

Comics Glossary

These shared terms are useful for referring to content, ideas, etc. when teaching with comics and graphic novels.

Bleed: An image that extends beyond the frame and to the edge of the page.

Caption: Text that is usually separate from the rest of the panel or page, often in its own box, that provides narration, time transitions, or background info.

Closure: The mental process readers use to connect panels and to infer what happens in the gutters (between panels).

Color Palette: The set of colors used in a comic, which can create the mood or distinguish between characters, times, or settings.

Composition: The arrangement of visual elements in a panel or page—what the reader sees first and how their eyes move through the image.

Emanata: The representation of an emotion or an idea “emanating” on the page (e.g., when a character falls in love and their eyes turn to hearts).

Foreground/Background: The arrangement of elements within a frame that can create a sense of depth, with objects closer to the frame being in the foreground.

Framing: The way a scene or subject is visually presented within a panel, similar to how a camera frames a shot in film. Framing choices like close-ups, wide shots, or over-the-shoulder views help control focus, mood, and perspective.

Gutter: The space between the panels. (Scott McCloud points to this space as one that is ripe for meaning-making/messaging and interpretation.)

Inset Panel: A smaller panel that appears inside a larger one, often showing a close-up or simultaneous action.

Line Work: The style and weight of the artist’s lines, which affect tone, movement, and emotion.

Motion Lines: Lines that suggest movement or speed (e.g., behind a running character or flying object).

Multimodal Text: A text that uses more than one mode—like visual, verbal, spatial, and gestural—to create meaning. Comics are inherently multimodal.

Panel: The unit of meaning in most comics pages; that is, the narrative box.

Sequential Art: A term popularized by Will Eisner, referring to images arranged in a sequence to convey a story or idea.

Speech Balloon: A rounded shape containing dialogue spoken by a character. It usually has a “tail” pointing to the speaker.

Splash Page: The one-page representation of action; that is, a panel that takes up the entire page.

Spread: Two facing pages in a comic or graphic novel. Often used for dramatic or complex visual storytelling.

Synesthesia: The representation of one sense using another sense (e.g., the heat or delicious odor of a pie is shown through the wavy lines coming from the pie).

Thought Balloon: Similar to a speech balloon but shaped differently (often cloud-like). Used to show a character’s internal thoughts.

Tier: A horizontal row of panels.

Visual Literacy: The ability to interpret and make meaning from images, especially when combined with text.