation, writing is a difficult and far from exciting skill to master or to teach, and truly analytical writing can be a very foreign concept to students. I wondered if comics could accomplish some of the goals I had in the class better than the media I was currently using.

I decided to find out. After all, how difficult could a comic book be to read and analyze anyway? As it turns out, very difficult. I discovered quite quickly that the world of modern-day comics is remarkably dynamic, textured, detailed, and, at times, bewildering. In it, I encountered

infinite earths and limitless timelines; rebooted characters that shift in gender, race, and powers; superheroes and villains who routinely return from the dead; competing origin stories; and even names that surely were created to confuse—Deadshot, Deadpool, Deathstroke; Green Lantern, Green Arrow, Green Hornet. Even the very definition of the medium seemed a bit uncertain to me: as the authors of *The Power of Comics* warn, “The search for a definition [of comics] must begin with disentangling the comic book medium from the semantic confusion of the term *comics*” (Duncan, Smith, and Levitz xii).

How then, could I, a relative newcomer to contemporary comics, bring a group of mostly uninitiated teenagers into the DC or Marvel universe and utilize it to teach them how to write analytically? The process I used is what I would like to share with you today. I believe it is very reproducible and will yield excellent results for anyone who would like to try something new in their writing classes, even if, like me, you’re sometimes baffled by the comics universe.

Background

My first-year writing class at Pepperdine University, a private liberal arts college in Malibu, California, runs one semester and typically has 18 traditional first-year students who can vary widely in their writing experience and preparation. The class includes four writing assignments: an argument analysis paper, an argument paper, a research paper which varies in approach, and an analytical review paper. The review paper is the third paper in the term and was the assignment I chose to feature a comic book.

My goal for the review paper is for students to further develop their actual analytical skills, meaning their ability to separate and identify different elements of a whole, and then examine and evaluate the effectiveness of those elements. I have found that teaching analysis is

important to prepare students for their future work as undergraduates, especially in a liberal arts institution. However, students have a hard time actually *analyzing* something—they tend to drift into simple description on the one hand, or unsupported personal opinion on the other.

My analytical review paper assignment at the time asked students to review the effectiveness of an assigned text or other form of media to determine whether or not they would recommend that work. They were asked to break down the parts of the piece and decide what works and what doesn't work. I had tried many different subjects for students to review. Movies were entertaining, but the medium was so familiar to students that they had trouble transitioning from just being an audience to actually analyzing the films. Short stories were focused, but students complained of not having enough material to write about. Novels were complex, but they required a lot of class time to discuss and most students had had their fill of evaluating novels in high school. Comic books seemed like they might fit the bill better as the subject of my review paper assignment.

Thus, I launched my comic book analytical writing assignment last year and ran it in both my fall and spring semester first-year writing classes. The results were quite encouraging, and I plan to use it again this coming academic year. For the assignment, I chose the comic *Hawkeye: My Life As a Weapon*, by Matt Fraction, Daveed Aha, and Javier Pulido. Published by Marvel in 2013, this free-standing comic gives a peek into the life of Avenger Clint Barton, or Hawkeye, when he's not being an Avenger. It is a critics' favorite and is fast-paced, action-packed, creative in its use of text and images, and does not require any knowledge of a backstory. It turned out to be a perfect comic for students to analyze regardless of their comics background.

Here is my assignment sheet, and it is available on the back table. As you can see, it is a 3-4 page paper, involves some outside research, and is graded in stages such as an outline and

rough draft. It asks students to analyze the effectiveness of different features of *Hawkeye* and make a recommendation for or against the book.

Teaching Process

As a comics novice myself, I had some work to do to prepare for this assignment. Two texts that were extremely helpful to me were *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, 2nd edition, by Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith, and Paul Levitz, and *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, by Scott McCloud. I also had the good fortune of knowing a comic book editor who was working as an adjunct instructor for us at Pepperdine, and she took a look at my intended assignment and plans for the project. In addition, I exchanged a few emails with Randy Duncan and consulted with my son Ryan on various Hawkeye details.

Of course, every assignment has its pedagogical challenges that we need to anticipate as educators, and this one was no different. Certainly, most students will not be familiar with the format of a comic book, the theory and practice of comics, or even the intricacies of the DC or Marvel Universe. The instructor cannot rely on previous writing classes to have given students background in these areas. And like most humans, students often fear the unknown, especially when it affects their grade, so they may be a bit anxious about the assignment. And, truthfully, contemporary comic books can be challenging to read! They require concentration, and students probably will need to read the book several times to be able to write well about it. I did not find any of these challenges to be insurmountable, but they should be considered.

To prepare students for the assignment, I used the following approach, which I have muscled into the acronym ARROW—Hawkeye’s weapon of choice.

ASSIGNMENT - For the assignment, I would recommend choosing a free-standing comic like *Hawkeye*. Most students will not have enough background knowledge of the comics universe to handle a text that requires knowledge of a backstory. Also, the comic should be complex enough to provide good material for analysis. In the case of *Hawkeye*, the non-linear plotline, variety of panel shape and size, engaging storyline of a hero on his day off, and intricate drawing and coloring all gave the students plenty to analyze for the assignment. And, of course, a comic that is appealing visually and from a narrative perspective is helpful to keep students' attention.

READER - It is helpful to make certain that students understand that they are approaching the comic as an informed reader, not as a comics expert. Just as they have analyzed films and novels in other classes based on limited knowledge, so they can feel comfortable looking at the comic as a reader with the background provided in the class. Their judgments as an informed reader are valid.

RESOURCES - Students do need adequate resources for this assignment, especially if you include a research component. I put on print course reserve the two texts that helped me the most— *The Power of Comics* and *Understanding Comics*. One of the Pepperdine reference librarians also created what we call an InfoGuide for our class that had links to helpful electronic books and databases for the research portion of the assignment. If you do not have this type of resource available to your students, you can always just create your own list of helpful links.

Most importantly, I used three 90-minute classes to give students some background on comics and to allow them to brainstorm ideas for their papers. In class one, I discussed what a review

paper is, emphasizing that the students will need to offer their own analysis of the good and bad aspects of *Hawkeye* and support each point with material from the comic, ultimately recommending the book or not. I utilized movies during this class to discuss how to identify and analyze different features. So, for example, we discussed *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, evaluating plot, characters, setting, soundtrack, dialogue, theme, cinematography, and other features. This discussion shows them the process of analysis that they will use for *Hawkeye*.

In class two, I provided them with some background on comics and features of comics that are useful for evaluation organized into three categories to make them more accessible—story elements, composition, and layout.

In class three, we worked through the comic book together, one issue at a time. I allowed them some time to look through each issue and record in their notes what they noticed about the issue, then we discussed it as a class. This discussion helped make sure the students understood the book, and it gave them time to brainstorm ideas to get them started on their own analyses.

OUTLINE - I assign several graded and ungraded outlines and rough drafts in my first-year composition class, and my review paper on *Hawkeye* has both. I actually devote a fourth class to the assignment by making it a workshop in which they develop outlines for their papers so I can help them with their content before they start writing. These outlines show their thesis statements and main ideas—specifically, the features of the book that they will discuss and evaluate and the material from the book that they will use for support. Obviously, this makes the paper much easier for them to write.

WAY FORWARD - I also require a rough draft for this paper, which I go over with the student personally, so I can see how they have worked out their ideas on paper. In addition, I offer a sample paper for them to view online, which is not on *Hawkeye*, to help them visualize what a strong analytical review paper looks like.

Results and Evaluation

Overall, I was very happy with the results of the comic book assignment. Most students recommended *Hawkeye* in their papers and analyzed three features of the book. Grades on the review paper were higher than the previous two papers in the class, but that also might be because students were generally improving their writing as the semester progressed.

Several of my pedagogical goals were realized through the assignment. As I had hoped, the interplay of text and images was unique and interesting to students and provided much for them to evaluate. Students used words to describe the assignment like “innovative,” “interesting,” and “different.” One student summed up the assignment as “a . . . fun new style of writing.”¹

I also found the comic book to be very attractive and engaging to students and not just visually. The length was perfect for a first-year writing class and the narrative content offered something for everyone. As one student noted, the comic was “more tangible and easier to reference than a full length movie.” Another noted that s/he “enjoyed the comic book in an academic setting because it was easier than having to read a novel and try to piece a review together.”

¹ Student comments are taken from anonymous course evaluations at the end of the semester and anonymous written comments in class at the end of the assignment.

Not surprisingly, using a less traditional medium like comics also appealed to those students who can sometimes feel on the outside of a writing class—comic book fans themselves, visual learners, those who struggle with reading large amounts of text, English language learners. One male student who had not said a word throughout the entire semester but who loved comics became my “comic book expert” in the class and shared often about the genre. He scored a 90/100 on his review paper while he had been a C student before that. Another self-professed comics lover scored a 94 on his paper after receiving Bs on his previous papers. This was his comment: “When we wrote this review paper on a comic book, not to mention a super-hero comic book, I could not have been more thrilled.” Perhaps because of the use of images and iconic storylines and characters, *Hawkeye* also appealed to many of my international students. One noted that “writing the review of a comic book was a new experience that I will cherish for a long time.” Of course, the artistically inclined enjoyed being able to bring their expertise to the assignment. Noted one, “I liked being able to talk about more artistic elements.”

My hope that the medium would be just unfamiliar enough to students to require them to concentrate when they read was also realized. Most students definitely brought fresh eyes to the work and quickly recognized that they would need to read the comic more than once to be successful on the assignment. One student remarked, “At first it was hard and once I took the time to read it thoroughly it was enjoyable.” Said another, “It took a few times reading it through before I could write the paper because it was far more complex than first meets the eye.” Naturally, this level of effort was not appealing to all students; one complained, “I’ve never read comic books since elementary school, and I don’t know anything about heros [sic]. So, this is the most difficult paper I’ve written so far.”

Lastly, I would like to report that assigning a paper based on a comic book gave me a bump in terms of the “cool” factor as a professor, but, sadly, I don’t actually have any hard evidence that happened. But one can always hope.

In conclusion, I still have a lot to learn about comics, such as why there is no ice cream on the Island of Themyscira, but I did really enjoy using a comic book to teach analytical writing, and it was fun to dip my toes into the comics universe and bring my students along with me. For us, then, the future of writing about comics is clearly “up, up, and away!”

Lisa Smith, Pepperdine University
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San Diego, CA / July 20-23, 2017
“Beyond Strunk & White: Using Comics to Teach Students to Write Analytically” – Assignment Sheet

ENG 101 – English Composition I
Review Paper
SKILLS FOCUS: Analysis, Use of Outside Sources

Outline Due: Tuesday, February 21, 2017 (**not graded**)

Rough Draft Due: Tuesday, March 7, 2017 (**25 points**)
(**must be printed out**)

Final Draft Due: Tuesday, March 14, 2017 (**100 points**)
(**must turn in rough draft with final draft**)

Writing Prompt

In a paper of 3-4 pages, write a review of the comic book *Hawkeye Vol. 1: My Life as a Weapon*, #1-5.

You may address both the good and bad aspects of the text, but ultimately you must make a recommendation about whether or not your audience should read the book.

Formatting: double-spaced, 12-point font, numbered pages, stapled, no folders.

Outside Sources

Cite at least **three** outside sources in your paper:

- ◆ at least one source must be either a **book** or a **periodical** (you can access these electronically)
- ◆ you should cite from *Hawkeye* and include that source in your list of works cited, but do not count that as one of your three outside sources

For help finding outside sources:

- ◆ “Researching Comic Books” on our ENG 101 InfoGuide, available as a tab on our class Courses site
- ◆ *The Power of Comics* and *Hawkeye* on print reserve at Payson Library

MLA 8 Documentation

Use **MLA 8 parenthetical documentation** and include a **list of works cited**, which should include your three or more outside sources and the comic book. **One to five points will be deducted for significant errors in MLA documentation.**

- ✓ for help with MLA parenthetical documentation when you cite from any of the sources:
 - ✓ MLA 8 Documentation Slides on Courses
 - ✓ pp. 470-492 of our class textbook
 - ✓ section titled “Why/How to Cite” on our ENG 101 InfoGuide
 - ✓ owl.english.purdue.edu

Suggestions

- ◆ you do not need to summarize the book; I have read it and I am your audience for the paper
- ◆ be specific, not general
- ◆ make certain you support your points by referencing the comic book