

How Comics Ask You to Tell the Story

Written by mImoment

Tuesday, 12 April 2011 12:15 - Last Updated Friday, 31 March 2017 11:39

Though it might seem like a “lazy” medium to some, comic books and graphic novels do make cognitive demands on the reader. The reader’s construction of narrative sequence is a good case in point. The illustrated panels in a comic book are completely separate from one another. The text or dialogue in each panel gives the reader clues about the likely sequence in which panels should be read. Illustrations which indicate action or a change of scene can also give the reader visual cues. But all readers of comic books and graphic novels make a small leap of faith each time they take their eyes off of one panel and move them to another. In effect, it’s the reader who turns the pictures into a story.

In this MediaLit Moment, your students will get to experience the challenge of constructing narrative sequences in comic books. They’ll have a chance to take a closer look at the textual and visual cues which help the reader construct a storyline, and they may even discover that their friends “see” the story differently than they do.

Scramble several comic book panels and ask students to guess the original sequence

AHA!: There’s a lot more to making a story with pictures than I ever imagined!

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

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Key Question #3: How might different people understand this message differently?

Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same media message differently

Grade Level: 6-8

Materials: Sequence of comic book panels, black and white copier, scissors

For this lesson, we've selected the opening panels from Jason Lutes' *Berlin: City of Stones* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2001), the first of three graphic novels set in Berlin between the world wars. In this sequence, two of the main characters meet while travelling on a train to Berlin. Print the strip of panels, make copies, then cut each strip into individual panels. See [pages 13-14](#) of our newsletter for comic strip panels.

Activity: Distribute "packets" of cut-up strips to your students and explain what you've done

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with them. Ask them to decide how the panels originally fit together. When students have made their best guesses and are ready to discuss them, ask them to give you their reasoning. What “clued them in” to the sequence that they’ve chosen? If students have come up with different sequences, make sure to let them know that it’s natural for different people to experience the same media message differently—there isn’t necessarily a “right” answer. Ask what led to these differing interpretations. You may also want to put the different sequences up for a class vote.

Extended Activity: If you feel that your students identified the original sequence of panels too easily, we have another, more challenging sequence available. In this story, the main character, Isabel, travels to Mexico in an effort to escape the guilt she feels over her failures in life. In this wordless sequence, she encounters a strange black-clad man who may or may not be real. As you might guess, this sequence is less plot-driven, and has more to do with the character’s state of mind. Question #3 is likely to become the primary question as your class works with this sequence. Students may even come away believing that the sequence they chose is better than the original! The activity suggestion for this sequence is from Rocco Versaci’s “ ‘Literary Literacy’ and the Role of the Comic Book: Or, ‘You Teach a Class on What?’ ” from *Teaching Visual Literacy*, Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, editors. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008. Here’s the comic book story in which the sequence appears: Jaime Hernandez, “Flies on the Ceiling,” from *Flies on the Ceiling: Volume Nine of the Complete Love and Rockets*, pps. 1-15, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1991. See [page 14](#) of our newsletter for comic strip panels.

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy’s MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, © 2002-2011, Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.com>