

# A COMIC LIFE...

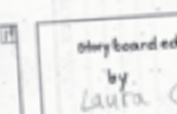
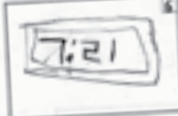
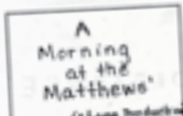


■ by Cindy Matthews

## 10 - Shot Lesson

### TASK

1. View the bank of photos on the screen.
2. Considering the choices of photos, construct a story idea that can be told with 10 of the photos.
3. Record the sequence of the photos that you'd use by printing a number in the box at the top right of each frame. The number comes from the shot order on the screen.
4. Under each frame write down what type of camera shot it is.
5. Sketch the photos in the frames.
6. Tell your story to a friend. \* How do the camera shots work in sequence to tell your story?



INSTRUCTIONAL COMICS WERE USED IN MID-1900S PAMPHLETS AND CATALOGUES. USING VISUAL IMAGERY AND COMIC LIFE SOFTWARE TO CREATE PROCEDURAL WRITING TEXTS IS AN ENGAGING WAY FOR STUDENTS TO DEMONSTRATE SCIENTIFIC AND MATHEMATICAL UNDERSTANDINGS.

As a storytelling medium, comics have come of age in the last few decades. With an enduring history in North America as a venue for superhero quests, they have entertained many a young reader. When Will Eisner published *A Contract with God* in 1978, comics took a step forward and the graphic novel was born.

Graphic novels have become *the* obsessive read for our students. They are enthusiastic about the easier to read ones such as *Sardine* and *Baby-mouse Queen of the World*, and about the meticulously researched Age of Bronze series. There's something for everyone: from girls' favourites such as *Amelia Rules!* to the ever popular Bone series to those that are popular with teens, like *Re-Gifters* and *Full Metal Alchemist*.

Many titles lend themselves to fruitful literature circle conversations. The cross-cultural explorations of *American Born Chinese* and *The Arrival* are two fine examples. The more didactic series such as *Phonics Comics* and the *Timeline* sets can serve as updated teaching tools. *Phonics Comics* is a line of phonetically based easy-readers designed as comic books. The *Timeline* titles draw readers into curriculum-linked historical stories. (They come with teacher's guides.) In-depth curricular connections are possible with powerful historical fiction like *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*.

The proliferation of this literary form and the growing collections of graphic narrative titles in our classrooms and school libraries are tangible evidence of the joy students' take from reading and of their engagement with this form of expression. Integrating technology with the study of comics, using software like *Comic Life*, can breathe new life into learning.<sup>1</sup>

Photos: Johanna Brand



### INTRODUCING COMIC LIFE SOFTWARE

TO HELP STUDENTS VISUALIZE THE FINAL PRODUCTS THEY WILL CREATE USING THE COMIC LIFE SOFTWARE, SHARE SOME SAMPLE PIECES FROM THE GALLERY AT [PLASQ.COM](http://PLASQ.COM) OR FROM THOSE SHOWN IN CHARLES THACKER'S ARTICLE.

FOLLOW UP WITH MINI-LESSONS TO MODEL THE DEVELOPMENT OF TWO COMIC PAGES, USING THE SOFTWARE, THE EASY-TO-USE HELP MENU, AND A SAMPLE PHOTO BANK (10-12 PHOTOS IN .JPG FORMAT) OF A SIMPLE SUBJECT. I USED PHOTOS OF MY FAMILY GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL AND WORK ONE MORNING. I HAD STUDENTS CREATE A STORYBOARD (SEE SAMPLE ON PAGE 13) USING THE PHOTOS AND THEN I CREATED THE COMIC WHILE THE STUDENTS WATCHED ON THE PROJECTION SCREEN.

HAVING LOADED THE SAME PHOTOS ON EACH OF THE STUDENTS' COMPUTERS, I LET THEM EXPLORE THE SOFTWARE AS I SUPPORTED THEM THROUGH THIS GUIDED CREATION. ONCE THEY HAD CREATED VISUALS, I PROMPTED THEM TO ADD DIALOGUE. AS A REFLECTION PIECE, I ENGAGED THEM IN A PEER REVIEW OF THEIR STORY SCRIPTS, HAVING THEM USE THEIR NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONVENTIONS.



o capitalize on students' engagement with graphic novels, let's take a look at how to develop a comics unit as part of teaching media literacy. Here is a list of learning activities to support your students' reading and deconstruction of the visual language of comics. As the students hone their visual literacy skills, they will begin to understand what Will Eisner calls the "grammar of sequential art."<sup>2</sup>

1. Begin with a comparison of magazine cartoons, comics, and graphic novels. Focus on the basic conventions: fonts, images, drawing style, inking for outline, icons, panels, colour or black and white design, dialogue, action, and characters.
2. Be explicit with the vocabulary of the genre, such as *gutter* and *panel-to-panel transitions*.<sup>3</sup>
3. Have students review familiar graphic novels to identify examples of the conventions.
4. As a think-pair-share activity, have the students record (draw and label) examples of font (for titles and sound effects), panel shapes, word bubbles (e.g., whisper = dash lines, speech bubble, thought bubble, etc.), and captions, also known as narrative (text) boxes.
5. Discuss the different kinds and uses of word bubble tails (sharp angle for terse dialogue, slight curve for calm voice, extended for far-away or offstage dialogue), as they relate to character development and mood.
6. To explore the text and production conventions of the genre, lead more advanced students to study page layout and panel transitions. Highlight the concept of "the power of suggestion" that "lies in the gutter."
7. Discuss "the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible"<sup>4</sup> in panel design and illustration choice as they relate to story development.
8. Have students review familiar graphic novels to identify samples of the transitions.

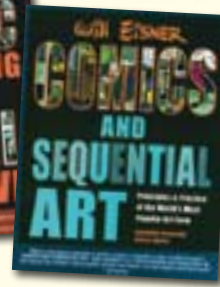
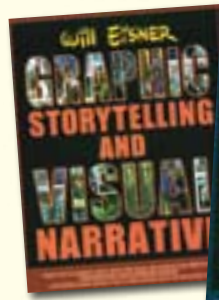
**A SIDELINE MEDIA LITERACY LESSON CAN FOCUS ON THE SKILL OF CREATING EFFECTIVE CAMERA SHOTS AND USING CAMERA ANGLES. THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES ARE HELPFUL:**

[MEDIACOLLEGE.COM/VIDEO/SHOTS](http://MEDIACOLLEGE.COM/VIDEO/SHOTS); [ACCAD.OSU.EDU/MIDORI/MATERIALS/CAMERA.HTML](http://ACCAD.OSU.EDU/MIDORI/MATERIALS/CAMERA.HTML); [MEDIAKNOWALL.COM/CAMANGLES.HTML](http://MEDIAKNOWALL.COM/CAMANGLES.HTML)

FOR STUDENT HANDOUTS USE THE STICK FIGURE ILLUSTRATIONS FOUND AT [NEWI.AC.UK/ENGLISHRESOURCES/WORKUNITS/K54/MEDIA/CAMSHOTS.HTML](http://NEWI.AC.UK/ENGLISHRESOURCES/WORKUNITS/K54/MEDIA/CAMSHOTS.HTML)

### TEACHER RESOURCES

FOR THE UNINITIATED THERE ARE GOOD RESOURCES BOTH IN HARD COPY AND ONLINE. CHARLES THACKER PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW AND A STEP-BY-STEP INTRODUCTION TO COMIC LIFE SOFTWARE AT [MACINSTRUCT.COM/NODE/169](http://MACINSTRUCT.COM/NODE/169). SCOTT MCCLLOUD'S [UNDERSTANDING COMICS](#) IS A TEXTBOOK WRITTEN IN COMIC BOOK STYLE.



### WRITING STORIES FOR COMICS

To lead into writing for comics, share with the students the secret of successful storytelling: Show, Don't Tell. Following this dictum requires succinct use of text.

Students start with a writing plan. As a story outline, it may begin with sketches to visualize the characters and setting and/or a story map to list aspects of the setting, characters, plot, problem, and resolution. This is the springboard for a prose summary of the storyline. Once they have drafted their writing plan, the students write a script with dialogue for their character(s) and captions for narration. Following the usual steps in the writing process, the students have their work peer-edited, revise it, and have it approved by the teacher.

Next students have to decide on the visuals they will use. Younger students may choose to draw pictures or create scenes with toys such as Lego, stuffed animals, or action figures. You can take simple shots of these displays with a digital camera and load them into a photo bank. Or you can scan the images they draw on paper. If students are not using computers, you can print these out for them.

Students can also use photos they have taken with a digital camera. They can use the school's digital camera, bring their own cameras to school, or bring in a file from home on a USB memory stick or CD. They will need around 20 photos for their photo bank. Remind them to consider the mood of their story, which should inform their decisions when taking photos. This leads to the "10-Shot Lesson"<sup>5</sup>: students select 10 usable photos to tell their story or reflect the mood of a topic. With background lessons on basic photography skills, students can make informed decisions for their photo selections (see sidebar).

Students storyboard their tale by sketching images of the 10 selected photos, in sequence, and noting the dialogue from their scripts. The storyboard template is an organizational tool. You can find many examples online. I use a simple six-square template, with three lines below each box. These serve as a way to sequence the visuals and match the dialogue. The sketches are quick stick-figure representations of the photo image, just to capture the visual. Ask the students to label each sketch as to the camera shot and angle, using their understandings from the photography lesson.

**USE COMIC LIFE TO HELP BREAK DOWN COMPLEX IDEAS AND TO CREATE ENTERTAINING CONTENT FOR MATERIAL THAT CAN SOMETIMES BE DULL FOR STUDENTS. FOR EXAMPLE:**

- ▶ TIMELINES (HISTORY, EVENTS, SEQUENCES)
- ▶ HISTORICAL FIGURES (BACKGROUND HISTORY, LIFE OF)
- ▶ INSTRUCTIONS (STEP BY STEP, DETAILS, ILLUSTRATIONS, EASY TO FOLLOW)
- ▶ DIALOGUE, PUNCTUATION
- ▶ CHARACTER ANALYSIS
- ▶ PLOT ANALYSIS
- ▶ STORYTELLING
- ▶ PRE-WRITING TOOL
- ▶ POST-READING TOOL
- ▶ TEACHING ONOMATOPOEIA (USING LETTERING TOOL?)

**HAVE STUDENTS LOOK AT HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF VISUAL NARRATIVES AND SEQUENTIAL ART, IN TAPESTRIES, FRIEZES, AND HIEROGLYPHICS. THESE RECORDINGS OF ANCIENT EVENTS USED COMMONLY RECOGNIZED SYMBOLS TO CONVEY A MESSAGE AND ESTABLISH MYTHOLOGIES.**

This storyboard can serve as a formative assessment tool, particularly in a teacher-student writing conference.

With their storyboards in hand, the students are ready to create the final version of their own comics or graphic novels. If they are working on paper, print out copies of different panel layout pages that you can get from a 30-day trial version of Comic Life at *plasq.com*. Students draw their images or cut out and glue their photos into the panels. They create speech bubbles and lettering, cut them out and glue them on as another layer. This production method gives students a hands-on opportunity to display their artistry. School visits by comic artists like Chad Solomon, author of *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws*,<sup>6</sup> can inspire confidence in drawing and design.

Students can create their comics digitally if they have access to a computer lab. I began our earliest versions with Kid Pix, software licensed through

the Ministry of Education. The graphics for backgrounds and stamps lend themselves well to the comics medium. The downside is that you have to create the speech bubbles manually with the draw tool. Also, the individual drawings do not fit into a panel layout page. Connecting them with the slideshow feature creates something more like a cartoon than a comic.

I've found that Comic Life is just the right software. The wide range of panel choices, layouts, lettering, and speech bubbles opens up the graphic possibilities. It is a great forum to set free students' creativity and critical thinking. If possible, at this point of the unit I would recommend sending the students to the computer to upload their photos and write their stories in Comic Life. ♥

**NOTES**

1. Charles Thacker, "How to Use Comic Life in the Classroom." MacInstruct TechEd, Technology in Education, *macinstruct.com/node/69*.
2. Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form*. Paramus, NJ: Poorhouse Press, 1985.
3. For explanations of these and other terms common to the genre, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.
4. McCloud, p.92
5. Lesson design adapted and used with permission of Jack Hammond, teacher, Stouffville District Secondary School, York Region District School Board.
6. Chad Solomon and Christopher Meyer, *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws, The Sugar Bush*. Edmonton: Lone Pine Publishing, 2006. Available at *lonepinepublishing.com*.
7. Thacker, "How to Use Comic Life in the Classroom."



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