Q. What is a “graphic novel”?  
A. Graphic novels have a few defining characteristics. But first and most importantly, they are long comic books. (I'll get back to the rest.)

Q. What is a “comic book”?  
A. You may think you know the answer to this one, but stick with me a few minutes:  
A comic book is a magazine or bound book that contains “comics” (also known as “comix”).  
Comics is a medium for expressing information and/or artistic ideas that is defined by

...and that's it. However, comics also often feature such things as...

“word balloons.”

...and sometimes, “thought balloons.”

These techniques aren't necessary to make comics, but they are quite common. There are other common, familiar, but even more optional elements of many comics, such as certain kinds of characters, like funny animals or superheroes. But I'll get to that in a minute.

Here’s how to read a comic:

1. Just as in our written language, you read the elements of a comic starting with...

...the upper-left corner of a page, and then you read across to the right...

2. ...before proceeding down to the next row...

3. ...and then the next.

4. “You apply the same left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading order...”

“comics are a nested system.”

“everything within one panel...”

“when you finish reading...”

“you even use the same rule for actions within a panel.”

“to the panels themselves!”

“hee hee!”

“Boo!”

“RAAAUGH!”

by Jessica Abel

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“Wait a minute,” you may be saying, “what ABOUT those superheroes?

Hee hee.

Ahem.

OK. “Comics” is the name of a medium, like “film” or “painting.”

You don’t think “film” means movies about gangsters, or cowboys, do you? Film is a way to express ideas. Any ideas you want to express.

mhm...

I’ll deal with you later!

Not a lot of vitamins in this kind, but you get a taste for it.

mmm...

my favorite flavor!

delicious and nutritious!

But “novel” is used less precisely. The term “graphic novel” is often applied to short-story collections as well. I don’t know why.

I think “novel” is just used to mean “long book.”

Well, “graphic” means “told in images,” not “naughty pictures.”

OK, so what is a “graphic novel” besides a comic book?

Handcoday or softcover graphic novels have enough pages to need a square spine...

But don’t worry...

The term is also sometimes used to imply adult-level content — i.e. “comics are kids’ stuff,” but graphic novels are for adults. But then, sometimes they call long kids’ comics “graphic novels,” too.

...so they can sit on the shelf with your other books.

The great thing about comics is, you can get an idea of their content just by flipping them open!

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