Are graphic novels real reading? (Yes, and here is why)

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Are graphic novels real reading? Yes: a graphic novel is a format, not a level. What a comic asks of a reader, what librarians say, and when to add other books.

Yes. A graphic novel is a book told in words and pictures together, and reading one takes the same things any book does: following a story, knowing who is speaking, working out what happened and why. The words are fewer, but the reader has to do more with them, because a comic leaves gaps on purpose.

The question usually comes from a good place. A parent sees a child racing through comics and wonders whether the child is really reading, or just looking. This post is for that parent.

A format, not a level

The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a library that studies children's books, put it plainly in a June 2020 post we read on 31 October 2026: graphic novels "are simply a format, just like picture books are a format." Its point is that a graphic novel can be simple or demanding, funny or serious, for a six-year-old or for an adult, the same as a book without pictures can. The only thing all graphic novels share is the way the story is told.

That matches what we see on Peabody's Series Tracker. The comics on it run from series with a few words a page, made for children just starting to read alone, to long fantasy series with maps, dozens of characters and a plot that runs over nine books. "Graphic novel" says nothing about which kind you are holding.

What a comic asks of a reader

Reading a comic page is a skill, and it is not a small one:

- Order. A reader has to know which panel comes next and which bubble is said first. Manga from Japan flip that and read right to left.
- Who is talking. The tail of each speech bubble points at the speaker, and thought bubbles and caption boxes are different voices again.
- What happened in the gap. Between two panels there is a strip of white called the gutter. A character is at the door in one panel and on the street in the next, and the reader fills in the walk. Every page asks for dozens of these small guesses.
- Faces and bodies. Much of a comic's meaning is in a raised eyebrow or a slumped shoulder, which the words never say.

The words themselves are real words, too. Comic writers have less room than other writers, so every bubble is chosen; long series for older children use plenty of hard vocabulary, and a child meets it with a picture right beside it.

What librarians and publishers say

Scholastic, which publishes many of the best-known children's graphic novels and so has an interest here, says in its 2025 "Guide to Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens" that graphic novels are "accepted by librarians and educators as mainstream literature for children and young adults". The same guide notes that "major awards and state reading lists across the US regularly feature graphic novels", and the CCBC's post says graphic novels for children and teens "regularly appear on annual best-of-the-year lists". Both were read on 31 October 2026.

You don't have to take a publisher's word for it: walk into the children's section of your public library and the graphic novels usually have their own shelves, in the middle of everything else.

When it is worth adding something else

None of this means a child should read nothing but comics forever, any more than they should read nothing but one author. Variety helps: long stretches of prose build a different kind of stamina, and books read aloud take children into stories above the level they can read alone. A few gentle ways in:

- Hybrids, which are part comic and part chapter book. Peabody's guide from comics to chapter books lists the series that sit in between.
- The same world, both ways. Some series exist as a comic and as a prose book, so a child can carry on with characters they already love.
- Reading aloud. A chapter book read together at bedtime, with comics for reading alone during the day, covers both.

If your child only reads graphic novels right now, our post on what to do (and not do) has more.

Questions grown-ups ask

Do graphic novels count for a school reading log?

That is the teacher's call, and many say yes. If a log asks for minutes, comic minutes are reading minutes. If you're not sure, ask; a short note saying what your child read and what they thought of it is usually welcome.

Are graphic novels easier than other books?

Some are and some are not. The words may be fewer, but a long graphic novel asks a reader to follow many characters, read faces and fill in the gaps between panels. Look at the book, not the format.

My child just looks at the pictures. Is that reading?

Reading the pictures is part of reading a comic, and young children often start there. Ask what is happening, or what a face is saying. When a child can tell you, they are following the story, and the words come with rereading.

Peabody is free through the end of 2026. Alongside the comics there is a library of stories for every reader, from first books up.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/are-graphic-novels-real-reading