Comics and Literacy

What are comics?

Comics are a much misunderstood art form. Often closely associated with superheroes in the West, it is more properly thought of as a medium of its own, capable of embracing all genres.

What distinguishes comics as a medium? Prolific and respected comics artist Will Eisner used the simple two word definition “sequential art.” In essence, comics are a series of visual images placed in order to tell a story, with or without text attached. As such, comics are a form of the broader field of visual narrative.

These two-panel comics show how placing images in sequence implies the passage of time.

There is obviously some overlap between comics and picture books, or comics and illustrated novels. These lines are always going to be a bit blurry in some cases, and indeed some works do this deliberately, such as *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which begins with a comic sequence before settling into an illustrated novel format.

Recently, the term “graphic novel” has become popular, and there seems to be some confusion about what they are, and how they are different from comics. Graphic novels are essentially “comics that you need a bookmark for” – usually longer, more sustained works that don’t have to cater to the episodic nature of comics. In the last twenty years, graphic novels have gained a new respectability, even winning the Pulitzer Prize.
A (very brief) history of comics

Given that it's hard to define exactly what comics are, it is equally hard to point to an exact beginning for them. Producing images is a quintessential human activity, and placing them in order to tell a story is also long established. This quick history will fill some of the gaps.

Assyrian reliefs

Wall carvings from the temples of some of the oldest cities in the world feature sequential images used to produce a narrative. The wall carvings discovered at Nineveh which show Ashurbanipal's victory over the Elamites form a full narrative of the battle through a series of images.

The Elamite king being beheaded
A soldier in a chariot carries the Elamite king’s head

Menna’s tomb

This example was fully fleshed out by Scott McCloud in his book Understanding Comics. Menna was a scribe during the reign of Thutmose IV. In typical style for the ancient Egyptians, the walls of his tomb were painted with many vivid images of daily life. Although it is not at first obvious, these images are in fact in a sequential order, showing workers processing and harvesting grain.
Bayeux tapestry

Actually an embroidery, this famous cloth tells the story of the momentous events of 1066, culminating in the Norman invasion and the coronation of William the Conqueror as king of England. The panels of the tapestry show in order the events leading up to the invasion from the point of view of the Norman victors. There is an obvious political agenda to the tapestry, supporting the claim of William the Conqueror to the throne.
Hogarth

The Eighteenth Century English artist William Hogarth is known for his engravings of the seedier side of London life. What is not as well known is that his illustrations were in many cases designed to be viewed in a sequence. He specialised in dramatic morality tales, often showing the downfall of those who succumbed to the temptations of life in the city. His best known work is “The rake’s progress,” charting the descent of a wealthy young man into vice, poverty, and eventually the infamous insane asylum Bedlam.

A scene from “The rake’s progress,” showing the downfall of a young man-about-town
Comic strips

The first comics as we understand them were comic strips in newspapers. They arose in the late nineteenth Century, where they evolved from the single panel cartoons that had been used for political satire and social commentary for centuries. The very first strip is commonly held to be The Yellow Kid, published in the New York World in 1895. It featured the adventures of a gang of young children in a New York tenement.

![The Yellow Kid](image)

New comic strips emerged that went beyond being simple jokes. Some involved elaborate fantasy worlds, like Windsor MacKay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *Dream of the Rare-bit Fiend*. Others were fantasy or science fiction adventure strips, like Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant* or Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*. In the early 1930s, inspired by the heroes of the pulp magazines, comics saw the birth of the genre that would come to dominate the form for many years in the West – the superhero.

Comic books

The very first comic books were compilations of daily newspaper strips. Gathering the strips together allowed for fans to read entire storylines of the adventure strips at one sitting. Over the space of only a few years, many comic books came to feature original content, and artists were able to explore the use of the full page.
US comics

American comics are generally what most Australians think of when they think of “comics.” The American industry took off in the thirties, particularly with the birth of superheroes, a Superman was not the first superhero, but he was the character that brought them to the public consciousness. He debuted in Action Comics in 1938:

![Action Comics #1](image1.png) ![Detective Comics #27](image2.png)

First appearances of Superman and Batman

Early comics covered many genres, including romance, adventure, science fiction and horror. In the 1950s, a moral panic erupted over the content of comics, fuelled by the book *Seduction of the Innocent* by Fredric Wertham. This led to comics publishers choosing to self-censor, removing any “violent or disturbing” content from mainstream American comics for most of the next thirty years, contributing strongly to the impression of the medium as being for children.

In the 1960s, Marvel Comics revitalised the superhero genre, introducing new, younger characters with more relatable issues and personal lives, like Spiderman.

![Amazing Fantasy #15](image3.png)

Amazing Fantasy #15, first appearance of Spiderman
Australia

Comics have a long history in Australia, both in newspapers and magazines. Norman Lindsay produced many comics in his time working for The Bulletin, and of course went on to illustrate the classic children’s book The Magic Pudding.

Australian newspaper strips have abounded over the years, from the wartime adventures of Bluey and Curley to the antics of Ginger Meggs.

There has been a recent renaissance in the Australian comic scene. Artists like Mandy Ord, Nikki Greenberg, Bruce Mutard, Pat Grant and Shaun Tan are producing important works that receive huge critical acclaim.

Japanese comics (Manga)

Comics in Japan evolved quite independently of comics in the West. They arose from early comical scrolls like the mid-Twelfth Century Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga (“Animal-person Caricatures”), depicting animals and people in a range of humorous scenarios.

A monkey thief being chased

In the 1920s and 30s, the ancient storytelling form of Kamishibai (“paper drama”), using a series of cards shown in order on a small wooden stage to tell a story. After World War II, Osamu Tezuka, known as the God of Manga, rose to prominence with his creations, the best known in the West being Astro Boy and Kimba the White Lion.

France and Belgium

The Francophone world has a very strong culture of comics and graphic novels, usually called Bandes Dessinées (“drawn strips”) or BD. They are written for both children and adults, and cover many genres. Comics is held in such high regard that they are sometimes called “The Ninth Art”, following it in the same league as architecture, dance, etc. The most famous examples of this rich tradition in the West are Tintin and Asterix.

Other countries

Other nations such as India and China also have large and vibrant comic scenes, but these have not made as much of an impression overseas.
Reading comics

Panels and gutters

Comics are constructed of a series of “panels” – the distinct images that make up the page. These panels may or may not have borders to separate them visually. The space between panels is referred to as a “gutter”. It is this gutter space where the illusion of time appears.

Speech typically appears in a speech balloon, with the “tail” of the balloon pointing to the character that is speaking. A thought bubble indicates an internal thought, and looks more like a cloud. Sometimes text captions are used instead of thought bubbles.

Panel order

Understanding panel order is the key to successfully “decoding” a comic book. In newspaper strips, this was often simple due to the constraints of space: as the name implies, most are a simple strip of panels, read in the same direction that we usually read. In larger Sunday strips, early artists like Windsor McKay felt the need to number their panels to make the reading order explicit. In general though, panels are read in the same direction as reading order for the language.
In Japanese comics (manga), the reading order is reversed, as Japanese reads from right to left.

Cartoons

Cartoons are distinct from comics in that they contain one panel and do not attempt to portray action over time. In many other ways, they share a good deal in common with comics. They may use word balloons, captions and sound effects, and their art style may be simplified and “cartoony.” The essential distinction of a cartoon being a static drawing remains.
Comics In class

**Literacy**

Comics find a natural place in the literacy classroom. They can be used for building many of the core literacy skills.

**Sequencing**

This is a core feature of comics – sequential order is basic to the medium. The reader must mentally “bridge the gap” between the images to construct the narrative. This may be a straightforward moment to moment transition, or a more conceptually complex change of scene, flashback, or other form of transition. Students will need to understand these forms of transition, and that the gutter between panels might be used for any one of them.

**Inference and Context**

The marriage of text and image in comics allows many opportunities to build inference skills. Captions might reinforce the illustrations, provide commentary, or even an ironic counterpoint, such as in this example:

![Comic panel](image)

**Teaching comics**

Consider this two-panel comic from Scott McCloud:

![Two-panel comic](image)

To read this comic successfully, students need to:
1. understand the images are linked in a narrative
2. read them in the correct order
3. make the link between the content of the two panels

In addition, the implicit link might not be the correct one, as the time implied between these two panels is obviously not insignificant. Carl may have died any number of ways! This active process of providing “closure” to the story is an unique aspect of comics that leads to many storytelling possibilities.
**Visual literacy**

As well as being seen as a story, comics can also be analysed as visual texts. This involves an understanding of the visual elements of the images and how they have been selected by the artist to maximise their appeal and impact.

**Elements of Visual Design**

These terms form a common language for speaking about any visual art. An understanding of these elements and how they can be manipulated to produce an effect is one of the key understandings of visual literacy.

The elements are:
- Line
- Shape
- Form
- Texture
- Composition
- Colour
- Tone

My manipulating each of these elements, the artist can produce a specific effect.

**Mise en Scene**

This term, borrowed from cinema and theatre, describes how a scene is laid out. An artist can exercise a huge amount of control over how a scene is interpreted through his choices regarding:

- Framing – what is visible in the image?
- Angle – where do we see it from?
- Lighting – how is the scene lit?
- Panel shape and size
- Panel repetition and echoing – repetition of images or motifs

Compare and contrast these two images of a familiar character:

![Art by Yildray Cinar and Mike Allred](image)

In each image, clear choices have been made about colour, tone, line, form lighting, and angle to produce a different effect.
Lesson ideas

These ideas include ways to teach and understand the medium of comics, as well as some places where comics work well in the curriculum.

Making comics

Comics can find a place in many areas of the curriculum. In addition to English and art, they work very well in the history classroom, as they deal with sequencing and narrative. They can be used as instructional devices in science, or to share a scientific story. The sky is the limit!

Sequencing

- **Mix-up**
  Supply a series of comic panels to your students as discrete images in no particular order. Their job is to reassemble the panels to form a narrative. There might be multiple plausible answers. Compare and contrast results after the activity.

- **Fill the gap**
  Supply a series of panels in order to your students. Their task is to add panels between the ones shown, adding detail or filling in the narrative. Share results afterwards.

- **Choose your own adventure**
  Students are supplied with a selection of panels, with a beginning, one or more from mid-story and possibly, the end. Their job is to fill in the narrative around these panels in any way they see fit. This is a great opportunity for creative responses. It also works well as a shared activity, with students adding a panel and then passing it on.

- **Cut ups**
  Students are supplied with a completed comic or comic page. They have to disassemble it, and reassemble the page so that it still makes sense, or perhaps to create something new. This might involve removing panels, making new panels, adding captions, or other alterations. This also works well as a group activity.

Captioning

Add your own words and captions to a comic, or replace the current ones. This might be a comic with the captions removed, a previously wordless sequence, or even a comic created by a classmate.

Visual literacy

- **Analysis**
  Using the language of visual elements and mise en scene, analyse artistic choices in a given scene. What effects has the artist been aiming to produce by making these choices?

- **Change a scene**
  Choosing a scene from a comic, redraw it using different framing, colours etc. How does your version compare? Is the visual and emotional impact different?

- **Draw a scene**
  Provide a verbal or written scene to students and ask students to turn it into a comic. Ask them to pay special attention to the visual elements – what moments will become panels? How do the panels relate to each other? How is the action framed? What about colour? Art style?

Using comics: Adaptations

Comics adaptations are becoming increasingly common, from popular YA novels to established literary classics to Shakespeare to the Bible, in styles from photorealistic to manga. These can be used in class to great success, especially if introduced in parallel with the original text. An adaptation of a book being studied can be a huge boon to students with learning difficulties.
Making comics

By hand

Obviously by hand the simplest way to make comics, requiring only something to write on and something to write with. Some students may find this challenging as they do not consider their art skills up to scratch for the task. In this case, you can simply enforce a “stick figures only” rule until they feel more confident.

Online

There are many websites that allow you to create, store, display and share comics. They vary in their specifics and their capabilities, so it is best to see which ones might suit your needs best. This is a small sampling current as of time of writing:

Strip Generator (http://stripgenerator.com/)
- Free
- Uses premade characters
- Point and click interface
- Strips and elements can be saved
- Profile pages add a community element

Pixton (http://www.pixton.com/)
- Free to use (basic) or paid version adds these options:
  - Upload images and record voice directly into comics
  - Libraries of pre-made characters and objects
  - Download comics in PDF, JPG, PNG
  - Teacher moderated private online space

ToonDoo (http://www.toondoo.com/)
- Free or paid
- Make strips or books
- Use included images, or upload your own

Bitstrips (http://www.bitstrips.com/pageone OR http://www.bitstripsforschools.com/)
- Free or paid
- Make your own avatar
- Teacher moderated private online space
- Lesson plans and ideas

Make Beliefs Comix (http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/)
- Free
- Pregenerated character library
- No saving of comics, you will need to email or screen capture completed comics
- Multiple languages supported (including Latin!)
- Writing prompts and tools

Applications

Many applications can aid in the making of comics. Image manipulation packages like Photoshop and Gimp will obviously have great utility. Even a simpler platform like Paint can be used to make simple comics, or to colour comics.

Dedicated comic making applications are also available. The most prominent example is ComicLife, which is bundled with the EduStar package in Victorian schools. ComicLife allows you to import your own images, arrange them in panels, and add captions, word balloons and sound effects. Manga Studio is a dedicated comic making application that has many features that are invaluable for a more advanced artist, but might well be more than most students would need.
Further reading

Websites

Diigo – SLV Learn: Comics and graphic novels
http://www.diigo.com/list/slvlearn/comics-and-graphic-novels
A comprehensive round up of comics links.

No Flying, No Tights
http://noflyingnotights.com/
Comics reviews and news beyond the world of superheroes

The Graphic Classroom
http://www.graphicclassroom.org/
Website dedicated to the use of comics in teaching.

Elements of Visual Design
http://designelementsandprinciples.com/elements2.htm
An introduction to the language of visual design

Books

THE book to read to understand comics and their unique place in the artistic world.
His later books, Making Comics and Reinventing Comics are also valuable.

Lessons from the master artist and craftsman.

Ryan, John Panel by Panel: An Illustrated History of Australian Comics, Cassell, 1979
Long out of print, but one of the best general surveys of Australian Comics

Sheill, Annette Bonzer: Australian Comics 1900s- 1990s. Elgua Media, 1998
A more recent book, including a list of Australian comics creators.

A very good international survey of important comics.