

THE FRIENDSHIP PARADOX

Created by Aśka

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 13–18 YEARS OLD (YEARS 7 to 12 SECONDARY)

GENRE: Young Adult Coming of Age (Graphic Novel)

THEMES: friendship, identity, transition, belonging, connection, wonder, growth/resilience, family relationships, physics, neurodiversity, science, gap year, travel, outback Australia, community, emotions, mental health, coming-of-age

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English (Language, Literature and Literacy)
- Health and Physical Education
- Media Arts
- Science
- Visual Arts

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Aśka

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PLOT SUMMARY

Note to self: no matter how messy or confusing, the universe is an orderly place with physics to guide you.

High school is over. Dash is excited to spend their gap year working for the local science museum, travelling and teaching kids about physics. Maybe they'll even make a friend. People are part of the universe, so the laws of physics should also apply to them, right?

Except Dash discovers the workplace is just as challenging as school – relationships are confusing, students don't follow the rules and co-workers aren't what they expect. Then Dash meets Kay. Can opposites really attract? Or will Dash's attempts to use physics to understand their world repel a potential friend?

The Friendship Paradox is an exploration of friendship, belonging, and the tricky, brilliant ways we try to connect with each other, especially when our minds work a bit differently.

AŚKA'S NOTES ON GRAPHIC NOVELS

Terminology

Comics, like any literary medium, encompass a wide range of lengths, genres, themes and levels of complexity, appealing to readers of all ages. The term *graphic novel* is often used to describe longer-form comics; in these notes the two terms are used interchangeably.

What are Graphic Novels?

Graphic novels are books written in the *language of comics*: a sophisticated interplay of text, image, symbolism and layout. Unlike illustrated prose or picture books, graphic novels rely on *sequential* storytelling. Content is divided into **panels** that unfold across the page, creating a sense of time passing and inviting readers to actively construct meaning between moments.

Recognition and Cultural Value

Graphic novels have received increasing critical and institutional recognition worldwide.

In Australia, the Australian Library and Information Association's *AALIA Graphic* network (<https://graphic.alia.org.au/>) supports and celebrates manga and graphic novels through recommendations, interviews and professional resources. *The Folio Project* (<https://foliocomics.com>) is also a great online resource showcasing the vital role comics play in Australia's literary landscape.

Australian graphic novels are winning major literary awards, including the Prime Minister's Literary Award, state literary prizes and CBCA Book of the Year Awards. Literary magazines across the country now regularly publish comics.

Graphic Novels and Literacy

Graphic novels promote literacy not simply because they are visually engaging, but because they demand complex, multimodal reading skills. Readers must decode written language while simultaneously interpreting visual cues, symbolism, spatial relationships and pacing.

Because much of the narrative information is conveyed through image, the written language in graphic novels is often economical and precise. This can expose students to sophisticated vocabulary and layered meaning within a concise text.

The multimodal nature of comics allows multiple entry points into the same work. As a result, the same graphic novel can be equally rewarding for reluctant readers and highly advanced readers. Each reader combines visual and textual information in their own way, often leading to deeply personal engagement and strong re-read value.

Importantly, the visual dimension of the medium also enables the exploration of complex or sensitive themes that may be difficult to approach through words alone.

How the Format Works

Reading a graphic novel engages both the logical and emotional parts of the brain. Written text is decoded sequentially, word by word, translating letters into language. Images, however, are processed more quickly and holistically, often evoking immediate emotional responses and engaging multiple senses. The interaction between these two systems creates a dynamic reading experience, tailored to an individual reader. The graphic novel medium by default creates strong and fast emotional connections with the text, characters and its themes.

Literacy and Visual Literacy as Partners

At the heart of literacy education is the development of critical reading and thinking skills. Students learn to analyse narrative structure, metaphor, symbolism, point of view, inference, intertextuality and so on. Studying graphic novels in the classroom offers a parallel pathway to teach these and many more devices. Rather than viewing them as a stepping stone to prose, graphic novels should be recognised as another door to the storytelling brain.

Students who can critically analyse visual and multimodal texts are better equipped to interpret film, digital media, advertising and prose. Today, where most of the information, narratives, as well as – let's face it – propaganda is presented on screen in the form of images, having high competency in visual literacy is essential. Yet visual literacy is not an innate talent. It is a skill that must be taught. Studying graphic novels provide a practical and rigorous framework for developing these skills.

Additional Advantages: Reading and Making Comics

Short comics and comic strips, with their concise storytelling, are powerful teaching tools. They highlight core narrative elements such as pacing, structure and clarity. Students quickly see how much can be communicated with carefully chosen story beats, images and minimal text.

Importantly, students learn best by doing.

Artistic skill *is not a prerequisite* for writing in the language of comics. When students understand that drawings function as *information*, they can use simple shapes, stick figures or symbols to communicate complex ideas. The effectiveness of a comic lies not in polished illustration but in how it uses the tools of the medium:

- Emotion
- Dialogue
- **Onomatopoeia**
- **Panel** shapes
- Other sensory information
- Symbolism (**emanata**)
- Time passage
- Framing (camera angle/distance)

Just as imperfect handwriting does not prevent a strong prose story, limited drawing skills do not prevent a powerful comic narrative. Educators are encouraged to approach comics as a *language that students can both read and write*. When treated in this way, comics become not only texts to study, but tools for thinking.

Here is how to make a disposable, eight-page booklet, perfect for the students to practise their ideas on: <https://youtu.be/G7VYfF6dlaA>

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

AŚKA'S NOTES ON GRAPHIC NOVELS

- How do you read a graphic novel?
Do you begin with words, images, or both together? Compare your approach with a classmate. What does this suggest about how meaning is constructed in comics?
- After finishing the novel, what do you think the title means? Are there moments in the story that directly connect to it?
- How are Dash and Kay different? What do they have in common?
- How would you describe the relationship between Dash and their dad? What can you infer about their family life? What experiences may have shaped their relationship?
- The book provides insight into Dash's inner world. How does Dash use science to interpret or **recontextualise** their experiences?
- What *three* key ideas do you think the creator wants readers to take away from this book?
- This book is a work of fiction, based on real life experiences. How does this differ from an autobiographical work?

ENGLISH (LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, LITERACY INCLUDING VISUAL LITERACY)

Character and Theme

- How is friendship explored in the novel?
What actions define a strong friendship in this story? Do you agree?
- How does Dash grow throughout the novel? Do other characters change? Provide examples.
- Dash's past experiences influence their present behaviour. Identify one example and explain how the connection is shown visually or through dialogue.

Visual Literacy and Narrative Technique

- Choose a **spread** (two facing pages) that combines words and images.
 - First, read only the words. What do you learn?
 - Then, study only the images. What information is conveyed visually?
 - How do the two modes work together?
- Examine how time and pacing are controlled.

- Find one fast sequence and one slow sequence.
- How do the number of **panels**, panel size, and layout shape the reading speed?
- Why is pacing important in those moments of the story?
- Identify one example of each of the following:
 - **Flashback**
 - **Foreshadowing**
 - Visual **metaphor**
 - Silence or pause in conversation
 - Artwork breaking **panel** borders

Explain how each helps the narrative and deepens meaning.

- Analyse how text is presented. Consider:
 - **Speech bubble** shape, colour and tail
 - Font size, style (bold, italics, etc.) and alignment

What effect do these choices have on how the dialogue 'sounds'? Are any choices purely aesthetic?

- The book uses **panels** of different sizes and shapes, and sometimes no **panels** at all. Find three examples where these design choices deepen understanding.

Consider:

- Do **panels** overlap or interrupt each other?
- Are there borderless images?
- What effect do these choices create?
- **Onomatopoeia** in comics can suggest mood, action, off-**panel** events and sensory detail.

Find three examples and analyse:

- Why are the sounds drawn the way they are?
- How do size, direction and style of lettering *add additional meaning* beyond the word itself?
- **Emanata** are visual symbols indicating movement, emotion, sound or other invisible information.

Find examples and explain what each communicates.

Where did you learn to read these symbols? Do they differ between American comics and Japanese manga?

Creative Response

- Write either:
 - A short prose piece, or
 - A short comic (maximum 10 **panels**)

Write about a time you felt you did not fit in. Focus on conveying *how you felt*, whether through words, images or both.

- Imagine Dash and Kay one year later. Create a short comic (maximum 10 **panels**), or written epilogue exploring how they may have grown.

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION (PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY HEALTH)

- What strategies does Dash use to manage overwhelm or sensory stress? Provide examples. Do you have any strategies that help you?
- Research the term *masking*. What does it mean in a behavioural context? Why might someone mask? Reflect on a situation where you felt pressure to present a different version of yourself.
- In what ways is working at the Pop Science Hub ideal for Dash? In what ways is it challenging?

Describe a time when something you loved also presented significant obstacles.

- What do we learn about Dash from what we see of their home environment?
List or draw objects that would appear in your own 'safe space' and explain what they reveal about you.
- Reframing activity:
Dash uses visualisation to reinterpret stressful situations.
Choose a recurring stressor in your own life and redesign it as a quest, challenge or imaginative scenario. How does this shift your perspective?

MEDIA ARTS

- Graphic novels often use cinematic techniques. The creator acts as director, choosing what each **panel** shows.

Select a dramatic page and analyse each panel as if it were a film frame:

- What is shown? What is omitted?
- What camera angle is implied?
- How close are we to the subject?

- Are sounds or symbols adding meaning?

Discuss why might these choices have been made?

- The creator is also an editor. In comics, time passes in the **gutter**, unseen but implied.

Find a scene change where significant time passes between **panels** on the same **spread**. How is this signalled?

How else are large jumps in time indicated in the book? Find examples.

SCIENCE CONNECTIONS

- What narrative purpose do the science demonstrations and podcast episodes serve? How are they visually distinguished from the main storyline?

- Many chapters feature a visual motif linked to a key scientific idea.

Identify these motifs and explain their narrative function as they reoccur in the chapter.

- Choose a scientific concept you understand well. Create a 3-to-5 panel comic explaining it to a novice. Use minimal text and rely on visuals.

Include a visual motif or symbol if possible. Share your comic and evaluate whether your explanation is clear.

VISUAL ARTS

- Create an eight-page booklet from a folded A4 or A3 sheet.

(<https://youtu.be/G7VYff6dlaA>) Use words and images to tell a journal-style story about starting somewhere new or learning a new skill. Try to find some humour and/or surprise in the situation to make the story more engaging.

Include some of these:

- A clear narrative arc
- A surprising moment on an even-numbered page to maximise the **page turn** effect
- One **splash page**
- Varied **panel** sizes
- Multiple **panels** on each page, rather than full-page illustrations.

Focus on *clarity* and *storytelling* rather than artistic polish.

- Although characters often wear similar uniforms, they remain visually distinct. Identify the techniques used to differentiate them.

- The colour palette changes across sections of the book. Identify these sections thematically. What emotions are these colour palettes used to trigger?
- How would you describe the art style: realistic, stylised, or somewhere in between? How expressive are the characters' faces and gestures? Is the style consistent, or does it change? If so, why?
- Textures photographed by the comics maker overlay the artwork in the book. Identify some examples and explain how these textures add sensory depth or emotion to that moment in the narrative.

Draw a simple but emotionally charged scene from your own life. Add textural elements to the artwork, to support your story.

SENIOR EXTENSION QUESTIONS

These questions are designed for deeper analytical and evaluative thinking. They invite students to move beyond identification and into interpretation, critique and theoretical framing.

- **Multimodal Meaning-Making**
Graphic novels rely on the interaction between words and images. Select a scene and analyse how meaning is constructed across modes. Are the words reinforcing the images, contradicting them, or adding subtext? What is gained through this multimodal layering that could not be achieved in prose alone?
- **Science as Motif and Metaphor**
Evaluate the role of scientific demonstrations in the text. Do they function primarily as literal plot devices, symbolic parallels, thematic reinforcement, or commentary on knowledge and truth? Support your interpretation with close reference to specific scenes.
- **Representation and Perspective**
Consider how the text represents neurodivergence, identity, or social belonging. How does the visual form influence the reader's alignment with Dash? Does the format foster empathy, distance, critique, or ambiguity?
- **Editing and Narrative Authority**
A graphic novel requires deliberate decisions about what to show and what to omit. Choose a sequence and examine how compression, panel transitions, or visual framing shape the reader's understanding. What might be the effect if this same material was presented in prose?
- **Visualising Emotional Complexity**
Choose a complex emotional experience from the novel, or from your own life, such as anticipation, isolation, overwhelm, relief, or disappointment.

Create a short 4–6 *panel comic* that represents this emotion unfolding over time.

Your drawing skill is not being assessed. Instead, consider:

- What visual metaphor might best represent this emotional state? (For example – stress of a new workplace could be represented as a maze)
- How could camera angle, distance, or framing shape the viewer's perspective?
- Does the emotion expand, contract, fracture, intensify, or dissolve? How might this be shown with simple visuals?
- What symbols, recurring objects, colour or texture could reinforce the feeling?
- Where might silence be more powerful than dialogue?

Accompany your comic with a short written reflection explaining the choices you made and how they shape meaning.

This task asks you to think as a creator and critic simultaneously. Your goal is not illustration, but deliberate meaning-making through visual form.

GLOSSARY

Emanata – Visual symbols around a character indicating emotion, movement, sound or smell, such as sweat droplets, radiating lines or trembling marks.

Flashback – A scene that returns to an earlier time.

Foreshadowing – A hint of what is to come.

Gutter – The space between **panels** where time passes.

Metaphor – Representing one idea through another.

Onomatopoeia – Words that imitate sound; in comics, visual styling adds meaning.

Page turn – A narrative shift or revelation that occurs when turning the page.

Panel – A framed moment in time within a comic. Sequential panels create narrative progression.

Recontextualisation – Placing an idea or experience into a new framework of meaning.

Speech bubble – A shape containing a character's speech or thoughts. Variations in shape, colour and placement affect tone and delivery.

Splash page – A full-page (or double page) artwork emphasising an important moment.

Spread – Two facing pages viewed together.

ABOUT THE COMICS MAKER

AŚKA (PRONOUNCED ASH-KA), SHE/THEY, is an award-winning graphic novelist, an ex-quantum physicist and a big fan of the little doovalacky above the 's' in her name.

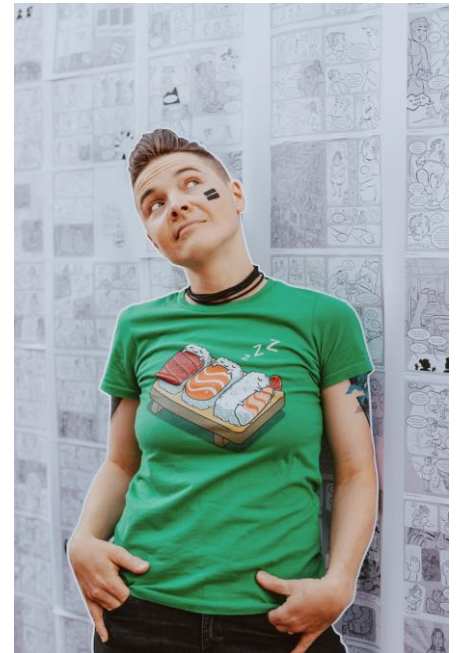
A hugely engaging and popular presenter, Aśka is passionate about visual literacy education. In addition to a catalogue of self-published comics, they have traditionally published more than a dozen books and graphic novels. Their recent titles include the YA graphic novel *Stars In Their Eyes*, which was a CBCA Notable Book, Stonewall Honor Book and nominated for the Comic Arts Awards of Australia.

She is also a recipient of several government Arts grants, prizes and fellowships.

Aśka is the Programming Director for the Perth Comic Arts Festival, contributes regularly to *The School Magazine*, volunteered as Illustrator Co-ordinator in the WA branch of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators for four years, has single-handedly run an animation festival, and held a solo art exhibition about numbers in nature.

When they're not creating children's books, Aśka is travelling across Australia teaching eager students of all ages how to write with pictures.

If you'd like to know more, head to www.askastorytelling.com



Credit: Emanuel Rudnicki