Comic, graphic novel or manga: what's the difference?

Peabody blog · Reading · updated 2026-10-31

A comic strip is a few panels, a graphic novel is a whole book in panels, and manga is comics from Japan, often read right to left. Plus two more kinds.

"Comic" is the big word: any story told in panels, with pictures and words working together. A comic strip is a few panels in a row, usually with a joke at the end. A graphic novel is a whole book told in panels, with a beginning, a middle and an end, like a chapter book. Manga is comics from Japan, and many manga are read right to left, starting from what looks like the back cover. So every graphic novel and every manga is a comic. Not every comic is a graphic novel.

Children often ask this, and so do grown-ups at the library desk. The words get mixed up because they overlap. Here is how we explain it on Peabody's comics shelf, in the words we use with children.

Five kinds of comic

- Kind: Comic strip · What it is: A few panels in a row, and usually a joke at the end. Three boxes, one big laugh. · Where to see one on Peabody: Make your own strip
- Kind: Graphic novel · What it is: A whole book told in panels, with a beginning, a middle and an end. · Where to see one on Peabody: Graphic novels by age
- Kind: Manga · What it is: Comics from Japan. Many are read right to left. · Where to see one on Peabody: Manga for kids
- Kind: Half and half · What it is: Part chapter book, part comic: the words and the pictures take turns. · Where to see one on Peabody: From comics to chapter books
- Kind: No words at all · What it is: Hardly any words. You read the faces, the moves and the pictures. · Where to see one on Peabody: Comics with no words

Comic strips

A strip is short. Three or four panels set something up and land a joke. Strips grew up in newspapers, which is why they are long and thin: they had to fit across a page. A child can read one in a minute and draw one in ten.

Graphic novels

A graphic novel is the length of a book. It has chapters, characters who change, and a story that takes more than one sitting. Many children's graphic novels come in series, numbered in order. "Novel" doesn't mean made up: some graphic novels are true stories, and some retell a

chapter book in pictures.

Manga

Manga is the Japanese word for comics. In Japan, books open with the spine on the right, and many English editions of manga keep that layout, so you start at what looks like the back. On each page you begin at the top right panel, read across to the left, then go down a row. The bubbles inside a panel go right to left too. Not every manga is printed this way, so check the first page: some English editions are flipped to read left to right.

Half and half

Some books sit between a chapter book and a comic. A page of words, then a page of drawings, then a comic strip in the middle of a chapter. These are good for a child moving from comics towards longer books, because the pictures still carry part of the load.

No words at all

Some comics have almost no words. A child reads them the way they read a face: what does this one want, and what just went wrong? A child who can't read the bubbles yet can still read the whole story.

The parts are the same

Whatever the kind, a comic is built from the same parts. Our comics words page draws one page and names ten of them, each read aloud: page, panel, border, gutter, speech bubble, tail, thought bubble, caption box, sound word and splash panel.

Two are worth knowing first. The gutter is the white gap between panels. Time passes there, and the reader fills it in. The splash panel is one huge panel, sometimes a whole page, for the biggest moment in the story.

That is why comics are real reading. A child following a comic keeps track of who is who, fills in what happened between two panels, and guesses what comes next. Those are the same things a reader does with a page of words.

Trying manga for the first time

Manga is the kind that surprises children most, because the book seems to open backwards. Our manga starter path takes five steps, one at a time, each read aloud: hold it the other way, read right to left, learn three manga words, pick a first manga sold for children, and test yourself with a short quiz. For grown-ups, how to read manga covers the same ground in a few minutes.

The manga on our shelf are series sold for children, and each page says whose age it is, the publisher's or our own estimate.

Questions grown-ups ask

Is a graphic novel the same as a comic book?

A graphic novel is a kind of comic. Both tell a story in panels. A graphic novel is a whole book with a beginning, a middle and an end, while "comic" also covers short strips.

What makes manga different from other comics?

Manga are comics from Japan. Many English editions are printed the Japanese way, so you open from what looks like the back cover and read each page right to left, top to bottom. Some English editions are flipped to read left to right instead.

Are graphic novels real reading?

Yes. A child reading a comic follows a story, keeps track of who is who, fills in the gaps between panels and guesses what happens next. The pictures carry part of the story, so a child can follow the plot before they can read every word.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026. Every series on our shelf has its books in order with a checklist, and our library has stories for every reader.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/comic-vs-graphic-novel-vs-manga