COMICS ARE GREAT!

LEAD A COMICS WORKSHOP, EVEN IF YOU CAN'T DRAW!

COMIC BOOKS
A PATHWAY TO LEARNING

WITH JERZY DROZD!
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Workshop</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing State and National Standards</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals of the Workshop</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking the Language of Comics: Skills and Terms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and Making Comics: Space=Time, Detail=Time</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space=Time, Detail=Time Examples</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Thoughts on Space=Time, Detail=Time</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing a Story, Not a Picture:</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the Classroom to the Drawing Board</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoon Instruction: Drawing Narratively</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts on Gesture, Acting Moments and Iconic Imagery</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Comics: Construct a Scene</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Comics: Create a Panel Sequence</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Two: Developing Sophisticated Readers Through Comics</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose Your Moment</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting Prediction</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing Environments &amp; Props</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferencing in the Gutter</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comics as a Path to Literacy</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to Look For in Students’ Comics Work</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closure</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comics for Elementary and Middle School Students</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Resources</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Information</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Comics is a storytelling medium made up of a collection of static moments, or “panels.” On their own, these panels communicate a little, but something magical happens when you place them in a sequence. Suddenly they add up to a narrative. And as a narrative art form, comics presents its authors with many opportunities to express story in images as well as in words. A popular slogan used by veteran cartoonists is that one must “write visually and draw narratively.” A cartoonist can use images to express tension, disorientation, glee, frenetic action, or calm introspection.

One of the most interesting aspects of what makes comics work is the partnership between author and audience. If we accept that comics is essentially a series of static images, then we must conclude that it is the reader who connects those moments into a narrative. Comics is more than a narrative with visual support—it is a fully interactive reading experience filled with its own symbols and language.

Comics not only affords an opportunity for cartoonists to express sophisticated ideas through image; it also engages a reader in the intellectual work of constructing a story.

Example from The Front: Rebirth. © Jerzy Drozd.

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS WORKSHOP

The purpose of this workshop is to explore the convergence of literary and artistic disciplines inherent in comics, and to demonstrate how both making and reading comics can be a powerful way to build reading comprehension skills such as prediction, inference, and fluency.

Workshop participants will experience:
1. ways to introduce cartooning/visual storytelling strategies to students,
2. suggestions for coaching students to express character, plot, and drama through images,
3. how comics can be used to invite prediction, inference, and foster fluency in a student’s reading, and
4. cartooning strategies to teach to different kinds of learners.

RATIONALE

Comics, graphic novels, and manga continue to gain more mainstream acceptance in the literary fields, and enjoy a more widespread popularity amongst students than ever. Is it a fad, or does comics offer something more profound that speaks to young people?

In 2007 I participated in the ArtServe Michigan’s Literacy Arts’ Comic Book Project as a teaching artist. I taught the craft of comics to third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms in five Detroit public schools over the course of 10 weeks per semester. During that time I witnessed first hand the deep links between literacy and art as students described as “unmotivated readers” demonstrated a sophisticated visual vocabulary and a palpable enthusiasm for delineating story through images.

Utilizing the rules of art as well as the rules of literature, comics holds a special potential in the classroom as a means to speak to a variety of learners. By exploring the role of images and their arrangement in a narrative, we can reach out to visual learners. By reflecting on what is communicated through the images in a comic, we can foster deeper reading skills in students. A reader infers what happens “between” the panels to construct the overall story, as well as predicts the outcome of a story based on the author’s choices of moment. By diving in and making comics, we afford students the opportunity to express sophisticated ideas through images, improving reading fluency and comprehension.

On the right is an example of a student expressing a sophisticated idea through images. In the original color version of this panel, the student rendered a bright orange and yellow object on his character’s head. When I asked him what was happening in this panel, he explained to me, “his brain is on fire. He’s mad.”

One of the key paradoxes found in comics is the complex ideas found within simple images.
English/Reading/Language Arts

Michigan

**R.WS.03.07** The student will apply the following aspects of fluency: pauses and emphasis, punctuation cues, intonation, and automatic recognition of identified grade-level specific words and sight words while reading aloud familiar grade-level text.

**R.NT.03.04** The student will explain how authors use literary devices including prediction, personification, and point of view to develop a story level theme, depict the setting, and reveal how thoughts and actions convey important character traits.

**R.NT.04.03** The student will analyze characters’ thoughts and motivation through dialogue, various character roles, and functions including hero, anti-hero, or narrator; know first person point of view and identify conflict and resolution.

**R.CM.04.03** The student will explain relationships among themes, ideas, and characters within and across texts to create a deeper understanding by categorizing and classifying, comparing and contrasting, or drawing parallels across time and culture.

**R.AT.04.01** The student will be enthusiastic about reading and do substantial reading and writing on their own.

**W.PR.04.02** The student will apply a variety of pre-writing strategies for both narrative and informational writing (e.g., graphic organizers such as maps, webs, Venn diagrams) in order to generate, sequence, and structure ideas (e.g., plot, setting, conflicts/resolutions, definition/description, or chronological sequence).

**W.PR.05.04** The student will revise drafts based on constructive and specific oral and written responses to writing by identifying sections of the piece to improve organization and flow of ideas (e.g., position/evidence organizational pattern, craft such as titles, leads, endings, and powerful verbs).
Participating in this workshop’s activities can contribute to fulfilling the following National Standards for Visual Arts:

**Grades K-4**

- **Content Standard 2**: Using knowledge of structures and functions
  - Achievement Standard 2c: Use visual structures and functions of art to communicate ideas.

- **Content Standard 3**: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
  - Achievement Standard 3b: Select and use subject matter, symbols, and ideas to communicate meaning.

- **Content Standard 6**: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines
  - Achievement Standard 6b: Identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.

**Grades 5-8**

- **Content Standard 2**: Using knowledge of structures and functions
  - Achievement Standard 2b: Employ organizational structures and analyze what makes them effective or not effective in the communication of ideas.

- **Content Standard 3**: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
  - Achievement Standard 3a: Integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks.

- **Content Standard 6**: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines
  - Achievement Standard 6b: Describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts.
GOALS OF THE WORKSHOP

Participants will...

1. ...experience a variety of cartooning strategies for classroom use.

2. ...learn the role of “sloppy drawing” as a means to construct a comics story.

3. ...learn a variety of terms and skills used by professional cartoonists.

4. ...discover links between the use of cartooning strategies and learning standards/objectives in their curriculum.

5. ...understand the connection of the workshop activities to the art form of comics.

6. ...understand how to use the workshop strategies to plan classroom cartooning activities related to curriculum areas.

7. ...understand the role of prediction, inference, and fluency in both making and reading comics.

8. ...become familiar with ways to coach students to look for moments of characterization, plot, and drama, and to express them effectively through images.

9. ...experience the creative problem solving process as they choose from the workshop cartooning strategies to express a story through images.

10. ...appreciate the artistic and educational decision-making involved in creating a comics story.

11. ...appreciate the potential for curriculum-related classroom cartooning activities to motivate students and promote reading comprehension.

12. ...become familiar with methods to interpret an artistic work as a means to analyze and understand a cartoonist’s work.
The following terms may be helpful to know and use with your students:

**Comics**—plural in form, used with a singular verb. A sequence of images used to communicate a feeling or idea. This is the term for the medium itself, though it is also used to refer to comic books and strips.

**Cartoonist**—a comics artist. A general definition is “one who writes with pictures as well as words.”

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**ANATOMY OF COMICS PAGES**

The following terms have been matched to the example on the right by the corresponding letters:

**A. Panel**—often the boundary around an image, signifying its separation from the other moments in the sequence. Sometimes an artist will choose a “borderless panel,” using the images within the moment to serve as the boundary between moments. Panels can be any shape, any size.

**B. Gutter**—the spaces between panels.

**C. Word Balloon**—containers for dialogue. Often drawn as a bubble-shape with a “tail” pointing to the speaking character. Like panels, word balloons can be any shape, any size.

**D. Caption Box**—square containers used within panels to communicate third-person narration, sometimes used for character monologue.

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*Example from The Front: Rebirth © Jerzy Drozd.*
E. Thought Balloon—similar to a word balloon, yet unique in that it communicates a character’s thoughts, or an inner monologue. Also, unlike word balloons and panels, thought balloons usually come in one specific shape—typically a balloon that has a “bubbly” edge with a tail of bubbles.

F. “Camera” or Viewing Angle—the angle at which the cartoonist has placed the reader in relation to the contents of the panel. In this example, I placed the “camera” above the character, as if it were mounted on the ceiling. Other viewing angles include placing the “camera” on the floor looking up at a character, looking over a character’s shoulder, or a wide shot showing a scene.

G. Layout or Composition—the visual “flow” of images and information. Layout can refer to the contents of an individual panel, or to an entire sequence of panels. Layout can be used for aesthetic purposes or to deliver story data, and sometimes both at the same time.

This is one of the aspects of comics where the rules of art are more at play, though it is often used for narrative purposes as well. In this example, for instance, we used layout to condense disparate moments into what I like to call a “super moment”. The future-car isn’t really in the room with the characters. They’re speaking with each other over radio.

H. Sound Effects—words used to communicate non-dialogue sounds.
Here are a few more examples demonstrating the previously mentioned comics terms:

**Panel size/shape**—Notice that none of the panels in this example are squares. Panels can be any shape, any size, depending on what the cartoonist wishes to express.

**Layout**—If you squint at the page, you may notice that the first panel’s angle “guides” the reader’s eye to the second one below it. Similarly, the second panel “leans” toward the third. The contents of the panels are also constructed to guide the eye. The monster’s action in panel one “guides” the reader’s eye to panel two.

**Sound Effects**—Though comics are made of static and soundless images, a cartoonist can evoke a world of sensory data using onomatopoeia and design principles. The differences in the design between the sound effect in panel one and the monster’s roar in panel two were deliberate.

In this example we find that **word balloons** can have different shapes to communicate the inflections in a character’s dialogue. The use of **bold text** also helps to give the reader inflection clues, as well.
These strategies serve both as an introduction to the comics art form and as an activity to find emphatic or “big” moments in literature.

One of the fundamental tools of comics storytelling is the panel. The size and shape of the panel, as well as the degree of detail within the panel, all serve to control the pace of the reading experience. Though comics are comprised of a series of static and silent images, a cartoonist can evoke a sense of rhythm and time through effective use of panels and their contents.

**Purposes:**
1. To engage all students in an analysis of cartooning as a means of storytelling.
2. To begin with a low-risk activity; students will discuss instead of draw.

**Process:**
1. The teacher will present the students with a storyboard featuring a sequence of panels of the same size, and invite the students to guess which moment takes the longest to happen (see example on page 13).

2. The rationale behind the students’ choices (and disagreements) will be explored. The teacher may pose the following questions:
   - Why do we think the moment when the girl gets ready for the date takes longer than when she opens the door?
   - Why do we think browsing the internet might take longer than getting ready for the date?
   - Is she hesitating when she opens the door, or does she open it quickly? How can we tell?

**Panel 1:** Girl looks for a date on the internet.
**Panel 2:** She finds a decent-looking candidate.
**Panel 3:** She gets ready for the date.
**Panel 4:** The doorbell rings, she answers it.
**Panel 5:** The handsome man turns out to be a farmer holding a pig.

The purpose of this activity is not to come to a consensus, but to demonstrate that we can’t be sure which moment takes the longest--there isn’t enough “data” to make total sense of the narrative.
3. The teacher will then present the same images in the form of a comics page containing varying panel sizes. The students will be asked again which moment takes the longest to happen (see example on pg 14).

Questions the teacher may pose:
- Why does a larger panel “feel” longer than a smaller panel?
- Why would a panel with more detail “feel” longer?
- How does removing the border in the last panel change the way it reads in relation to the other panels?
- Why would the author choose to make the panel in which the girl opens the door a different shape than the other panels?
- Would you choose a different moment for the largest panel? If so, which one?
- Are there any other reasons that a cartoonist might choose to make a panel larger, besides longer moments in time?

The teacher will introduce the students to the concept of \( \text{Space}=\text{Time}, \text{Detail}=\text{Time} \). Larger panels imply a longer or more emphatic moment. More detail invites a reader to linger on a panel, causing a change in the story’s pace.

4. The teacher will then lead the students in an interactive discussion over several examples of comics pages. The students will be invited to interpret which moments last the longest based on the use of panel size and shape as well as the amount of detail within the panels.

Pages 13-18 contain examples the teacher may use in the classroom, along with questions that the teacher may pose to the students.
Questions the teacher may pose:
• Why do we think the moment when the girl gets ready for the date takes longer than when she opens the door?
• Why do we think browsing the internet might take longer than getting ready for the date?
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Questions the teacher may pose:

- Why does a larger panel “feel” longer than a smaller panel?
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- How does removing the border in the last panel change the way it reads in relation to the other panels?
- Why would the author choose to make the panel in which the girl opens the door a different shape than the other panels?
- Would you choose a different moment for the largest panel? If so, which one?
- Are there any other reasons that a cartoonist might choose to make a panel larger, besides longer moments in time?
- How would changing the color of any of the panel borders change the way we feel about that moment?
Questions the teacher may pose (see panel legend below for reference):
• How does panel two feel different than panels three and four?
• Why do you think the author chose to make panels five and six different shapes?
• How do the borders on panels five and six make us feel about the moments within? (see note below)
• Which moment on this page takes the longest? Is it the biggest panel? Why or why not?
• Which moment on this page takes the longest? Is it the most detailed panel? Why or why not?
• Which moment on this page feels the most emphatic? Why?

A note on line: A cartoonist can create emphasis by changing the kinds of lines used in the narrative. A heavy, jagged panel border often indicates a moment of intense action or emotion. A lack of a panel border allows the moment to “bleed” off into space, creating an ambiguity of pacing. As you explore your own samples for classroom use, pay attention to what kinds of panel borders you see, and ask yourself what you think the cartoonist intended by them. There's more to the role of line, and it will be explored in subsequent activities.
Questions the teacher may pose:
• Which panel on this page takes the longest to happen?
• Do we judge the longest moment based on the size of the panel, or the amount of details in the panel?
• How does the last panel’s angle, shape, or lines affect how we feel about the moment?
Questions the teacher may pose:

- Which panel on this page takes the least amount of time? Why do you think the author chose to make that panel smaller?
- How does making a character leap “out” of a panel (panel six) change the way we feel about the moment?
Questions the teacher may pose:

- How does the lack of a border in the last panel affect the way we feel about it? Does it take more time, or does it have more emphasis?
- If Space=Time, Detail=Time works for panels, how can it also work for words?
Some additional thoughts on demonstrating Space=Time, Detail=Time in the classroom:

This idea of larger or more detailed objects taking longer to consider comes from everyday experience. Imagine you’re standing directly in front of the Empire State Building in New York City, and in your hand you’re holding an apple. Now, in your mind’s eye, look at both of them carefully.

Odds are, the Empire State Building took longer to view. Why? In order to take in the whole building (while standing in front of it) you would have to move your head up and down. You can’t see the whole building at once.

You can see the entire apple by just looking at it in your hand. Furthermore, the building has much more detail (windows, brick and iron work), so there’s more information to consider and parse. You can tell what an apple is with a simple glance.

Extensions:

• Draw an alternate panel sequence (panels only, no content) that puts the focus on one of the “smaller” moments on the page.

• Divide an example panel sequence into “beats.” One beat for a smaller moment, two for a medium moment, and three for a larger moment. Have the students “drum” the beats of the panels as you point to them.

• Repeat the above activity, but focus only on the contents of the panels. Determine how many “beats” a picture has based on the amount of words and details it contains.

Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:

What surprised you about thinking of cartooning from a storytelling stance over an illustrative one?

What were your initial assumptions about drawing a story as opposed to writing one? Has that been challenged in any way?

How can you adapt this strategy to teach curriculum-based content?
The difference between a Cartoonist and an Illustrator is one’s ability to use all of the fundamental communication tools in comics effectively. Many of the most successful cartoonists have illustration styles that are considered “raw” or “crude”. In fact, one of the most popular comics on the Internet, “XKCD” (http://xkcd.com/) is rendered entirely with stick figures. The author understands how to use cartooning principles of panel sequence, acting, and pacing to communicate his ideas without the need of a richly detailed environment or characters. A cursory scan of the comic strips found in newspapers will reveal a wide range of artistic styles, many of which are not what one would call “richly rendered”. Yet they enjoy wide and loyal audiences.

The most effective cartoonists understand that drawing ability is but one of the many skills used to create stories that an audience will fall in love with. More importantly, they must know how to use specific choices of moments within a variety of panel sizes and shapes to invite reader participation. What makes comics a powerful medium is not whether or not the illustrations are beautiful, but whether or not they are arranged and composed in an effective and evocative manner.

As a result, a majority of intellectual work in making comics occurs when a cartoonist is sketching, or performing “sloppy drawing”. The finished art of a comics work may be compared to the performance of an actor in front of an audience, while the sketching may be considered similar to the actor’s many rehearsals.

Shining a light on the notion of “sloppy drawing” releases the students from the performance anxiety of creating great illustrative works and establishes a connection between the learning activities and the art form of comics. The most successful comics classroom activities happen when the students enjoy the process of drawing a story instead of drawing a picture.
An example demonstrating the difference between “sloppy drawing” and the final page. The panel sizes and shapes, page composition, camera angles, acting moments, and dialogue were determined during the sketching stage. In a real sense, a cartoonist does the majority of his/her work during the “sloppy drawing” part of the process.

True, the sloppy drawing demonstrated above is probably a bit more refined than what you’ll see from a novice or young cartoonist. But it’s still far from what is achieved in the final artwork. Look at the hand of the tripping character in the final panel between the sloppy drawing and the final art—quite a difference! When we’re sketching our pages, we should be less worried about drawing things well than we are about getting the ideas on the paper. As long as the sketch communicates the idea, let’s be content with it and move on to the next panel.
Purposes:
1. To engage students in the activity of “sloppy drawing”.
2. To introduce students to the notion of drawing pictures that tell a story.
3. To foster students' confidence and comfort in a low-risk drawing activity.

Process:
1. The teacher demonstrates the concept of the “through-line” of motion and gesture by creating stick figures out of various lines on a pad, board, or overhead.

The teacher may wish to emphasize:
- The line of action--in what direction is the energy or motion of the character pointing?
- Character’s Spinal “Arc”--is the character arching his/her back with pride? Is he/she slouched in shame? Is the character recoiling in fear?
- “Sloppy Drawing” as an analogue for “First Draft”. By focusing on stick figures and lines of action first, we free ourselves from the concerns of drawing anatomical or costume details until the structure of the character is established.

2. The students will draw various stick figures, emphasizing the through-line in each of their drawings (see pages 22-24 for more information).

3. Using comics examples and by drawing on a pad, board, or overhead, the teacher will then demonstrate some basic gesture and expression drawing techniques, highlighting the role of iconic imagery as well as naturalistic rendering in cartooning.

Iconic Imagery: lines, shapes, and images that represent an idea, but aren’t actually there. These can come in the form of sweat beads, or steam coming from a character’s ears.

Naturalistic Rendering: A style of drawing used to more accurately represent the world. Most often called “realistic” drawing.

See pages 25-26 for more information on Iconic and Naturalistic drawing.
4. The students will draw a series of emotions, using either naturalistic or iconic imagery to convey the feeling.

Throughout the activity the teacher will remind the students that “sloppy drawing” is primarily about capturing ideas on paper rather than creating a work of illustrative beauty. If the student is not happy with the drawing, they are encouraged to cross the drawing out with an “X” and start over.

Extensions:

- Have the students retell a story discussed in class with pictures. Discuss which moments require the students to show the emotion/gesture (emotional reactions) versus which moments the students find more conducive to showing the whole figure/through-line (actions).

- Write a list of emotions on a board and have the students draw that emotion with only one line. Follow that with an activity where the students use that “line style” to render the emotion as a face. What does the quality and shape of the line tell us about the meaning of the image?

- Retell a story using the above example as a means to highlight dramatic moments of the story. How can you express the inner lives of the characters through the lines chosen to render them? Is there a “joyful” line versus a “despairing” line?

- Happy Accidents - Have the students draw a random shape on a blank piece of paper. The students then hand their shape off to a neighbor. The students must then make a character out of the shape by adding their own details.

More on “through-lines”

To really emphasize your line of action, it is often helpful to follow the spine of your character all the way out to one of their legs.

Here’s a modification based on the example on the previous page:

By following the spine through to the leg that supports the character’s action, or thrust, we get a clear reminder of where the energy of this pose originates.

Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:

How can a line communicate story?

Is drawing intentionally different than drawing proficiently?
Some example through-lines...

and some poses that one may derive from them.

Note that despite being stick figures, these characters are all demonstrating some sort of emotion or action. Body language is an essential component of comics storytelling, and can be achieved with even the most simple figures or drawing styles.
Some thoughts on gesture, acting moments, and iconic imagery to communicate story and character:

Aside from body language, students can exhibit the inner lives of their characters through the expressions on their characters’ faces or via subtle gestures. Even more idiosyncratic to comics, there is a wide range of iconic symbols to represent emotions. Here are some examples that demonstrate these ideas:

Pay attention to the expressions on the boy with the black hair in the first three panels. We get a clear sense of what he is feeling with images alone. If you read only his dialogue balloons, you’d only get part of the story. This is yet another example of how words and images converge to tell a story in comics.

An interesting aspect to this example is how wildly the art style changes when rendering the boy’s expressions between panel three and panel four. In the final panel, the boy’s face stretches out into pure cartoon. We can’t make this face, but we certainly can relate to what that expression feels like.

Let’s also take note of some of the iconic imagery—that is, illustrations that aren’t really there, but communicate some meaning to the reader. They’re symbolic in nature. The boy isn’t really on fire, but the cartoon suggests that his frustration has consumed him to the point where he feels he is on fire. The sweat beads on his face are also a staple cartoon symbol, used to indicate anger, frustration, fear, even embarrassment. You may also notice the crosshair-style symbol on his left temple. That is an iconic image borrowed from Manga, or comics from Japan. It represents, in a simplified cartoony way, that the veins on his head are throbbing from his anger.
More iconic imagery. The boys’ happiness is so intense that it manifests as a radiant light filled with cartoon stars. Again, that light and those stars aren’t really there, but the image communicates the characters’ enthusiasm.

Also take note of the exaggerated body language. Depending on the kind of moment a cartoonist is trying to create, they have the option to plunge full-on into cartoon imagery or stay on the side of naturalistic imagery. In my work, I like to flip back and forth between them.

Sometimes a more subtle kind of storytelling is appropriate. In those cases, acting moments and gesture take center stage.

In this example, note the facial expressions and use of hand poses. I intentionally removed the dialogue to invite you to put together the meaning of this piece.

We can’t know for sure what the characters are saying, but we can infer a great deal about how they’re feeling about what is being said. This was achieved through gestures and facial expressions alone.

Through comics you can make the equivalent to a multi-million dollar movie for next to no cost. However, the real price is that you, the cartoonist, must play the role of the director, screenwriter, cinematographer, the sound effects engineer, and every actor on the set!
These strategies are used in the everyday lives of professional comics creators. They serve as a means both to deepen students’ insights into the storytelling power of comics, and as a model to adapt for teaching curriculum-based content.

**Purposes:**
1. To involve the students in the process of creating a story with the explicit purpose of retelling it visually.
2. To continue with a low-risk activity—students will be encouraged to sketch the story ideas as they are discussed, but they will not be required to do so.
3. To foster the idea of “writing visually,” in other words, to write with the mindset of what an author can show versus what one can tell.

**Process:**
1. The teacher will lead the students in a discussion of ideas that would make an interesting short story. The students will be encouraged to think of ideas that are emotionally ambiguous actions—walking to get the mail, making breakfast, etc. Being attacked by a shark has an emotional moment that most people would agree upon, while walking to get the mail leaves a wide range of interpretation for the individual artists.

   The teacher may pose the following thoughts for consideration:
   - Is that an emotional action?
   - Is this an action that can be shown visually?
   - Where is this scene taking place?
   - What are the objects one may find in this setting?
   - Can we “see” this action or setting in our mind’s eye?

2. As the discussion progresses, the teacher will serve as a model for the students, sketching out key moments of the story they construct as a demonstration on how to capture the story in pictures. The teacher will not draw the moments described in panels, but rather as “doodles” on the page in no apparent sequence. The teacher may place focus on the actions taken by the character(s) over the role of environment or setting.

   During this “think aloud” modeling exercise, the teacher may focus on these concepts:
   - Are there any combination of moments that can be condensed into one illustration?
   - What do these moments mean to me as a cartoonist, and how can I express that emotion or feeling through body language, gesture, or acting?
   - What may be considered the most impactive moment of the story?
   - What moments might take a longer amount of time to happen than others?

3. The students will be invited to sketch on their own in the same manner as the teacher, randomly selecting moments in the narrative for consideration in regards to the above concepts.

   The teacher may wish to remind the students of the role of “sloppy drawing” as a means to encourage the students to focus on the narrative aspect over the illustrative aspect of the activity. The students may use stick figures to explore their moments in the story.
Extensions:

• Construct an alternate ending for a piece of classroom literature. Have the students sketch the key points of the new ending, highlighting the reactions of the main characters through gesture and expression.

• Demonstrate a key concept from a civics or social studies topic, such as voting, through cartooning. Have the students construct a scene where a character wrestles with the choices they face when choosing their candidate and finally makes his/her decision. Use gesture and expression to show the inner lives of the characters as they wrestle with the decision.

• Explore a scientific concept through personification and characters. As a fifth grader, I created a comic called *Silver and the Periodic Forces*, in which characters representing each of the chemical elements used abilities derived from their respective chemical properties to fight the forces of evil.

Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:

Was it difficult to think of an “emotionally neutral moment”? If so, why do you think that is? Can this be used in your thinking when approaching cartooning in the future?

Did you find any difficulty in visualizing the moments of the story as it was discussed? If so, what might help you in the future to do so? If not, how could you describe the process to a student who has difficulty visualizing a story moment?

How might this activity be used to teach to visual learners as well as non-visual learners?

More thoughts on “sloppy drawing” when constructing a scene

This activity serves to keep the focus of the students on the visual narrative options available before they face the challenge of composing the scene into a panel layout.

By focusing on the moments themselves and allowing them to “bleed off” into space, a student is less inclined to omit any information for fear of running out of room within a panel. This is very much akin to brainstorming a story, letting every idea happen on the page and editing material out with a later draft.

This concept of thinking about moment choices will be explored more fully in subsequent activities.

Random selections from my sketchbook as I brainstorm story moments for *Equalizers of the Divide #1*. Artwork © Jerzy Drozd.
CREATE A PANEL SEQUENCE

Purposes:
1. To build on the previous activity by composing the constructed scene into a comics page.
2. To reinforce the differences between the size and shape of a panel and its contents.
3. To revisit how panel size and shape help deliver emphasis and pacing in a comics story.
4. To emphasize the role of process in creating artistic works.
5. To continue raising the risk by inviting the students to more fully take on the role of a comics creator.

Process:
1. The teacher will lead the students in a brief discussion revisiting the concept of Space=Time, Detail=Time (see page 11). The teacher will remind the students of the notion that a larger panel usually indicates more emphatic or longer moments in the narrative.

2. The students will then take the scene they constructed in the previous activity and draw it in a series of six to nine panels, or as a comics page.

The teacher may ask the students:
• What is the big moment in this story?
• Which moment requires the most emphasis?
• Which moment takes the most time?
• Which moment takes the least time?

The students will design their panel shapes and sizes in accordance with the answers they develop during the activity.

The teacher may encourage the students to build their page “out of sequence”. The student may choose to start with the biggest panel on their page and work their way out from that. In other words, a student may decide that in a six-panel sequence, panel five of their narrative should be largest. They would draw panel five first and complete the rest of the panels around the largest panel.

If desired, the students may be paired into teams. The students would then share the responsibility of completing the comics sequence in any way they wish. One student may determine the panel shapes and sizes while the other illustrates the content. One student may draw only the environmental details (trees, sidewalk, houses) while the other student draws the characters.

3. When finished, the students will be asked to share their work with the group for discussion led by the teacher. The students’ work will be evaluated for uses of expressive line as well as effective use of panel shapes and sizes.

Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy--Create a Panel Sequence:
Were there any surprises about what you could “fit” into your panels versus what you had to omit? How did you decide what, if anything, did not need to be shown in your panels? What reading comprehension strategies are addressed by these workshop activities? How could you use published comics or graphic novels as a supplement to your current reading comprehension strategies?
Some points to ponder when viewing student work during the Create a Panel Sequence activity:

This activity is primarily about using comics to explore story pacing and emphasis. However, here are some other storytelling skills to watch out for in students’ work:

Use of Line

As stated earlier in this packet, different kinds of lines communicate different meanings. In the example on the left, I used different lines to express the character’s pain as he was electrocuted. A clean line often represents a calmer or more objective scene. Rougher or more jagged lines tend to indicate a heightened emotional moment.

Example from *The Front: Rebirth* © Jerzy Drozd.

Use of Gesture

We explored gesture, body language, and acting in a previous activity. As the students find their large and small moments in their narrative, it’s also worth noticing whether or not they’re finding their acting moments with their characters. Are the characters delivering story data visually as well as with words?

Example from *PPV: Pay-Per-View* © Jerzy Drozd and Tom Root.

Playful Sequencing

As stated earlier, comics observes the rules of art as much as it does the rules of literature. Because of this, comics pages can sometimes defy the Left-To-Right, Top-To-Bottom reading convention that we find in prose and other texts.

In this example of a student’s work, the main character falls into the panel below and proceeds to take the narrative from right to left.

Another point worthy of note in this example is the student’s condensation of multiple moments in one panel. We can see that the character tumbles through the air in the second panel. How would our reading experience change had he put each of those moments in individual panels?
There is a paradox involved when discussing comics from the standpoint of a reader. By the virtue of being a visual language, comics communicates ideas to a reader immediately, seemingly without effort. However, the thinking involved in decoding comics is quite sophisticated. For nearly a century cartoonists have been devising strategies to foster prediction and inferencing amongst their readers. By looking at these strategies from the cartoonist’s point of view we can adapt them for use in the classroom to develop more sophisticated readers.

The majority of people’s exposure to comics comes from the comic strips found in the newspaper. Those tend to be grid-style panels where not much changes in the way of actions or scenes. However, in long-form comics with a continuing narrative and a larger canvas with which to tell the story, the cartoonist is afforded the opportunity to explore some more sophisticated storytelling techniques. For instance, a cartoonist may derive many moments out of one. In this example, my collaborator and I decided to use the setting as one “super moment” containing the four narrative moments within. We see the two groups of characters converging on the same scene, implying an inevitable conflict. We were able to do this much more elegantly than if it were in a film or in prose, thanks to the fact that comics observes the rules of art as well as literature.
As stated before, comics provides a storyteller the ability to deliver complex ideas immediately through the juxtaposition of images and text.

In this example, the narration is referring to the action, but indirectly. If you were to take the caption boxes out of the page and read them on their own, you would only get part of the story. When you consider the last three text boxes in the final panel, you wouldn’t understand exactly what the text is referring to. The text is depending on the image to tell the rest of the story.

The center moment on the page is probably the most interesting use of image. I was faced with the prospect of showing the boy’s terror as he witnesses his friend being attacked by a villain. If I didn’t convey that terror properly, the following moment, where he hides instead of confronting the villain, would seem less dramatic.

*What is happening in that center moment?*

First, I decided to lighten the colors on the protagonist, in effect “greying” him out, to suggest that he’s numbed by the fear of the moment.

Second, I chose to superimpose him over various aspects of what he is witnessing. Here we get to the immediacy that comics affords once again—we can see the protagonist’s expression and what he is witnessing at the same time. I chose multiple aspects of the same moment to suggest a sense of “time standing still.” This moment is meant to resonate both to the hero and to the audience.

Third, the moments behind him are in panels shaped like shattered glass. Again, a suggestion to the reader that this moment is a shock to our protagonist. As if his world is shattering.

As readers we understand this intuitively, but one shouldn’t be misled by how easy it is to read comics. The thinking involved in making them and reading them is quite rich and complex.
We're accustomed to reading text from left-to-right, top-to-bottom. But in comics, the rules of art are also at play.

So, what does this mean?

When you approach a work of art, say, the Mona Lisa, you usually don’t begin scanning from the upper left of the image and proceed to the right, line by line, like a fax machine printing out an image. Instead, your eye is drawn towards whatever first captures your attention. There are multiple directions in which one can “read” a picture.

Comics can take advantage of this aspect of the visual arts by providing a reader with multiple ways to read a page. This ambiguity of directionality can allow a cartoonist to play any number of tricks to create a more interesting reading experience.

In this example, I was faced with a scene in which my protagonist was navigating a crowded convention while his father and friends watched over him from a distance. I was able to imply that the two scenes were happening simultaneously through many pages by running one part of the narrative down a vertical strip on the left side of the pages, and another part of the narrative on the right.

When you read this page, you’re given the option of reading panel one from top to bottom and moving on to panel two, three, and so on down the right side of the page, but this isn’t the only way that the page can be interpreted. You can also read the first three word balloons of panel one, then move on to panel two and three. From there you can read the last three balloons of panel one, and move over to panels four, five, six, and seven. This is explained with visuals on the following pages.

The point is there’s no right or wrong way to interpret the scene. As the author, I invite the readers to infer the scene in a way that makes sense to them. Taking advantage of ambiguity in a comics layout can offer readers a more fully interactive and rich reading experience.
"SAY WHAT YOU WANT ABOUT SPRING TIME AND NEW CARS -- THEY'VE GOT NOTHING ON THE SMELL OF STALE, OLD COMICS...

HELLO, THIRSTY.

UK

YO.

WHASSUP?

"HOW I REALIZE THE FIRST QUESTION ON MY MIND SHOULD'VE BEEN: 'WHAT THE HECK IS SHE DOING HERE?"

"BUT ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WAS THAT THERE WERE TWO GUYS WITH HER THIS TIME. NEITHER OF WHICH WERE THAT CREEP SHE LIVED WITH. WHAT KIND OF GIRL WAS THIS, ANYWAY?"

"I WANTED TO THANK YOU FOR RETURNING MY PIN."

"SHE SOUNDED EARNEST, BUT I WAS ONLY 18, AND NOT ABOUT TO BREAK CHARACTER."

"WELCOME TO TEENAGE LOVE, KIDS. PRETTY, ISN'T IT?"

RIGHT.

NO PROBL.

OKAY.

DON'T MENTION IT...

THIRSTY!
...resulting in a sense of simultaneity. This would be difficult to do in a film or in prose. Comics offers some truly unique storytelling abilities that avail themselves of the rules of art as well as writing.
The previous activities explored “writing with pictures” in regards to delineating a sequence of actions visually and how one can emphasize those moments through panel size and shape. This exercise puts a magnifying glass on the role of the expressive potential found in the contents of the panels themselves.

**Purposes:**
1. To augment the students’ awareness of the expressive potential of the contents of panels.
2) To invite an exploration of the role of props, environment, and staging in the context of comics.
3. To begin the day with a low-risk activity—instead of drawing, students will discuss examples provided by the teacher.

**Process:**
1. Using comics pages as examples, the teacher will engage the students in an interactive discussion about a cartoonist’s “choice of moment” (see pages 12-17 for additional information and examples).

The teacher will invite the students to first look at what the narrative of the page is from an objective sense. The teacher may ask the students, “what events are taking place in this scene?”

The teacher will then lead the students in a discussion on moments or ideas expressed without text. For instance, a student might suggest that a character is “evil” or “scary” with no word balloon or other text to support this decision. The students will be asked to justify their assessments of the moment, and the teacher will highlight topics such as camera angle, staging of elements, composition, and mood as a basis for group consideration.

**What does “Choice of Moment” mean?**

Put simply, it’s what you show in a panel and how you show it.

As with the activity of constructing a scene, a cartoonist may begin with more or less of a text version of the narrative they wish to tell. From there they decide on what images can best deliver the emphasis or emotional content of that moment.

In a sense, it’s analogous to finding the proper adjectives or metaphors to color your story.

The rough text version of the example to the right would have read something like this:

*The old man is confronted by a large, menacing figure. The old man attempts to engage the other in a friendly conversation, but his smile is met with a cold stare. As the old man falters, the large man confronts him openly.*

The purpose of this activity is to explore how comics uses images within panels to evoke emotional reactions and a sense of subtext. Cartoonists can express a “menacing” figure by placing the camera angle below him, as they can express tension by staying tightly focused on the characters’ expressions.
2. Students will be invited to interpret what the cartoonist’s intent was behind a series of comics examples.

The teacher may point out the difference between simply describing a series of events and telling a story. To show one action happening after another describes a narrative, but a cartoonist knows how to use the rules of art to help describe the emotions behind the actions.

Questions the teacher may pose:
- How do we know that the character feels the way we think they do?
- What do you think the author wants us to look at first?
- What does the author not show in the panel?
- How does making an image larger or smaller change the way we feel about it?
- How does looking up at a character change the way we feel about them?
- What does tilting the angle on the scene tell us about the story?
- How can use of color or ink change the mood of the story?
- When is it appropriate to show more of the scene?
- When it is appropriate to close in tight on your subject?

**Extension:**
Students could take an example from this activity and reinterpret it in another mood or tone. All of the moments in the panels would remain the same—the students would change the camera angles, rendering styles, or environment staging to alter the tone of the story. What changes would you make if you wanted it to be a frightening story? What could you change to make it seem sillier? Could you make the tone more neutral?

**Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:**
How does the choice of moment influence the reader’s interpretation of the story? What educational benefits do you think students would get out of participating in this strategy?

Closing in tight on your subject can put you face-to-face (as it were) with the emotions of the character. How does the grey background in the second panel change the way we feel about it with respect to the first panel? Why would we have obscured the character’s mouth?

Director Alfred Hitchcock had something to say about this topic. He described a man walking down the street while reading a newspaper. The man doesn’t see an open manhole in front of him, and the unfortunate fellow falls in.

When we see that moment from a distance, it’s *comical*. But when we close in tight on the man laying at the bottom of the hole we see his bruises and the pain on his face. Suddenly the moment becomes *tragic*.

The degree of distance between audience and subject changes the way the viewer interprets the moments in a story.

In the first panel I closed in tight on the protagonists, so that a reader might sympathize with their emotions. I deliberately chose to show the objects of scrutiny from a distance in the second panel to emphasize their “otherness” from the reader.
Let's take a look at a two-page sequence with a lot of different deliberate moment choices and ask ourselves some questions about it.

The introductory sequence of images consists of Polaroid photos of the old man with various convention attendees. Notice the overlapping word balloons as well. Does this feel like a straightforward interpretation of time? How does the overlapping of the word balloons “sound” to you?

In panel four, we see the old man (Chase Magnanimous) is signing autographs.

Chase is then confronted by a large man in panel seven. Note the choice of camera angle in this shot—it appears to be from Chase’s vantage point. Also note that the man does not speak. How does the choice of view and lack of dialogue make you feel about the moment?

In panel nine, the man does begin to speak. The camera moves in closer to his face, and the background and panel border are removed. Why do you think that is?

Chase’s responses to the man in panels six, eight, and ten are very narrow by comparison to any of the others. Do they feel different because of that?

What can we infer about the man’s emotional state from his expression and dialogue?

The moments chosen in panels six and seven are without dialogue. Do they still communicate? If so, what are they communicating?
In panel one of the next page, we see a side profile of the confrontation. What does this vantage point tell us about the differences between the characters? How are they reacting differently?

In panel two, we focus only on the man’s eyes. How does this moment feel different than the previous or subsequent moments?

The camera angle moves below the man and we get a view between his arms on the table in panel three. Notice how Chase is framed by the man and the dialogue in the shot. Does this express anything specific about the tone of the confrontation?

The change between panels four and five were deliberate. In panel four, we can clearly see the background behind Chase as the man walks away. But in panel five, the background fades away, replaced by a large black fill that fades just above Chase’s head. Also note that the last panel is absent of the grey tones featured in every other panel in this sequence. Is there any specific emotion that is communicated by these changes? Also, how does Chase’s size in the shot affect the way it feels to us?

Questions the teacher may pose to the students:

- Which feels more emotional, a close-up or a wide shot?
- If we only look at a character’s eyes, can we still tell how they feel? Does it make things even more clear?
- Does looking up at a character make them seem different?
- When a character is drawn small, do they feel different?
In this example I chose to establish my scene with an “objective” view of the setting. Could I have invited more reader participation by using a series of smaller moments, focusing on specific details from the characters point of view?

Take these two panels from the same scene, for instance. The first shot is more objective. It certainly gives us a sense of the size of the room and the spacial relationships between the characters. But does it feel personal?

Now look at the second shot. The camera is placed as if you were sitting in one of the desks in the room. How does this feel different than the two previous examples?
This scene is established through fragmented views of different aspects of the scene. How does this feel different than the examples on the previous page? What do we find ourselves focusing on in the narrative?

Notice that the first panel in this sequence gives us a shot delineating a location, but reveals only part of what we might see. Why might an author decide to do that?

In other words, what is the difference between explicit and implicit information in these examples?

Here we have a sequence that ends with a wide shot of the conflict.

Notice that in the second-to-last panel, the camera is tight on the protagonist, and the sound effect is quite prominent.

However, in the final panel the subjects of the action are distant, and the sound effects are much smaller. There’s also no panel border.

How does the final moment differ from the previous moments?
On this page we have seven panels, only three of which feature close-ups of the characters. Panels one and six feature more objective shots showing the location and the characters’ spatial relationships.

But what about panel five? Why would the author choose to make a panel that shows a piece of the environment with no characters at all? How does that moment feel different than the others?

Notice that the final panel features one of the characters without any background or panel border. Why would the author choose to do that?
Fostering prediction is a time-honored technique used in comics storytelling. Many covers of American comic books feature an image that hinges on a moment of uncertainty or drama, inviting the reader to open the book to find out what happens. Points of tension are also often placed at the last panel of a page, concealing the dramatic “reveal” on the next page.

**Purposes:**
1. To demonstrate comics storytelling techniques that foster reader prediction.
2. To continue raising the risk level of the cartooning activities through creation of an image that highlights a moment of tension or uncertainty.
3. To demonstrate to students how comics can reinforce the act of predicting outcomes based on visually presented story data.

**Process:**
1. The teacher engages the students in a brief interactive discussion on the role of prediction using American comic book covers as examples. The teacher will draw attention to how the examples demonstrate a moment of uncertainty or drama, and the students will be invited to predict the outcome of the moment (see pages 20 and 21 for more information and examples).

Questions the teacher may pose to the students:
- Who is performing an action in this image?
- Who is reacting in this image?
- What kind of reactions are the characters demonstrating?
- How do we know who the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) are?
- What do we think will happen after this moment?
- Are any of the characters showing emotions that surprise us? If so, why do you think the author would choose to do that?
- What can’t we tell for sure about what’s happening in the image?
- Does leaving some information out make us more curious about what will happen?
- What are some of the things that characters can say on a cover that make us want to guess what happens next?

2. The students and teacher will decide on a piece of classroom literature for consideration and discuss some of the moments of uncertainty or tension found in the story. Based on that discussion, the students will sketch a “cover” for that story that invites the readers to predict the outcome.

3. If the students are reluctant to draw an entire scene, the teacher may include a brief drawing lesson on “breaking objects into shapes” (see pages 22-26), emphasizing the role of designing a plausible environment over a realistic environment.

For example, if the students were to choose to draw a cover for *Charlotte’s Web*, they might sketch an image featuring Farmer Zuckerman walking away from the pigpen, mentioning how he looks forward to making pork chops out of Wilbur the pig. Wilbur could be looking at the reader with a worried expression. One could, if they wanted to push it further, draw Charlotte in the upper corner of the pen, exclaiming, “I won’t let that happen!”

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**Extensions:**

- Predicting a character. Use cartoon images of two characters to invite a discussion of what students can guess about them based on what they see. Use body language, expression, and costume as basis for consideration. How would these characters feel about one another? How do we know that?

- The students could create a cover demonstrating what they would create as the key point of tension or uncertainty between the characters discussed in the above activity.

**Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:**

Can prediction be fostered in a cover image or story without using a point of tension?

How might the addition of a Cartooning Strategy like “Inviting Prediction” enhance or augment a reading activity in your classroom?

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**Above:** we can easily tell who the protagonists and antagonists are in this image. The boys speed off in a car to escape the monsters and mercenaries behind them. But above them all, two figures are silhouetted by the sun, and they look as if they’re ready to fall right into the middle of the action. Are they heroes or villains? Not only are we invited to guess what will become of the boys in the car, we’re left wondering who these new characters are and what their role in the story may be.

**Right:** Sometimes a moment can be more abstracted, utilizing design principles as well as prediction tricks in order to grab a reader’s attention. In this image we can clearly make out that some calamity is befalling the hero, and we can guess who the villains are by looking at the characters who seem to be pleased at the boy’s predicament. This gives us less information to form a prediction than the example above, but by virtue of being an interesting visual it still invites reader participation.
An example of a comic book cover inviting prediction. The heroes are suspended in a moment of peril, inviting the reader to predict the outcome, or at least how the heroes will escape.
A page placing the point of tension in the last panel. By leaving the seal’s fate unknown at the page’s end, the reader is invited to turn the page to find out what happens next.
In previous activities we’ve explored some strategies and techniques for drawing people taking actions. As we proceed through these later strategies we come to what may be an uncomfortable realization: Cartoonists are charged with the responsibility of drawing nearly everything that exists in order to render a plausible world.

Note that I used the word plausible, not realistic. A plausible world is one that feels consistent with the style that the cartoonist has chosen. Whether we watch cartoon films like Monsters, Inc. or Sleeping Beauty, we never question the validity of the worlds in which the characters exist because the cartoonists have chosen to render their landscapes and props in a design style that is consistent and intentional. It feels right, and that’s all that matters.

Still, there will be situations where a student will express frustration because he or she doesn’t know how to draw a specific kind of car, building, or tree. This can quickly stymie what was previously a fun activity for your students. While it helps to remind a student of the concept of “sloppy drawing,” the following techniques may aid you in helping your students overcome their artistic hurdle and get back to putting ideas on paper:

**Break It Into Shapes**

In the Drawing Narratively activity, we touched on the notion of starting with a stick figure and its through-line. From there a cartoonist often will sketch out the basic shapes that make up the figure (this is often referred to by cartoonists as “the stick-and-bubble method”). This is used by virtually every working cartoonist on nearly every illustration they make. Just as we use the through-line to establish the proper pose and action before putting any time into the final illustration, the stick-and-bubble method allows one to establish proper structure before moving on to the fine details.

This kind of procedural thinking in illustration may be daunting to a young student in your class—after all, half of the fun of sloppy drawing is the immediacy of creating a story with images. As an answer to that, I point to the following points:

- You only have to use it when you’re stuck on a pose. If you can’t get it right, it may be time to back up and sketch the stick figure first.

- It can be a great way to speed up your process. If you don’t get the structure right at the stick-and-bubble stage, you can put an “X” over it and start over without spending too much time on the illustration.
Just as with drawing people, breaking objects and props into geometric shapes is a handy way of finding an approach to illustrating them. Above are some objects one might find in a typical home.

And here are the same objects rendered in a rough approximation of their geometric shapes.

Notice that I did not use a straight-edge or ruler to map out these shapes. Once again, the idea is to encourage sloppy drawing, to get the students less worried about technical precision and more concerned with telling a story. This is not a strategy to render richly-detailed worlds, but as a means to assuage any reluctance on the part of your students to draw their worlds.

Very few (if any) cartoonists actually use rulers to render their stories at the sloppy drawing stage. Most of them sketch their props and backgrounds as you see them above. There’s time enough for technical precision when the story is fully written.
Cars are one of the most difficult things to draw, yet they are part of our everyday lives, and therefore a time will come where you will be asked how to draw them.

The same rules of geometric shapes apply to drawing cars as well. If you can draw a box, you can make a passable attempt at drawing a car.
A reminder about sloppy drawing

At the top you can see the sketched version of one of the pages from my graphic novel, The Front: Rebirth. Notice that none of the lines that make the panel borders, background elements, or props are perfectly ruled or straight. At that stage I was only worried about telling the story, not drawing with astonishing beauty.

Once my story was completed, I then went to the final draft and spent my time doing proper perspective work and using my rulers, compass, and ellipse stencils (a piece of plastic with ellipses cut out) to make the objects crisp and precise, as you can see in the second example.

However, you may notice that the two sequences are nearly identical in content. The only major difference is the final production values.

You can always perfect the artwork later. During these activities our primary concern is creating stories.
If you have some truly advanced students, or if this idea of breaking objects into shapes is appealing to you as a teacher, you can always check out some books on perspective (some will be listed in the resources at the end of the packet). A brief summary of how it works is as follows:

Your picture plane is divided by the “Horizon Line”; that is, literally the horizon as you would see it in real life. As you look at a building from one corner, you will notice that if you extend its roof line all the way to the horizon, and at the same time extend the line where it meets the ground all the way to the horizon, they will converge at what is called the “Vanishing Point”.

In this way cartoonists use geometry to make their worlds and props more naturally precise and believable. But this kind of precision is outside of the scope of these activities—I only point it out as a point to ponder as you experiment with these cartooning strategies.

With proper use of perspective techniques, you can render more believable environments and objects.
Comics is a storytelling medium made up of a collection of static moments, or panels. On their own, panels communicate a little, but something magical happens when you place them in a sequence. Suddenly they become a narrative.

We connect these moments ourselves when scanning over the white space between the panels (known as the “gutter”). When the differences between panels are small, the connection is made effortlessly. The opposite is true when the differences are more distinct. In this way the reading of comics is a fully interactive process between author and audience.

In a very real sense, comics as a medium is entirely dependent on a reader’s ability to infer!

Purposes:
1. To introduce students to the sophisticated array of moment choices in a comics narrative.
2. To continue raising the risk level of the Choice of Moment activity by inviting the students to think more abstractly and creatively in their panel choices.

Process:
1. The teacher will lead the students in a brief discussion about panel transitions, using some comics examples as visual support. A focus here will be on the role of the “gutter” and how one can use it to bridge space and imply time in a comics story (see pages 28-31 for more information and examples).

Questions the teacher may pose to the students:
• How do wider gutters change the way we think of a sequence of panels?
• How does a panel sequence with fewer changes between them feel different than panels with many changes between them?
• When panels are showing many different parts of a setting, how can words help to make the sequence more clear?
• How would one show a sequence of actions without words at all? What types of moments would be best suited for that?
• What would change in a panel sequence if you used no gutters at all, and the panels all “touched” one another, or overlapped?

2. The students will draw the story based on their scene constructed during day one, including one or more of the following alterations:

A change of scene: Show a new aspect of the story that takes place elsewhere through use of moment choices or gutter widths.
A change of pace: Slow the story down or speed it up through changing panel sizes or gutter widths.
A change of view: Tell the same story, focusing on different aspects of the scene besides the subject. Give the reader a fragmented sense of the world in which the character is performing his/her actions.
A change of flow: experiment with ambiguous sequencing, arranging panels in something other than the left-to-right reading convention.
Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:

How could you use this strategy to enhance a classroom reading activity?

Are there pieces of classroom literature with which you could use this strategy to investigate an alternate point of view?

When the changes between panels are small, the connections between them are made effortlessly.
When the differences between panels are more distinct, the reader works more to “fill in the blanks” (signified by the gutters) to create the full narrative. In this example the narrative within the caption boxes assists the reader in making meaning out of the sequence.

When showing a sequence from a first-person perspective, the narrative becomes more fragmented as the reader experiences “pieces” of the world through the character’s eyes. How do you think this sequence would change if you removed the text?
Distinct moment choices coupled with an ambiguous layout adds to the level of inferencing asked of a reader. How does this ambiguity affect your interpretation of time in this scene? How many ways can you read the scene?
The wider gutter between panels five and six was intentional on this page. How does it change the pacing of the reading experience?
Process:
1. The workshop leader will engage the participants in an interactive discussion exploring the potential roles of comics as a teaching tool for literacy and other curriculum-based content. Using both personal experience and visual examples as a basis for the discussion, the workshop leader will encourage the participants to devise some of their own rough “lesson plans,” or a list of activity ideas for classroom integration based on their grade level and expertise.

The participants may be assigned to groups related to their respective grade levels and develop their classroom integration ideas as a team.

2. The participants will be encouraged to find adaptations and extensions of the activities explored throughout the workshop.

The workshop leader may remind the participants of these concepts as they develop their activities:
• What will the student be learning from the activity?
• What specific aspect of comics would best service the learning objective?
• Will the activity focus on a narrative as a whole?
• Will the activity focus on a specific aspect of narrative? (character, plot, drama)
• Can the activity be used to teach a subject besides literature?

3. When finished, the participants will share their rough lesson plans with the group for further discussion and brainstorming.

Purposes:
1. To share with the participants the workshop leader’s first-hand experiences using comics in a classroom environment.
2. To provide closure to the event in the form of a meta discussion of the comics principles explored.

Reflecting on the Cartooning Strategy:
How could you work with an art instructor to create a comics lesson plan that speaks to both art and reading standards?

Can a student have an expansive “visual vocabulary” yet a limited verbal one? If so, how could you use the previous Cartooning Strategies to address this?

In my own experiences in the classroom, I’ve found that students have a readiness to play with sophisticated concepts in their stories. To the left is an example of what Scott McCloud, author of Understanding Comics, calls an “Interdependent” word/picture partnership. The words and the picture depend on one another to complete the narrative.
An example of a cartooning lesson plan I’ve used in the classroom. By thinking about a character’s opposite, we’re engaging in an analysis of the character’s traits. I also invite them to create an emotional or a physical opposite, which nets some interesting results from the students. You can try this exercise yourself, using characters from classroom literature or from your students’ favorite TV shows (Spongebob, Hannah Montana, etc.).

**ANTI-ME!**

**CAN YOU DRAW THE OPPOSITE OF THESE CHARACTERS?**
**THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT THEM ON THE **INSIDE** (EMOTIONAL) AS WELL AS WHAT YOU SEE ON THE **OUTSIDE** (PHYSICAL).**
It may be difficult to know what to look for when reviewing a student’s work after a comics activity. This chart is meant to help shine a light on some of the things we cartoonists look for in exemplary work.

**Please Note:** A consistent use of one technique over an occasional use of another does not necessarily indicate a weakness. This is a general list of cartooning skills to look for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PANEL SIZE</th>
<th>PANEL SEQUENCE</th>
<th>PANEL CONTENTS</th>
<th>PANEL EXPRESSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LARGER panel sizes to show dramatic emphasis.</td>
<td>Panels arranged in a logical sequence of events.</td>
<td>Characters express an action or emotion.</td>
<td>Use of various panel shapes for intentional storytelling purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LARGER panel sizes to show “longer” moments in time.</td>
<td>Panels demonstrate a sequence of moments that deliver an action or series of actions.</td>
<td>Moments are included that show a setting.</td>
<td>Use of various panel line types (jagged, bold, colored, or no line at all) for intentional storytelling purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LARGER panel sizes to deliver more “story data” (setting, character placement, specific story details).</td>
<td>Panels follow an overall “composition” on the page. (one can clearly follow the actions from one panel to the other).</td>
<td>Use of moments that rely on text as well as illustration to deliver the overall scene.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMALLER panel sizes to show decreased emphasis.</td>
<td>Panels defy conventional reading directionality to create alternate paths in the narrative.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMALLER panel sizes to show “shorter” moments in time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Variety of Moments**

- Moments used to describe a setting.
- Moments used to visually/narratively describe a character’s differences from other characters.
- Moments used to express a character’s inner life (facial expression, gesture, expressive lines or icons).

**Camera Angle**

- A variety of visual vantage points across multiple panels to give the reader a wider view of the “scene”.
- A willingness on the part of the cartoonist to attempt drawing objects from multiple angles.
- A variety of visual vantage points to express a sense of mood or tone.

**Expressive Moments**

- The use of close-ups for dramatic effect.
- The use of wide vistas for expressive effect.
- Multiple panels expressing the same moment in time (aspect-to-aspect panels).
As of yet, comics does not have a universal ratings system like movies or television. So please be judicious when selecting comics for use in the classroom. Ask your local comics store owner or bookseller if the comic is appropriate for the grade level you teach. The following books listed are appropriate for grades three through seven.

**Power Pack: Day One Digest** by Fred Van Lente, Gurihiru, and Colleen Coover

Alex, Julie, Jack, and Katie Power are just four regular kids - but in twenty-four hours, they’re going to have to escape alien abduction, learn how to use their bizarre new super powers, rescue their parents from an intergalactic tyrant, and save Earth from total destruction!

**The Baby-Sitters Club: Kristy’s Great Idea** by Ann M. Martin and Raina Telgemeier

The graphic novel version of the popular series. This first volume chronicles how the Baby-Sitters Club was formed, focusing on the girls’ friendships and some of their amusing jobs. Subplots include Kristy’s gradual acceptance of her mother’s boyfriend and their eventual engagement and Stacy’s medical problem.

**nemu*nemu, Volume One** by Audra Furuichi and Scott Yoshinaga

Anise and Kana have shared a lot of adventures together, but nothing quite like this! Hilarity ensues when Anpan and Nemu, two walking, talking plushy pups, drop in on their new owners and turn their world upside down! Also available as a free webcomic at www.nemu-nemu.com

**American Born Chinese**, by Gene Yang

When his family moves to a new neighborhood, he suddenly finds that he’s the only Chinese-American student at his school. Jocks and bullies pick on him constantly, and he has hardly any friends. Then, to make matters worse, he falls in love with an all-American girl...

Born to rule over all the monkeys in the world, the story of the Monkey King is one of the oldest and greatest Chinese fables. Adored by his subjects, master of the arts of kung-fu, he is the most powerful monkey on earth. But the Monkey King doesn’t want to be a monkey. He wants to be hailed as a god...

Chin-Kee is the ultimate negative Chinese stereotype, and he’s ruining his cousin Danny’s life. Danny’s a basketball player, a popular kid at school, but every year Chin-Kee comes to visit, and every year Danny has to transfer to a new school to escape the shame. This year, though, things quickly go from bad to worse...

These three apparently unrelated tales come together with an unexpected twist, in a modern fable that is hilarious, poignant, and action-packed.
**Sardine in Outer Space** by Emmanuel Guibert, illustrated by Joann Sfar

In the goofy space adventures of a little girl called Sardine, encounters aren’t always friendly: weird creatures, cosmic squids, masters of the universe, talking clouds, and evil beings abound. In this volume of twelve stories, Supermuscleman, the chief executive dictator of the universe, is on a mission to make all the galaxy’s kids behave. Sardine must enlist the help of her cousin Lou and her pirate uncle, the gruff Captain Yellow Shoulder, to outwit him and his evil plans.

The first book in an exciting new series by two of France’s most talented comics authors, Sardine is a feast for the imagination of young readers. Emmanuel Guibert, an outstanding artist and graphic storyteller, takes a turn on the script, while Joann Sfar illuminates the writing with rambunctious, high-energy artwork.

**Robot Dreams** by Sara Varon

Dog + Robot = Best Friends Forever

When dog gets lonely, he builds himself a friend from a mail-order robot kit. Soon the two are happily sharing movies, popcorn, and peaceful evenings until a summer day’s swim leaves robot rusted and immobile. Robot Dreams chronicles the next year: the dog’s desperate search for new friends and the robot’s dreams—first from the beach, then from the junkyard—of his lost friend, the dog.

Without words, Sara Varon’s simple, moving, and instantly endearing artwork tells us all a story of friendship, loneliness, and forgiveness.

**Little Vampire** by Joann Sfar

Little Vampire and his friend Michael are the stars of these three stories about the things kids care about—like bullying, friendship, and being kind to animals — seasoned with a dose of supernatural adventure. Insightful and inventive, author/illustrator Joann Sfar brings Little Vampire and Michael’s fantastical world to life, feeding the imagination of young readers with stories that resonate with emotional truth.

**Kaput and Zösky**, by Lewis Trondheim

Kaput and Zösky are the most mayhem-inducing, the most screams-of-terror-provoking, the most rotten, ruthless aliens in the entire galaxy. And they have the biggest weapons, too!

So why can’t they ever be the first across the finish line? They’re even losing at hopscotch!

On one planet the natives surrender to Kaput and Zösky without a fight — where’s the fun in that? On another, Kaput finds that he’s won the lottery — and the planet comes along with it! He doesn’t even have to shoot anyone! Mayhem and hilarity abound in these thirteen stories told with bright, cartoony art by Lewis Trondheim.
William Tell: One Against an Empire: A Swiss Legend by Paul D. Storrie, illustrated by Thomas Yeates

He wanted nothing more than to live in peace, until a petty tyrant forced him into a cruel choice: Swiss hunter William Tell is famous for his great skill with a crossbow. A mild-mannered husband and father, he just wants a quiet life for his family. Yet his homeland’s brutal foreign rulers are making such an existence impossible. Then, one day, a ruthless official forces Tell into a terrible choice: Shoot an apple off his son’s head—or be killed along with his son. Will he accept this awful challenge?

Hercules: The Twelve Labors: A Greek Myth by Paul D. Storrie, illustrated by Steve Kurth

Famous for his superhuman strength, Hercules is the most popular hero in Greek mythology. The son of Zeus—king of the gods—and a mortal mother, Hercules faces the wrath of Zeus’s wife Hera, who resents her illegitimate stepson and vows to bring him misery. With her magical powers, she tricks Hercules into performing a series of twelve seemingly impossible labors, each one a test of his strength, courage, cunning, and fighting skill. Is Hercules strong enough to foil her scheme? For this exciting retelling of the twelve labors, author Paul Storrie consulted the classic work The Age of Fable (1859), by American Thomas Bulfinch, and Edith Hamilton’s Mythology (1942), both of which are considered the best resources about on ancient myths and legends. Artist Steve Kurth also relied on historical research to accurately bring to life the world of ancient Greece.

Amaterasu: Return of the Sun: A Japanese Myth by Paul D. Storrie, illustrated by Ron Randall

This graphic novel tells the story of Amaterasu, the Japanese Shinto goddess of the sun. Amaterasu’s parents create the first eight islands of Japan. Amaterasu’s father later puts his children in charge of parts of the natural world. Beautiful and kindly Amaterasu is made the goddess of the sun. But her brother, Susano, god of the sea and storms, is jealous of his sister’s position. In fear of Susano’s temper, Amaterasu hides in a cave, plunging the world into darkness. The other gods and goddesses must come up with a clever plan to lure Amaterasu from her hiding place and restore order to the world.

Beowulf: Monster Slayer: A British Legend, by Paul D. Storrie, illustrated by Ron Randall

Beowulf is a brave and mighty warrior, known to have the strength of thirty men. At home in Geatland, Beowulf hears about the terrible troubles of his father’s friend, Hrothgar, the king of the Danes. Hrothgar’s land is plagued by Grendel, a vicious monster who attacks the Danes by night. Beowulf sets sail to aid Hrothgar and the Danes. But is Beowulf strong enough to slay the monstrous Grendel? And even if he succeeds, what other dangers lie ahead for the warrior-hero?

Theseus: Battling the Minotaur: A Greek Myth, by Jeff Limke, illustrated by John McCrea

Raised by his mother and tutor, young Theseus finally learns the truth of his birth: he is the son of King Aegeus, ruler of Athens. Armed with his father’s shield, he sets out to claim his birthright and face his greatest challenge—the Minotaur, a savage beast who is half-man, half-bull. To defeat the Minotaur, Theseus must enter the Labyrinth, a bewildering maze from which no one has ever escaped alive. Will Theseus succeed in his quest? Or will he suffer the fate of the Minotaur’s many other victims?
If you’re curious about learning more about what makes comics tick, or if you would like to more effectively integrate comics into your classroom, these books may prove to be invaluable resources:

*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, by Scott McCloud

*Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*, by Scott McCloud

*Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: Making Comics: Manga, Graphic Novels, and Beyond*,
by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden

*Comics and Sequential Art*, by Will Eisner
As you experiment with these strategies, if you need help, advice, or encouragement, please don’t hesitate to contact me at:

**JERZYDROZD@GMAIL.COM**

or visit my website at:

**COMICSAREGREAT.COM**

I also co-host a podcast where we explore these strategies and other comics topics. You can download and listen to the show for free at:

**KIDSCOMICSREVOLUTION.COM**

**BEST OF LUCK!**

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