



Nearpod

Canvas Student Guide

Screencast-O-Matic

Calculator

Grade Sync

Assignments 90

Pages 90

Files 90

Outcomes 90

Rubrics 90

Quizzes 90

History

Home

Logout

Step One:

Prompt: Write down

Prompt: Jot down 1

Step Two:

Choose one topic a

Step Three:

# GRAPHIC MEMOIR/GRAFIC NOVEL

E.O. Smith collaboration between Ms. Abercrombie's *Creative Writing & Performance* and Ms. Glaeser's *Drawing I*  
fall 2021 classes inspired by ECSU's NEA BIG READ.



What is a graphic novel? What's a graphic memoir? What's the difference? As with many genres, a truly satisfying definition remains elusive, but let's just say that for our purposes, we want to use the form of comics to tackle serious subjects.

We'll be joining **ECSU's NEA BIG READ** in this unit, as we explore Thi Bui's national best seller, ***THE BEST WE COULD DO***, as a model for creating our own Graphic Memoirs/Novels. We will also collaborate with Ms. Glaeser's visual arts students to realize the vision of our own work.

**TASK:** Create a comic strip that goes beyond the fun and light entertainment of the typical Saturday morning cartoon and confronts LIFE.

**TARGET: I can organize and develop artistic ideas and work in order to create original graphic memoir or graphic novel panels.**

A few possibilities:

- an autobiographical comic dealing with a personal experience
- a strip that uses fictional characters to tackle a social problems/ issue – war, poverty, environment, personal freedom
- an historical strip “documenting” a historical event
- focus on a narrator who faces a complex moral quandary

**Step One:**

Prompt: Write down five compelling or important incidents in your life that would make a compelling graphic story.

Prompt: Jot down five world issues about which you feel passionately.

**Step Two:**

Choose one topic and begin planning how the story might be broken up into visual frames with text. This will require a kind of paring down of the full text. (Three panels minimum.)

**Step Three:**

Start drawing characters, scenes before attempting the strip itself. Stick figures welcome!

**Step Four:**

Drafting the strip.

**Step Five:**

Final copy on decent paper with decent pens.

**Process deadlines:**

- Complete your script by Dec. 6
- Use that script to create thumbnails by Dec. 8

Create a revision plan after discussion on 8.

- Revise and create a storyboard for your group meeting the week of Dec. 10
  - Edit and publish your final, polished graphic memoir/novel panels for class on Monday, Dec. 20.
  - Reflect on your project in-class on Dec. 20 & Create a written reflection (250 words) about the process (with or without a partner).
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## ***The Best We Could Do: Interdisciplinary Collaboration in a Time of Pandemic***

During the fall 2021 semester at E.O. Smith High School, *Creative Writing & Performance* collaborated with *Drawing I* on the creation of graphic memoir/novel panels inspired by ECSU's NEA BIG READ grant featuring Thi Bui's award-winning graphic memoir, ***THE BEST WE COULD DO***. Julia Wintner, Coordinator of Gallery and Museum Services at ECSU, provided students with copies of the graphic memoir for this interdisciplinary collaboration. The powerful graphic memoir explores a Vietnamese family's struggle to survive war-torn Vietnam, immigrate to the U.S., and navigate complex generational ties. Students were invited to explore their own stories using the graphic memoir genre, and some will display panels at UConn's Dodd Center as part of the ***Artist as Witness*** project this spring.

Students explored the graphic novel and memoir form and used elements of graphic design and memoir/fiction to explore a range of subjects. Some tackled topical issues such as coping with the pandemic, depression/anxiety, homophobia, and combating racism while others focused on sports, holidays, nature, road trips, and transitions during childhood. Ms. Glaeser shared graphic design techniques and opened her art classroom for students to explore a range of media: watercolor, pen and ink, colored pencil, and consulted with students on their composition strategies. Ms. Abercrombie focused on teaching narrative structure and the power of creating interesting juxtapositions and interplay between text and image.

Students were given the option of working with each other or solo, and many chose to work collaboratively on the writing/illustration process. Some students chose an autobiographical approach while others chose fiction or poetry to explore the form. Some used fictional characters or personas while others wrote from personal experience. All encountered the challenge of telling a story through image and text within the constraints of three graphic novel panels. The process proved meaningful and moving, especially in bringing students of two different disciplines together. Through storytelling and visual art, students shared themselves with each other and broke through the Covid pandemic isolation.

—Denise Abercrombie with Tammy Glaeser

## **Selected Testimonials from *Creative Writing & Performance* Students**

“Through my graphic memoir, I wanted to show how the pandemic affected me as an Asian American girl. Along with other graphic novels/memoirs, *THE BEST WE COULD DO* helped me think of the format of my graphic memoir. The collaboration with the art class was fun! I got to work with my friend so that made the process seem more natural and enjoyable.” –S. J., grade 9

“Before I even started storyboarding, I looked at *THE BEST WE COULD DO*, and realized that there was an orange backwash color on every page. I realized that maybe I could make it so that the color of the panel related to the mood of the text and drawings. For darker scenes I used reds or blues, and for lighter scenes I used pinks, greens, and yellows. The individual people or objects are not individually colored in because I feel that the message of growing up is partly translucent.” –B.F., grade 9

“Collaboration with another class was very fun and beneficial. Lorna and Milo helped me throughout my process as well as made it more enjoyable. I have read graphic novels before and I plan on reading more. I read them because I intake information better with visuals than just reading. Something I learned about myself was that I have a good memory when it comes to past events. This story took place when I was 9 and I am 14 now.” –L.P., grade 9

“The theme of my graphic memoir, *Road Trip 2016*, is to keep persevering no matter what happens in life. My audience would be a younger audience because when you are growing up, you go through many hardships and you have to get over them to move forward to the next part of your journey through life. The graphic memoir, *THE BEST WE COULD DO*, influenced me to write on a topic that was part of my life instead of writing a fantasy or fiction graphic novel. I got feedback by working with the person who drew the pictures. She helped me edit what I wanted in the memoir and what I should leave out.” –M.H., grade 9

“In my graphic memoir, I wrote about the journey of overcoming a personal fear and tried to convey a theme of courage through engaging imagery. I explored the concepts of how much power my imagination had over me and ultimately the beautiful process of pride, happiness, and relief one feels after facing a difficult challenge. This was also about how having a good friend who stuck by you could inspire you to do things you otherwise would be too afraid to do. I really enjoyed collaborating with my friend to do this because she put my vision to life in a way that I wouldn't be able to do. She dedicated a lot of time to it and really poured her soul into the art. She was also in a unique position as illustrator because she was the character in my memoir that helped

me stand up to my fear. *THE BEST WE CAN DO* graphic memoir especially influenced our coloring style, as both the book and our graphic memoir featured one color. This was because of the aquatic setting it took place in.” –G.G., grade 9

“My story is called *Hopeless* and is about a man and his struggle against suicide. I decided to make a theme that if there is someone you love who is struggling, you should get professional help instead of trying to help them yourself. There's only so much friends can do. I've always written in lighter tones and that's why I created a second character who tries to persuade the victim not to jump, but it's always so disappointing to see someone kill themselves and nobody talks about it, which is why I figured if nobody was going to talk about it, I would. I also wanted to make sure I got it right, so I imagined someone who was so stuck in their own mind that they wanted to end the pain in the only way they knew how, and instead of seeing them as a two dimensional character I wanted to make him a victim, not a meaningless character. I kept this in mind writing the script, and I'm so proud as to how it turned out.”

–C.W., grade 9

“*Not-So-Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving* is a comedic graphic poem about some crazy things that go wrong on Thanksgiving. This story was written with the intent that people of all ages who enjoy wild stories and cartoons would read it. This graphic poem was fun to create, and I enjoyed both the writing and drawing elements to it. This project started out as a list of crazy things to happen on Thanksgiving, similar to the actual crazy things that have happened at my house, only a bit exaggerated. Thanksgivings at my house include about 20 people of all backgrounds, so creating the material wasn't difficult. With this I added in words and played with the format to generate a rhythmic poem. When drawing I focused on capturing whatever wild image I had thought of while writing each line. Overall I think this piece came out well, and I can see the chaos of my large family's life reflected in its pages.”

–H.S., grade 9

“In my story I was trying to convey a world in the future where humans continued to cut off nature. In this world there are no trees and smog fills the sky. This was a foreshadowing to what I think will happen if we continue on our current path. I think the target audience for my story is people who feel the impact that we are having will not affect our world. This was designed to bring light to what will happen.”

–D.D., grade 9

“I was trying to convey that even if there are changes that you go through in life there will be other things that will always make it better. If that change is good then there will be more good things to find. Not everything is going to go the way you expect it to, but that’s what life is. It gives you challenges whether you want them or not and you have to figure it out. You have to figure out how to make yourself feel better, how to make it better for other people.”

—G.R., grade 10

“In my graphic novel, I focused on the tradition in my family of picking out a Christmas tree and experiencing this special event through the perspective of my younger self. I chose this perspective because I wanted the theme of my piece to be very childlike and whimsical. The intended audience for my piece could be anyone, but I intended it more so for teenagers or adults. That would seem contradictory at first, but my logic was that an older audience would get a greater sense of nostalgia and relatability in reading the graphic piece. However, the piece could be appreciated by younger children as well.”

—S.C., grade 9

“I think the message I tried to convey was don't let the moment go to waste, because once it's over, you'll never get another chance. And to not get full of yourself when you are succeeding. I would definitely consider continuing this form of writing again. It was fun.”

—L.K. grade 9

“This was probably the hardest piece of work I have written from a sheer emotional standpoint. It's meant to show the pain and psychological trauma of having someone close to you die by suicide. I purposely worked with my partner to make it as surreal as possible to convey the trauma and how it affected me as this was a deeply personal story. The entire piece started out with only rough outlines and concepts and sparse text to represent the lack of knowing what to do in the aftermath. And the poem within the piece was something Angel (the one who unfortunately passed) had written about me. I thought it fitting as I saw her in the same way. A shining light in the darkness trying to warm the void. Collaboration was difficult. Not because it was the person I worked with but because of how I had to explain the moment by moment in extreme detail to let it be shown in the truest way. In the end it was worth it. Being able to absolve some of the guilt and the pain I felt. Not something I plan on doing again but a worthwhile experience nonetheless.” -P.W. , grade 10

"I really wanted to create a story where the main pairing is LGBT+ and the fact that they're gay is not a major plot point. It's an afterthought. So often LGBT representation in media is presented as a gay character and them being gay is their main character trait. They're two dimensional at best and it's frustrating. I wanted to create a world where being gay is just as normal as being straight and the main conflict comes from the fact that one of them is magic. I wanted to subvert expectations and make people think "seriously? That's it? That's such an arbitrary reason to hate a couple!". That's the whole point! Discrimination is arbitrary by definition and I wanted a way to really drive that point home." –M.S., grade 12