

Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing, by Elizabeth Losh, Jonathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, and Zander Cannon. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013. 304 pp.

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The authors of *Understanding Rhetoric* utilize the comics medium to present writing concepts for first-year composition courses and beyond. The title is a nod to the foundational comics theory treatise by Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, in which the animated author explores how comics make meaning through image and text. Like McCloud, *Understanding Rhetoric's* authors explain rhetoric and writing through didactic content that directly addresses the reader. Losh, Alexander, Cannon, and Cannon take form as characters Liz, Jonathan, Kevin, and Zander in the textbook as they engage students and instructors alike through compelling narrative, humor, visual metaphors, thoughtful examples, and authentic author voices.

The introduction, "Spaces for Writing," foregrounds several key writing principles and best practices: context and space, audience and purpose, writing as a process, collaboration, visual literacy, and revision. Each of these concepts is then given attention in seven "issues" (read "chapters"): (1) "Why Rhetoric?"; (2) "Reading Strategically"; (3) "Writing Identities"; (4) "Argument Beyond Pro and Con"; (5) "Research: More than Detective Work"; (6) "Rethinking Revision"; and (7) "Going Public". Each issue concludes with REFRAME and Drawing Conclusions sections. The REFRAMEs feature student characters Cindy, Luis, and Carol. Carol is Cindy's mother and a non-traditional college student. Following the REFRAME, a Drawing Conclusions section presents readers with four assignments related to the chapter's content.

Modeling Multiliteracies

Though readers may approach this text with hesitant curiosity, one strength of *Understanding Rhetoric* is the fact that the authors avoid making assumptions about students' (or instructors') literacies. Where the introductory issue presents concepts of visual representation by comparing cartoons, photographs, and symbols in multimodal texts, issue two explores signification in written texts. The authors introduce students to the kind of reading that will be expected of them at the college level. One concern I often have with college textbooks is the authors' inclination to assume that students already know what is expected of them. *Understanding Rhetoric* makes no such assumptions. In order to demonstrate critical reading for students, "Issue 2: Reading Strategically" illustrates the story of Frederick Douglass and displays how textual representation can become imagery in a reader's mind. As the

story progresses, Liz and Jonathan respond, question, and engage the text in multiple ways, modeling the act of critical reading. Later, illustrators Kevin and Zander climb into the panels to help student characters make sense of the comic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*. One strength of this issue is the authors' equitable approach to analysis. Though they begin with the more literary work of Frederick Douglass, they conclude with a contemporary comics adaptation. Both texts demonstrate rich meaning-making practices in order to form arguments about serious subject matter. The content is sure to please instructors, but what about students?

No textbook compels *all* students to engage in discussions of writer identity or audience constraints, but I have had more students complete the readings in *Understanding Rhetoric* than in any other textbook I have assigned. *Understanding Rhetoric's* unique form is memorable enough, but the clever narrative used to frame its contents also contributes to the reinforcement of these concepts, serving as a visual mnemonic for students. There are several moments throughout the textbook that my students have found particularly salient because of the ways in which they are presented through the comics form. I will present a select few.

Rhetorical Theory and Analysis

In many writing courses, rhetorical theory can be the pedagogical cornerstone. In issue one, the authors portray debates concerning rhetoric by drawing ancient thinkers in contemporary contexts. Plato's hesitations about writing as a technology, Aristotle's yearning for more educated communication among the people, and Cicero's understanding of rhetoric as visual and spatial allows students to understand the foundations of such thinking. Issue one's REFRAME section reinforces these theories as Cindy helps Luis apply what they've learned about rhetoric through a discussion of professional email correspondence with professors—a rhetorical situation incredibly relevant to first-year students.

Research Ethics

Discussions of effective argumentation are followed by the fifth issue, "Research: More than Detective Work." The issue begins with three points regarding summary, paraphrase, and quotes and then moves on to research ethics, including a section on plagiarism. Again, the content of this section is not what makes it so innovative; most of our textbooks confront the ethics of citing others' work. Rather, the execution through the comics medium is its strength. In the section "Coming Clean with Citation," Liz and Jonathan's likenesses are transformed through another artist's drawing style. The change is abrupt and obvious to readers—much like shifts in a writer's voice can

be to experienced writers and writing instructors. The authors invited artist Tom Gammill to draw this section in order to illustrate, quite literally, how plagiarism is not only unethical but also damaging to an author's credibility and personal style.

Re-Vision

Many students resist revision as a necessary part of the process, but the authors present it as a uniquely transformative activity in which all writers engage. In issue six, "Rethinking Revision," the authors demystify the writing process by discussing the ways in which first drafts of canonical texts barely resemble those we know so well—namely *Pride and Prejudice* and Abraham Lincoln's Inaugural Address. The authors also share the story of Maxine Hong Kingston who lost a manuscript in a house fire. My students have identified with this loss—perhaps naively, but nonetheless—as similar to losing a paper due to a corrupted hard drive. Fortunately, the authors remind us, the work itself exists in the writer. The REFRAME that follows issue six then shows Cindy working through a rough draft that her instructor feels needs significant revision. She is frustrated but visits the writing center to work through this draft and improve her argument. Showing students utilizing resources on their campus (their peers, their instructors, and the writing center) is another strength of these REFRAME sections and the addition of the student characters.

Too Much Comic, Not Enough Textbook

Perhaps the largest drawback to this textbook is the Drawing Conclusions (DC) sections. In their attempts to make this textbook read more like a didactic comic, the authors have compromised one of the primary purposes of a composition textbook: to invite students to apply learned material through activities that include checking for understanding, engaging in discussion, practicing writing individually, etc. The DC exercises are neither titled nor divided by type or rigor of activity. Many of the activities take significant scaffolding or time to complete. For example, the DC section at the end of issue three, "Writing Identities," asks students to keep notes on their online interactions for a week. They are then asked to write an autoethnography, which the authors describe as "a brief narrative describing your own use of the sites" to understand identity in rhetorical situations (140). This activity, depending upon interpretation, could be a 250-word journal assignment or a three-page essay. It could be abridged and completed over a couple of days, or become a multi-week documentation project for students. I typically have to adapt this and other DC assignments to such an extent that I end up rewriting the assignments altogether.

The authors have certainly introduced an innovative approach to textbooks in *Understanding Rhetoric*, and for the most part, their work in the chapter content and REFRAMEs is exemplary and reflective of contemporary composition theory and pedagogy. However, the DC sections remind readers that some conventions of the textbook were lost in the convergence to a hybrid genre. The authors did release an online instructor's manual and companion website for students to serve as resources, though I suspect these are underutilized since they need to be accessed outside of the text.

Understanding Rhetoric in the Composition Classroom

The textbook's content will be comfortable and familiar to writing teachers; new to most will be the presentation of familiar concepts through a unique form. Considering comics as a medium worthy of consideration was certainly a goal of the authors from the very beginning. And that was a smart move. Because *Understanding Rhetoric* will look and work differently from textbooks students are used to reading, it seems only right to utilize that curiosity as a catalyst for discussions about argument across multiple media.

For the authors, it is clearly very important that students are being asked to intelligently engage in media, and they have created a textbook that models that engagement. Issue two's DC section includes an activity in which students are asked to consider "What evidence do you find that indicates that the writers and illustrators of this book thought carefully about the images it includes? What choices might you have made differently?" (111). In addition, the introduction's REFRAME depicts Luis and Cindy responding to having been assigned a textbook for their first writing class; Luis is excited but Cindy is not so sure.

Teachers and students of writing will engage this textbook and approach it with a particular set of expectations related to writing pedagogy. *Understanding Rhetoric*, in many ways, will challenge those expectations and present both teacher and student with broader definitions of writing, beginning with the very textbook they use to understand it.

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