

Introduction to Comics Art: Gateway to Visual Storytelling

A Semester's Lesson Plan

This class is meant to serve as a basic introduction to the elements of visual storytelling. Depending on the school and what best suits its curriculum, this class could be offered as an art studio class, an illustration course, part of a writing program or within a film and video department. If a school is only looking to offer one studio class in comics, an Intro class like this could easily serve as that class.

I taught at a school that had a sequential art (i.e. comics) program and this course served as an introduction to many of the concepts and skills that would be explored in greater detail in subsequent classes.

I've always enjoyed teaching this Intro class. For many students this was their first class in the subject and they were extremely open and enthusiastic regarding new concepts and approaches. We have all been continually exposed to pictorial storytelling from a very early age through television, movies, and now digital games and computers. Much thought goes into how the succession of images dance across our eyes to form narratives, but little of this process is studied in higher education using the same formal vocabulary that artists and writers employ.

As a cartoonist, I see comics as a "gateway" medium to explore visual narrative. I always get a few hardcore comics enthusiasts in each class who are disappointed that we aren't studying the evolution of the superhero or some such comics-based ephemera. Intro to Comics Art is not a survey class but a studio class; its purpose is to educate not only cartoonists but anyone interested in visual narratives. Although I teach this class using comics as a starting point, many of the lessons are pertinent to other visual disciplines as well. Whether the student would like someday to create a children's book, a film, or a written script for television/film, this class should help.

A few things that should be noted:

- It is difficult to translate what happens in a classroom onto paper. This lesson plan only serves as a general guide. I've never taught this class the same way twice. Some classes require more study guides and detailed demos than others. Which semester I'm teaching, the percentage of various majors, and ultimately, the unique group of students that make up the class are variables that determine how this material is taught.
- Since comics is such a visually driven medium, drawing is often the skill most emphasized. Without a doubt being able to draw well is a blessing but sometimes during the learning process it can become a hindrance. Often young cartoonists get so fixated on their drawing that they fail to see the bigger picture (pun intended). The drawing skills the students bring to the classroom range from

incredible to horrific. The challenge, of course, is to provide assignments and exercises that engage the more advanced students without frustrating the less apt. Stressing communication over draftsmanship helps serve that purpose.

- In the Intro to Comics Art, I try also in the class to avoid assignments where students get stuck on "the idea phase." If I am asking them to tell a story visually, I'll provide them with one (like a simple fable or folk tale) which they can choose to elaborate on or not. Too often a student's excuse for not working on an assignment is, "I couldn't think of an idea."

One: Character Design/Iconic Representation

In-class Exercise:

In the first class I'll ask the class what skills go into making a comic and then write them on the blackboard.

Exercise Objectives:

I want to give the students a realistic sense of all the different skills that a cartoonist must synthesize in order to be successful. Students become very humbled throughout the semester. They have lofty goals of completing a 300-page graphic novel but can not yet string together a page of coherent panels. From the very beginning I attempt to ground them with realistic expectations (and in doing so reduce some pressure).

Most commercial comics are broken down into tasks and these are the first answers I receive: penciling, inking, writing, coloring, lettering. We talk about how cartoonists must stage, costume and often light panels. They must research a story and know how to effectively gather visual reference. They must be competent graphic designers, arranging the various elements (word balloons, captions, figures, environments) in each panel for clarity and desired effect (not to mention knowing something about fonts and designing book covers).

Students rarely mention editing and I always emphasize this as one of the most important skills to develop-the ability to rework, revise, and persevere. Most good comics read effortlessly; images reduced to their essence seem as if they dripped off a nib and onto the page. Most great cartoonists have honed an idiosyncratic visual language, where every image suggests a lot more than that what is actually on the page. The cartoonist Chris Ware stated it this way, "Comics are a sort of piano roll, or sheet music, of the rhythm of life, flattened out on a page 'played' with one's eyes."

When looking at the list of skills on the blackboard, I try to stress to my students that to become merely proficient in synthesizing all of them is not something that can be done in ten or fifteen weeks. It takes years.

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Homework:

- Read through chapter two of *Understanding Comics*.
- Design two characters that could be featured in your upcoming comic book. These characters should be more or less rendered "realistically."
- Each character should be shown in side view, front view, and rear view.
- The two characters should be drawn in proportion to one another.
- Include four face shots: happy, angry, surprised, and bashful/shy.
- Repeat above but redesign your characters in a highly iconic style.

Assignment Objectives:

This assignment gives me an opportunity to assess each student's skill level. Many students are so locked into a "style" (to put it generously) that they can not really draw yet. This assignment requires them to show range in their drawings.

In my experience, 99% of the students have drawn repeatedly some sort of character that reflects their interests and the type of narratives they want to tell. This is useful information for a teacher, a way to know students and their interests better.

Because of their familiarity with these repeatedly drawn characters, students approach this assignment with a certain degree of confidence. They begin with some positive momentum as they move forward, which is a benefit, since the assignments get more challenging as the class progresses.

Finally, facial expressions are a good example of how the slightest variations in a single line can result in wildly varying results. Learning that every line can make a huge difference sometimes steers young artists away from covering their drawings with marks they believe show "energy" or "style."

The *Understanding Comics* readings help prepare the students for the following assignment.

Handouts:

Model sheets from animation studios. One model sheet, from Disney's *Aladin* illustrates how each character is broken down into a basic shape.

In-Class Exercise:

I tack a long string across the wall and hand each student a panel from a comic. The comics vary from very iconic (Ziggy) to highly rendered (Prince Valiant). I also include fumettis (photo comics), superhero comics, *MAUS*, various Manga, Disney, *Archie*, etc.

One end of the string is the iconic pole of the spectrum, the other end realism. The students, one by one, tack their panels somewhere along the string. The next student is allowed to reorder any of the panels placed prior to their turn.

Exercise Objectives:

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When the last panel is placed we can then see what comics are bunched up where, or to put it another way, what styles of cartooning seem to be often employed for specific genres of cartooning. Usually the heroic stories are highly detailed and humor is spare iconic. Not only is the first impression a comic makes upon a reader visual, but a comic's "look" is, in varying degree, its content.

We discuss the exceptions to these rules and how one's style drawing determines how a story will be perceived. Most students are under the false notion that you draw a specific way and that's that. By the end of this exercise they have learned that style can be a conscious choice that can vary based upon the needs of the story being told and of the artist.

This exercise is also a way to actively discuss some of the concepts of chapter two of *Understanding Comics*.

Two: Drawing Vs Design

In-class Exercise:

Early in the semester I ask the students to wear to class shoes with laces. I then ask them to create a one-page comic, using no words, that explains to a reader how to tie a shoelace. I ask them to imagine giving their comic to an alien who speaks no earth language (but needs its laces tied!).

Assignment Objectives:

There is something incredibly humbling about this assignment. It makes students very aware that knowing how to do something is very different from being able to draw it.

The students' drawings usually succeed or fail, with little in between. The students who fail tend to fail miserably. They are more concerned with trying to make an interesting drawing. They include all sorts of extraneous information, employ all kinds of distracting panel configurations, and often need to get their "character" involved.

The students who succeed do so because they think like graphic designers. They zero in on the information that needs to be conveyed and make sure that it is front and center.

As the old saying goes, it is okay to decorate construction but it is not okay to construct decoration. Again, I am de-emphasizing drawing and emphasizing graphic design.

A cartoonist does not have to draw well to be successful. Many of the comic strips that appear in the daily newspapers are proof of that. One may argue that the drawings of Cathy Guisewite or Scott Adams are charming or quirky, but few would attest to their rendering skills. Drawings don't have to be rendered well to succeed; they have to be clear.

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This assignment also demonstrates how difficult it is to convey information visually even when you have a clear objective. *Without* a clear sense of where you are going, the task is that much harder. Many students want to draw their comics (or shoot their videos) before they have any sense of their objectives, a recipe for frustration.

Three: Comic Strips

In-Class Exercise:

Over the course of a week, I save the comics section from the local newspaper. I hand each student five examples from the same comic strip (*Wizard of ID*, *Dilbert*, *Cathy*, *Fox Trot* etc.)

During class time they study the strip and answer the following questions:

What are the dimensions of the strip? How many panels does an average strip contain? How many words does the average strip contain? How many words per panel? Do the strips have a recurring rhythm to them? How are the characters framed? Full body? Head and shoulders? What shapes are the word balloons? Does the lettering vary at all? If so, what determines the variations? Are the borders hand drawn or ruled? Does the cartoonist ever abandon the border? Under what circumstances? What panel number within the strip? How wide are the gutters? How are solid blacks spotted? How are backgrounds depicted and with what frequency? What is the premise of the strip? Where does the humor stem from? Is there a main character? What is the main character's defining personality trait? Does more than one character share the spotlight? If so what is his/her relationship to the main character?

Using the answers to the questionnaire, I ask the students to create a comic strip in the same format about a first-quarter freshman. The strip should be stylistically identical to the one studied.

Assignment Objectives:

This assignment allows students to become familiar with the basic vocabulary of comics by identifying its formal elements. As a teacher I learned to take nothing for granted. Many would-be cartoonists don't seem to know what a gutter is or the difference between a word balloon and a thought balloon. Although this assignment is quite rigid, it forces the student to examine solely the formal elements of a comic to understand its nuts and bolts. This assignment also requires the use of pen and ink, but I wait till later in the semester to really get into that.

During class time I introduce the idea of reproduction-drawing larger with the knowledge that the artwork will be reproduced. I may take several comic strips and blow them up 200% so students can see how thick the lines get and how wide the gutters become.

I'll also demonstrate how to use an Ames lettering guide and how to use a reduction wheel. Again, I never take anything for granted and I show how to use a drawing board, T-square and triangles to make right angles.

Handouts:

Four: Storytelling Primer

In-class Presentation:

I show slides of Grahme Chaffe's *Big Wheels*. I show three two-page vignettes—first without the words, then with. Without any words Chaffe creates rich and precise sketches of people, relationships and environments.

For a cartoonist one of the constant challenges is to convey a certain amount of information in a limited amount of space. Only so many words will fit into any given panel, only so many visual details can be focused on at once. When a cartoonist becomes adept at visual storytelling, dialogue and written narrative make the story richer and more complex, rather than reiterate what's in the drawing.

The work of Ben Katchor is a great example of a comics "image track" and "word track" operating in different orbits. The tension and resolution of these two orbits is one of the reasons Katchor's work is so interesting.

For a recent project, I read a lot of Japanese baseball comics. From the images alone I was able to absorb most of the narrative from subtle check swings to dramatic strikeouts. Even off-the-field action, blooming romances and failed investments, were clearly told. These were exciting stories even though I couldn't read a word of it. Images are a universal language.

Comics for adolescents are full of hyperbole?what is said in the text is exactly what is happening in the panel. "I will pull you from this burning rocket!" proclaims the masked man as he pulls a woman from a burning rocket. This kind of overstatement has led to the general assumption that comics are not capable of more subtle and nuanced work. I think most commercial cartoonists are just not skilled enough to tell a story in a purely visual manner. Pantomime comics are the most demanding of forms. Cartoonists like Jim Woodring, Jason, and Fabio are masters of pantomime and can be shown and discussed as well.

Reading:

On Directing Film by David Mamet.

This is a slim but highly informative volume that is as appropriate for a cartoonist as it is for a filmmaker. Mamet discusses, among other things, how a story is often told in disparate images. An example: "I'm sitting at a bus stop. There is a full moon. A woman yells from a window from across the street. A fire alarm is pulled." This beginning of a story amounts to a shot list. This juxtaposition of images moves the narrative forward and gets the reader interested in what happens next.

Using cuts allows readers to make their own associations between each panel, and

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become more fully invested in the story. Writing clearly with pictures is at the heart of comics.

You can try to show frustration by rendering a frustrated expression in a single panel. But to differentiate between frustration, anxiety, or fear is difficult. Students try to do it in one shot because they feel it is the least time-consuming solution and perhaps the most obvious. However showing frustration in a series of shots may be more effective: 1) the garbage can overflowing with crumpled paper 2) an overflowing ashtray 3) hands atop a typewriter.

Additional Reading:

Understanding Comics, chapters 3 and 4

Homework Assignment:

This exercise would be equally appropriate for an introduction to filmmaking or video class.

Show the following sequence of events using only pictures:

You wake up and realize you have overslept and are now late for class. You rush out of your home towards school only to discover that it's Sunday.

- Each image should be on its own 6" x 6" square drawn on 8.5" x 11" copier paper.
- Finished artwork should be done with a Sharpie fine point marker.
- Stick figures are fine as long as the reader can discern what is happening in any given panel. This exercise is not about drawing; it is about storytelling.
- Minimum six panels. No maximum.

This assignment is essentially a pantomime story that requires the student to tell a simple (yet challenging) story using only pictures. During the critique, the process of editing becomes apparent.

Assignment Objectives:

The challenges here are obvious. How does the cartoonist late and rush in purely visual terms? How does the reader tell the protagonist is a student? That it is Sunday?

I ask only for stick figures because I want students to invest more in the story's underlying structure and not be too concerned with how polished and rendered it looks. Having already talked about keeping images iconic (and dealing with comic strips), they usually "get it."

I require a separate piece of paper for each image so that when the class looks at the work we can remove or rearrange panels. The class also will suggest additional panels and discuss how each decision influences the story. I've seen improvements made by turning a single panel into five panels and a thirty-panel story reduced to seven.

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A story is a journey to a destination. Each image is a certain amount of distance traveled. Some journeys are direct and brisk; others are more leisurely paced. How you edit a story determines whether you take your reader on a perilous ride or a surreal one. As an editor, you serve as your story's navigator.

Five: Pencilling, Tortoise and the Hare

Homework:

I ask students to pencil draw a two-page pantomime Tortoise and Hare story. They may add any twists to the story. Students have set the fable in a nursing home (with the tortoise and hare in retirement), made them into gangsters, robots, and professional wrestlers.

There are two due dates. Roughs (thumbnails) are due the next class period. The finished assignment is due one week later.

Homework Objectives:

This assignment reinforces the lessons we learned from the previous assignment. The Tortoise and Hare story is provided to eliminate a student's #1 excuse for procrastinating: "I couldn't think of an idea."

There are two due dates because I like to see the students work in stages. I often give two grades for each assignment, one for roughs or thumbnails and the second for the finished project. I'll also try to give the students class time immediately after the homework is given so they have some focused time to get the ball rolling and I'm there to respond to any questions they may have. This strategy is effective for preventing assignments from being started and finished only hours before they are due.

In this assignment I am asking for more finished drawing (without requiring inking).

Handout:

Pencilling handout that discusses different approaches one can take in achieving "finished pencils."

Reading:

Understanding Comics, chapter 6

Six: Story Structure

In-Class Exercise:

Responding to a list of questions based on the movie *Marty* that is shown in class

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Exercise Objectives:

Before delving into writing scripts I like to go over the rudiments of story structure. Of course there is no formula for good stories, but by exploring narrative structures students can be given the basic tools of good writing to help shore up their "future masterpieces."

Each semester I'll show a movie in class that we then break down, scene by scene, shot by shot. I often show the movie *Marty* (1950) starring Ernest Borgine. It's a magnificent screenplay. Since most students have never heard of it they have no preconceived opinions. And most importantly it stars the awesome Ernest Borgnine.

To ensure "active readers" I hand out a questionnaire that they read before we start the movie. I have them fill it out after the video. I find if I give the class time to first write out their thoughts, the ensuing class discussion is that much richer.

Handout:

Story Structure handout

Seven: Scriptwriting

In-Class Exercise:

I hand out several scripts that were written for comic books and then have the students draw a page from two different scripts.

Objectives:

This unit allows the students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the different ways scripts are formatted. Some scripts are incredibly exposition-heavy and set up near impossible challenges for the artist (Cunningham), others are more vague and require the penciller to do much of the staging (Brubaker).

Homework:

Part One:

Write a single scene, for three drawn pages that takes place in a specific location (high school gym locker, tree house, Fourth of July picnic, etc.). The script, which must be typewritten, will be handed over to someone else to draw. The writer will not have the opportunity to elaborate on the script with the penciller so it must convey all the information the penciller will need.

Part Two:

I randomly hand out scripts for other students to draw.

Homework Objectives:

Most students who are new to comics romanticize the job of working for a big commercial comic book company. They want to be "writers" or "pencillers." This

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assignment makes them understand that once you start collaborating you are surrendering considerable control.

When we look at the finished projects on the due-date there is plenty to talk about. Writers who were not clear are taken to task: pencillers who took liberties with the writer's scripts are also asked to account for themselves. Some collaborators are ecstatic, others gravely disappointed. In this way students gain an understanding of the collaborative nature of commercial comics.

Eight: Inking

In-Class Exercise:

I enlarge a single panel from a comic (my favorites to use are Walt Kelly's *Pogo* and Sinnott-inked Jack Kirby) and pass the copies out to students. They then tape vellum over the images and trace the lines with their brush.

Exercise Objectives:

If I had a quarter for every student who draws with a marker and tries to get it to look like a brush stroke I would be the richest teacher I know (although that is not saying much). Students are averse to using a brush because they have to surrender some control. Using a brush to make a brush mark seems painfully obvious but students will be students.

This assignment seems rote and unimaginative, so when I first used it I was surprised that the students really liked it. For many it got them hooked on the brush. By tracing they were able to focus only on inking lines. By the time they were finished they not only had cool-looking pictures of *Pogo* and *The Fantastic Four*, but they also had some confidence.

Additional Exercise:

I'll spend a class introducing students to various nibs, inks, and brushes. We'll then spend a few hours sketching from life (still life or model) directly with ink.

Objectives:

Many students never draw directly with ink. Even their sketchbook drawings are tentatively done in pencil. A lot of would-be cartoonists never touch ink until it's time to finish their pages. As a result the students are tight and awkward and are merely tracing lines rather than enhancing them. I encourage students to throw out their Sharpie and Pigma markers and work with nibs and brushes in their sketchbooks drawing directly with ink.

Learning to use a brush enables the students to greatly vary their line weights and lay down a far more expressive mark than a pen will allow.

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Reading:

Understanding Comics Chapters 5

Nine: Read Maus

Homework:

Read *Maus* and complete a study guide base on the reading.

Objectives:

On a purely formal level Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* is arguably the most carefully considered comic ever put together. The decisions to use upper or lower case lettering, open or closed panels, and the very style of the book itself were made based upon the demands of the story that needed to be told. The study guide ensures the book gets read and allows for a fuller classroom discussion.

In-Class Activity:

Showing the CD ROM *The Complete Maus*.

Objectives:

Spiegelman is incredibly articulate about his creative process. I have yet to show this CD-ROM without several students experiencing minor revelations.

When creating their work, I want my students asking as many questions as possible about what they are doing. I do not want them operating on autopilot, mindlessly reiterating the poor choices they picked up from years of reading mediocre comics.

There is also a wealth of material on-line about *Maus* as well.

Ten: Non-Fiction Comic

Homework:

Create a completed three-to four-page comic that is lettered and inked.

The comic should be a nonfiction comic about the student and his relationship with comics. Essays on George Herriman, how comics are distributed, Manga, comics and sexism, and homages to favorite characters are a few examples of assignments I have received. Both *Understanding Comics* and *MAUS* are examples of nonfiction comics.

Objectives:

I'm asking the students to take what they learned throughout the semester and use it to say something personal about their relationship with the medium of comics.

I also like to provide a few classes where we try to create a workshop environment. I have the time to float around the room and touch base with each student and they are given chunks of time to focus (at the end of the semester this is crucial).

Eleven: Final Zine/Mini Comic

Final Project:

- Make a periodical from all your previous assignments
- Make a copy for everyone in the class.
- You may use any desktop publishing application (Quark or PageMaker) or cut, paste, and Xerox.

Objectives:

Ultimately a finished comic is a product and not a loose piece of bristol board. Drawing something for reproduction requires a unique set of concerns. The satisfaction of making an edition of a comic is unparalleled. This assignment provides a great way to wrap up (and bind!) the semester's activity.

In-Class Demonstration:

I bring several examples of artist books, zines and mini comics to class to show examples of different formatting and binding techniques. Basic bookmaking and printing concepts are covered and discussed.

In addition, I take a comic I have done and show the different stages it went through? from concept to printed book. A cartoonist can create a great comic, but if something goes wrong in the printing his/her efforts may have been for naught.

I show bluelines, printer's color separations (several versions), and examples of what can go wrong. I show how different paper stocks or colored inks can be used for varying effect. I am hoping to demystify the printing process and show that it's important to see the process in its entirety.