

Image and Text: The Language of the Comic Book

In recent years graphic novels have gained mainstream attention for their ability to tell rich, complex stories in a unique way. Books like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* showcase the power of the medium to combine powerful dialogue with rich visual metaphors. Comic books are a creative way to engage students in the art of storytelling, decision making, and critical thinking.

In this activity, students will be introduced to the basic language of comic books. They will explore the way comic artists use the sequential art that combines text and images to tell a story. Discussion and exercises will lead each student toward creating an original, three-panel comic strip.

Curricular Areas

Visual Arts, English–Language Arts

Grade Level

Grades 6–12

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.5](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5](#)

Pennsylvania Art Standards

- [9.2.12.D](#): analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective

National Visual Art Standards

- [Anchor Standard #7](#): perceive and analyze artistic work

Art Images Required

Click on the title below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are also available in the Artstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase.

- [Prometheus Bound](#), begun c. 1611–12, completed by 1618, by Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders
Artstor search: W1950-3-1
- Pre-printed comic strips



Prometheus Bound, begun c. 1611–12, completed by 1618
Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, active Italy, Antwerp, and England),
1577–1640
Frans Snyders (Flemish, active Antwerp), 1579–1657
Oil on canvas
7 feet 11 1/2 inches × 6 feet 10 1/2 inches (242.6 × 209.6 cm)
Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund, 1950
W1950-3-1

Materials Needed

- Short, three-panel comic strips with the text removed from word balloons
- Comic strip with five blank panels
- Larger comic strip with three blank panels
- Pencils, colored pencils, tape or glue stick

Lesson Process

1. Briefly review the Greek myth of Prometheus. (Note: this could be a carry-over from an earlier lesson, or a follow-up to a previous homework assignment.) Look at *Prometheus Bound* and introduce the concept of visual storytelling. Ask students to identify various elements from the story that are represented in the painting: Prometheus, the eagle, chains, the rock. etc. Are there key elements from the story that are missing, or did the artist make clear choices about what to include?
2. How is this painting different from the story itself? What does the story offer that the painting does not? The painting represents a single moment from the story. Ask students what moment they think is being represented in the story. What do they think happened before this moment? What will happen next? Discuss what image might come before this one, and what image might come after.
3. A comic book or comic strip is a medium that uses a series of sequential images to tell a story, allowing us to see a larger portion (or even the entire story). A key element in comics is that images and text work together. The artist needs to decide what information to **show** and what information to **tell**.
4. Hand out the comic strips with the blank word bubbles. As a group, have students discuss what they think is happening in the comic using only the pictures for information. Then, have students discuss what questions they have about the story. What gaps could the word bubbles fill to move the story along or complete details? Have students work in pairs to help reconstruct the story by filling in the word bubbles with text and dialogue.
5. Select a few examples to share with the class. Note that while there are similarities, there are certainly differences as well. Discuss how relying on images means that the text doesn't have to tell everything. Pictures take the place of some text. Likewise, the text which is included frees us from having to include every individual scene in a story. Ask students for examples of this concept from their three-panel strips.
6. Working with partners, students should take their comic strips and cut them into three individual panels. They should then glue or tape these three panels onto the blank five panel comic strip in the first, third, and fifth positions—creating two new blank panels in the story. Using the pre-existing visual story as a guide, pairs should discuss possible new scenes for the story as well as what sort of text might be included. After making a decision, they should fill in the blank panels, adding the two new scenes to the story. (The goal is for students to build up from the scenes provided to think about what moment might be missing or could be expanded.)
7. Share several of these expanded comic strips as a class. Ask students to explain how they decided what images to include and what text would work well with those new images.

Assessment

1. Students will think of a simple short story and create an original comic strip in three panels. To begin the process, ask students to think of a simple incident or mini-story that could be told with three pictures and a few words. Encourage them to imagine the beginning, middle, and end of the story.
2. Students will select a comic book from a personal collection or from a selection of comic books available in class for this assessment. After examining the comic book, students will write a review of how well the artist and writer worked to create an effective comic. The review should be based on a general opinion, but should be supported with specific references to both the images and the text of the comic.

Enrichment

1. Research the storyboard process used in most television advertising. Note similarities and differences to the comic book/comic strip process described above. Perhaps use panels of images and text to create an advertisement for an existing or imagined product.