



AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMIC STRIPS

Visiting artist, Heather McAdams, developed this project for the University of Illinois at Chicago Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative 2000.



Ask any group of kids to make a list of words that come to mind when they hear the words *comic strip* and they'll most likely come with words like *funny...superhero...action comic...Sunday funnies...* Now these are all valid associations, but oddly do not have much to do with what's been going on with some of the best "contemporary" comic art of the last 25 years!

Comics are one of the most popular and interesting art movements of the 20th Century. Today's comic artists didn't want to be defined by outdated notions associated with mainstream commercial comics, but instead chose to pioneer new ground--oftentimes using the comic strip as therapy, social commentary, or storytelling that has nothing to do with traditional "gag writing." For example, Pulitzer Prize-winning Art Spiegelman's epic work, *Maus*, movingly tells the story of his father's experience in a Nazi concentration camp.

Some of the best contemporary comic artists draw in a primitive and honest style more related to folk art, children's art, or what is variously called Art Brut or Outsider Art than to *Dynamic Anatomy*-inspired realism. Even comics that deal in more traditional comic subject matter use increasingly varied and experimental design and drawing.

In this project, students and teachers create autobiographical comics that explore some interesting moments in their lives. Some of the comics eschew traditional narrative structures and instead are composed as lists, whimsically recreating the author's subjectivity through a series of idiosyncratic observations.

Comics are a youth-oriented medium. Students appreciate being given the knowledge and skills to tell stories about their lives in a medium that they find exciting. Autobiographical comics are a great way to introduce the art curriculum to the larger community. Comics can be printed in school and local newspapers or used to create shows about



contemporary student life in school or community gallery settings. Students can create inexpensively printed or xeroxed collaborative comic books and distribute them for free or sell them as an art fundraiser.

You may wish to review contemporary comic material before sharing it with students. There are alternative comics that some may reasonably believe are not appropriate to teach in a middle school or high school curriculum. But as Heather McAdams says, “This doesn’t mean we should ‘throw out the baby with the bathwater’ and not expose students to this rich and wonderful contemporary art form. Just because there are thousands of x-rated, trashy movies, should we not teach teens about cinematography? Heck, no! It’s up to art teachers to educate themselves about the variety and quality of contemporary comic artists, so that they can teach kids more effectively about this powerful (and often forgotten) medium.”

Drawing autobiographical comics is not necessarily an easy project. It takes time and skillful teaching to help students create meaningful and well-designed comic artwork. Use Heather McAdams’ fabulous brainstorming and designing tips to help students develop the capacity to tell stories about their lives and to help students appreciate a really cool art form.

Lesson Plan

(See final page for materials list.)

STEP #1 GETTING THE IDEA

COMPLETE THE McADAMS’ AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMIC STRIP WORKSHEET

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you to recall some rich and meaningful stories in your life out of which to make a comic strip. The questions are designed to spark memories that will be fun and interesting to draw and share. It is important to stimulate your mind by writing down many stories. In much the same way an athlete needs to stretch and warm up for a game, we oftentimes need to do warm-up exercises before making art. In addition, we need many

stories to choose from for our final comic strip and for many more future works.

** There is a McAdams’ Comic Questionnaire file for downloading in the Process folder.*

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FILLING OUT THE QUESTIONNAIRE:

You can write just enough to spark the memory or tell the whole story. Write as much as you need to in order to recall unusual or special details.



You can skip any question that doesn't apply to you.

You can work on the questions in any order you want to.

You can write more than one answer/story to a particular question.

WHEN YOU ARE DONE FILLING OUT THE QUESTIONS:

Read what you have written. One of these stories will JUMP OUT at you as the one that you want to tell, the one that you want to draw, the one that you want to make into a comic strip!

When you have decided on what story you want to do, try to visualize how you might begin laying out the panels.

What will you most look forward to drawing?

Imagine telling the story in front of a group of people. Where does the story begin? How does it end?

Are there any funny parts? Sad parts?

Do you think it will be a one or two page comic strip?

Is there any opportunity to write dialogue?

Thought balloons?

This is your homework--have fun thinking about your story until the next class.

Remember:

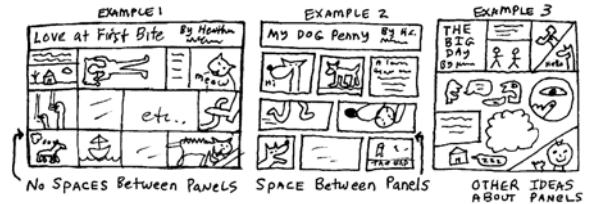
You are an expert on your story.

Your story does not have to be funny.

There is no subject too small!! !

STEP #2 THE ROUGH OR QUICK SKETCH

Look at the examples of a rough sketch.



Use a pen. Divide the piece of paper into 12 panels, leaving space for your title. Are you going to work horizontally or vertically?

Begin laying out your comic strip. Don't get too detailed now. Try to capture the essence of the action in your drawings.

Use soft pencils so that you can make a clearly seen line without having to indent or permanently mark the paper. After the inking you want to be able to cleanly erase all the pencil lines. With a hard-surface paper and a soft pencil, you should be able to do this erasing cleanly, quickly, neatly. As you begin your sketch, try test erasing your pencilwork with a soft eraser in order to understand the correct pencil and pressure to use.

PURPOSE OF ROUGH SKETCH IS TO....

1. Figure out placement of words in relation to pictures.
2. Nail down the wording. This includes dialogue, thoughts, narration, and commentary.
3. Figure out how many panels you will need.
4. Practice. Loosen up!



TIPS OF THE TRADE & HINTS FROM HEATHER

1. Use dialogue and thought balloons whenever you can. It brings characters to life. Remember, you can write your own dialogue exactly the way you want your readers to hear it. (Example: “Here ya go Dea...an’ say Hullo to yur Mutha for me!”)
2. You can add commentary by writing something with an arrow pointing to someone or something. Putting a little box around it sometimes helps.
3. Exaggerate. If your character is nervous, don’t rely on drawing facial expressions. Think about it first. What kind of body language does a nervous person have? Biting fingernails? Buckets of sweat sliding down his face? Shaking all over? Forget about realism. EXAGGERATE!
4. Give your characters visible and distinguishing traits so that they are always recognizable to your reader no matter how bad your drawing may get! (Example: my character has big teeth, ponytail, and cowboy boots.)
5. Use metaphors! If you felt like a square at a prom, draw your head as a square! It is funnier and probably more fun and easier to draw. If you stuck your foot in your mouth at an interview, you may want to consider drawing just that! And if you write, “It was raining cats and dogs”...well, you get the picture.
6. It’s an autobiographical comic so get personal. Draw from your point of view and how you felt/feel about the situation.

7. Use the language of cartoons! Words like CLUNK! SLURP, HA HA, GRUNT, SPLAT, AAAAHHHHHHHHH!, HELP! will help you to get your point across faster and more directly if you use them. Symbols like: lightbulbs above a head, stars and birds circling a head, fume lines, hearts, teardrops or sweat drops, puffs of smoke disappearing around a corner, lots of ZZZZZZZZZZZs are part of the established language of comics.

8. HAVE FUN!

UNDERSTANDING COMICS

Get copies of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and his *Reinventing Comics*. These books are invaluable resources for constructing comic lesson plans (that is to say, lesson plans about comics) concerning iconography, naturalism, transitions, the representation of time, and other comic-producing issues.

For on-line sources contact scottmcccloud.com.

STEP #3 THE PENCIL SKETCH

With a sharp pencil (and an eraser and pencil sharpener close at hand) begin drawing your comic strip on bristol board. Use your rough sketch as a guide.

Start by drawing the outside border. Then draw in your panels. Decide whether you want to use space between the panels or not. Some cartoonists like to use rulers when they draw borders; others (like me) prefer a looser look.



MAKE DECISIONS, MAKE CHANGES

Remember that nothing is ever set in stone. This is also the time to make changes, erase, nail down dialogue, make decisions about the tiny compositions of each panel, etc. Change the sizes of the panels if necessary, make adjustments, but you should be getting more detailed in your drawing and neater with your printing. Try to work out any problems at this stage. You will be ready to move on to Step #4 only when you have resolved all the little problems with your comic.

Read your comic strip all the way through. Does it read the way you want it to? Do you think readers will understand what you are trying to say? Will it evoke the emotions and feelings that you are trying to evoke? Is it funny where you want it to be? Sad where you want it to be? Show it to someone you know and ask him or her to give you feedback.

When you feel content with your pencil sketch and excited about inking it, then you know that you have completed Step #3.

STEP #4 INKING

The last of the four steps in completing your comic strip is to ink your pencil sketch. It doesn't really matter what tool you use, but I suggest either permanent sharpies or speedball dip pens with Higgin's Black Magic Ink in a bottle. It's better to use permanent marker because it doesn't smudge and it's easier to cleanly cover with white out than water-based markers that tend to mix with the white out.

It's important that lines be black (not grayish). You can check this at an early stage in the drawing by making a xerox of the developing comic. If you can't make a copy that

shows crisp black lines against a white ground, you need to create darker lines that will contrast more clearly.

You can ink your comic strip any way you want. I generally begin with the lines and do my shading afterward. Try to consider the entire page as a composition, achieving a balance of lights and darks, small panels and large panels.

This step is usually the most enjoyable for me. I love to develop the individual panels, adding patterns and shadows to give them more depth and texture creating tiny worlds for my viewers.

Collect samples of comic art. Note the very different ways artists use hatching, lines, patterns, dots, solid blacks, and other devices to create interesting effects. Often the way in which the comic is inked is an important aspect of the artist's unique style.

If you make a mistake, you can use white out. I suggest a thin white out like Kinko's Multi-Purpose Correction Fluid. If you can still see the ink underneath after applying, put on another coat. Let it dry thoroughly before inking over the top of the white out.

Try not to use white out if you can. Be spontaneous and let inking accidents become part of the design choices when possible. But don't worry about some "cakey" looking white out on your drawing.

Remember that the ultimate goal of a comic is reproduction in a print medium so as long as it can be xeroxed, photographed, or scanned so that the white out doesn't show, it's not a problem. When you are done with the inking, erase all of the pencil lines. Be extra careful when erasing over areas where white out was used!



MATERIALS

For Autobiographical Comic Strips

NECESSARY

- 1.** Paper: 11" by 14" Canson or Strathmore Acid Free Drawing Paper or Bristol Board
- 2.** Pencils: (2B-4B) or Black Warrior or Tigonderoga pencils #2 or EX-SOFT #1.
- 3.** Erasers: ARTGUM and erasers for the end of the pencil
- 4.** Pens: Extra fine, fine, and medium pens with permanent ink such as Sharpies or Staedtler Lumocolor
- 5.** Dip pens: Speedball Pen, type B holder
- 6.** Pen tips: Bowl point #512 (the simple tips).
- 7.** White out: Kinko's Multipurpose Correction Fluid
- 8.** Ink: Higgins Black Magic.

OPTIONAL

- 1.** Brushes: Smallest sizes (#0 and #1), short handles, sable (or sabeline) brushes.
- 2.** Glue sticks
- 3.** X-acto knives
- 4.** Scissors
- 5.** Rapidograph pens: a set or buy them individually. Sizes .80 (green) and .35 (gray) are nice sizes to start.