

# TEACHING GRAPHIC NOVEL CREATION

SO, WE'VE COVERED THE BASICS OF COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS AND HOW TO MAKE THEM. NOW LET'S SPEND A LITTLE TIME TALKING ABOUT HOW TO TEACH A CLASS ON CREATING THEM. YOU DON'T NEED TO BE AN ARTIST OR A WRITER TO TEACH A COMIC BOOK WORKSHOP. IF YOU ARE EITHER OR BOTH OF THOSE THINGS, THAT'S A HUGE ADVANTAGE, BUT IT'S NOT NECESSARY.

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER SHOULD GIVE YOU ALL THE INFORMATION YOU NEED TO HAVE AN INFORMED OPINION ON WHAT COMIC BOOKS ARE AND WHAT THEY CAN BE. AND YOU SHOULD FEEL CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO GUIDE SOME YOUNG CREATORS IN THE CREATION OF THEIR OWN CONTENT. BUT WHAT YOU DO NEED IS AN ENTHUSIASM FOR THE MEDIUM. IF YOU DON'T LIKE COMIC BOOKS (OR BETTER YET, LOVE THEM), MAYBE YOU SHOULDN'T TRY TO TEACH A CLASS ON THEM ON YOUR OWN.

FIND SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT. OR GET SOMEONE WHO LIKES COMIC BOOKS TO TEACH THE CLASS WITH YOU. IF YOU DON'T HAVE ANY CO-WORKERS THAT ENJOY COMICS, FIND A COMICS-LOVING TEENAGER TO TEACH THE CLASS WITH YOU.

ENTHUSIASM IS CONTAGIOUS. IF YOU LOVE IT, YOUR STUDENTS WILL LOVE IT. AND YOU CAN'T FAKE IT. SO DON'T EVEN TRY.

OKAY, LET'S GET GOING. THIS IS A SHORT CHAPTER. WHICH IS WHY IT ONLY COUNTS AS A HALF CHAPTER. BUT IT'S A VALUABLE ONE, SO LET'S DIVE IN.



Mr. THANE

When planning your graphic novel workshop, the first thing you need to do is decide if this is going to be a one-off workshop or a series of workshop sessions. A one-off is obviously less work to plan and less of a commitment for the instructor, but it is very limited in what you can do. Multiple-session workshops allow for more involved creations and have the built-in advantage that super-motivated participants can work on their comics in between the workshop sessions, if they are so inclined. But multiple-session workshops have the distinct disadvantage that not everyone will show up for every session, which can provide for disruption to your carefully planned agenda.

I prefer a multiple-session workshop. But my advice to someone teaching a graphic novel workshop for the very first time is to do a one-off workshop. See how it goes. If it goes well and you have decent attendance, try a multiple-session workshop later. In my experience, one-off workshops work well with teens throughout the school year. Then in the summer we offer multiple-session workshops, which get good attendance from teens who are looking for something to do while school is out and are willing to commit to a program that can stretch out over a month.

### ONE-OFF WORKSHOPS

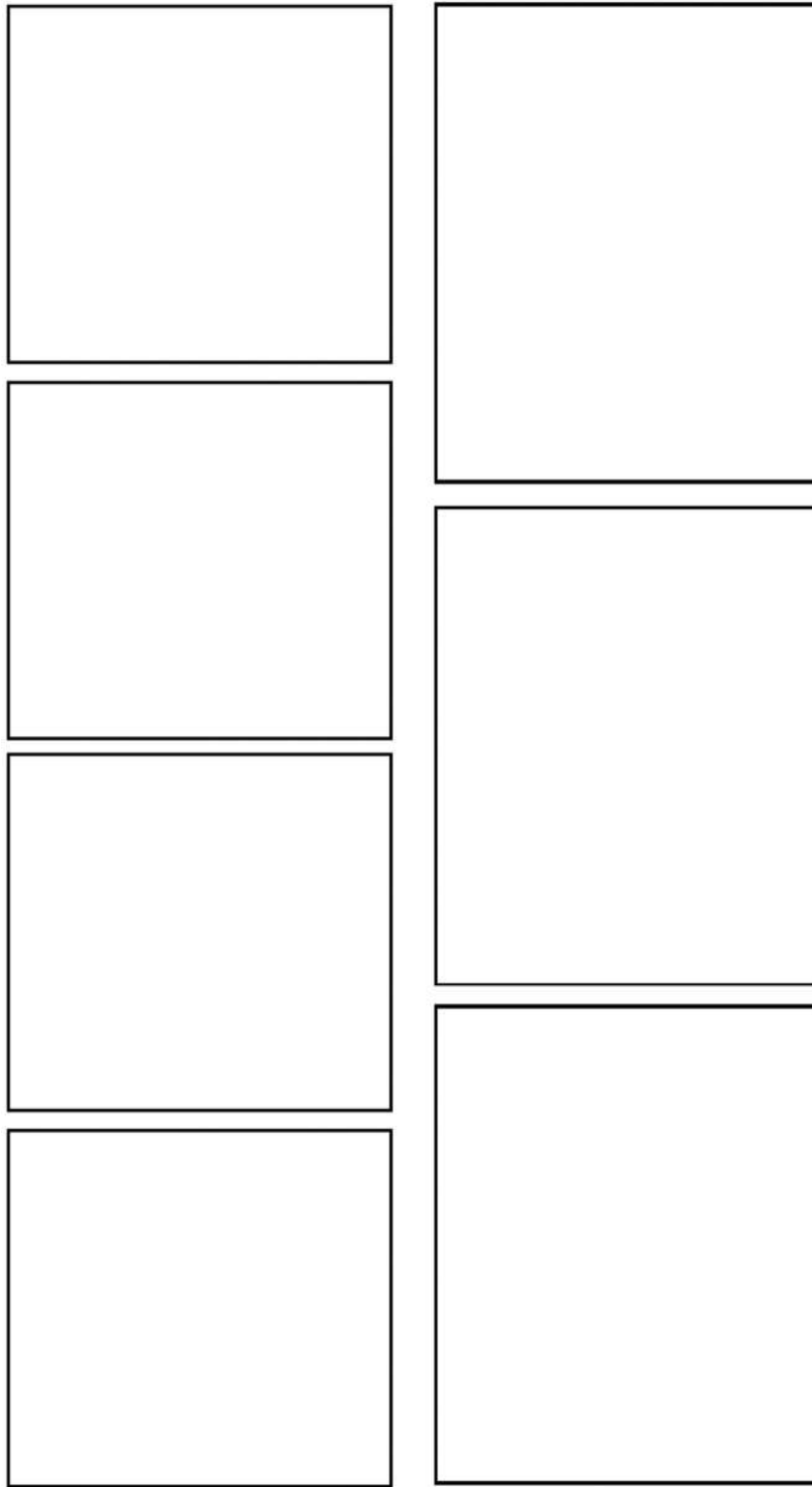
If you're going to do a one-off workshop, I strongly recommend you focus on comic strips as opposed to comic books or graphic novels. Comic strips begat comic books, and they are an identical art form on a smaller scale. A person can conceivably create a finished comic strip in an hour, whereas a fully realized graphic novel could take years to complete.

Give yourself about two hours for your workshop. You could do it in less or more, but two hours tends to be the magic length for a workshop that's long enough to give students the time to complete something but not so long that they lose interest and wander off.

Prepare for the workshop by gathering collections of comic strips from your library to use as examples. Go for a wide spectrum of comics. Get humor strips like the ones most people associate with newspaper comics (*Calvin and Hobbes*, *Peanuts*, *Pearls Before Swine*, etc.). But also look for different genres. In recent years, old time adventure comics from the golden age of comic strips have been reprinted in books, and they might just be on the shelves in your library (*Flash Gordon*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Prince Valiant*, etc.). And don't forget about web comics. There are thousands upon thousands of web comics out there, and some of the most interesting creations in a comic strip format are being made today in web comics. Not all web comics follow the standard horizontal single strip format of their newspaper predecessors. But a lot of them do. The most successful web comics get collected in print books. Look for *Dinosaur Comics*, *Hark! A Vagrant!*, *Fowl Language*, *Oatmeal*, *The Creepy Case Files of Margo Maloo*, *Bad Machinery*, and *High Moon* on your library shelves. Or just google "web comics" and see what pops up. Using lots of examples is a nice way to start off your workshop. It will also give your students with short attention spans or who finish their work early something to look at during the workshop.

Once you've gathered a healthy number of examples, it's time to get your supplies together. All you really need is some paper and pencils and pens. I would recommend photocopying the panel borders on the opposite page (see Figure 2.5.1) to give each of your students a three- or a four-panel template to work in. A standard newspaper comic strip is 10.5 × 3.25 inches in dimension. Starting with a preformatted panel template will save time, and you've only got one workshop, so you don't want to waste time drawing boxes.





**Figure 2.5.1**

From *Murder Mystery, Graphic Novels, and More: Innovative Programs for Engaging Teens in Your Library* by Thane Benson. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited. Copyright © 2019.

On the day of your actual workshop, have everyone introduce themselves and name a comic strip they like and why. Briefly show some examples of different comic strips that you have collected. Talk about what makes them different. Discuss the content, the style of art, and the art-to-text ratio. Hand out the panel templates with the pens and pencils and get to it.

What your students create is up to them. A gag comic strip that has a set-up and a punch line is only one possibility. They can make a historic comic, a horror comic, an adventure comic, an autobiographical comic. Whatever they want is fine. But challenge them to create something that tells a whole story in one strip. That's the challenge. It's also a terrific creative challenge to condense a story to the bare minimum that will fit in a single comic strip.

Encourage your students to quickly sketch out their drawings and add their text in (if there is any) right away before finishing any drawings. All the lessons and pitfalls covered in Chapter 2 apply to comic strips as well as comic books or graphic novels. Make your way around the room, and check in on your students as they complete their comic strips, giving helpful advice when applicable.

At the completion of your workshop, make a copy of everyone's comic strip (with the creators' permission) and gather them together into your own newspaper. It can just be a simple photocopied page with everyone's work on it. Or you can literally create your own newspaper. It's up to you how far you want to take it. See Appendix II for more information on making collections print ready.

You can also run a comic strip workshop using a purely a digital medium, as opposed to paper. The principles are exactly the same. It's just a different medium. See Appendix I for a step-by-step tutorial for creating a comic strip digitally.

## **MULTIPLE-SESSION WORKSHOPS**

I like to teach graphic novel creation as a four-part workshop, meeting once a week for two hours at a time over four weeks to complete the workshop. As I mentioned earlier, this gives motivated students the ability to work on their comics between the sessions if necessary. Four two-hour sessions are also just about right for a student to finish a short comic in the class.

Prepare for your workshop the exact same way as if you were doing a one-off workshop on comic strips. Gather lots of examples of graphic novels from your library's collection. Gather a wide collection of genres and styles. Gather paper and pencils and pens. If you want to supply fancier materials, that is up to you. Bristol board and ink and brushes are the traditional medium used in comic book creation. But regular copy paper and regular pens and pencils will work as well.

On the first day of your workshop, after welcoming everyone and introducing yourself, pass a clipboard (or two) around with a started Jam Comic on it. Explain that the students will take turns working on the Jam Comic as it gets passed around the room throughout the whole first session while you are presenting. (For details on how the Jam Comic creative exercise works, see Chapter I.) Then go over the outline of the schedule for the entire workshop.



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## SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR FOUR-PART WORKSHOP

### Day 1:

Welcome

Pass the Jam Comic around

Introductions:

    Name?

    What's a good comic book/graphic novel you've read lately?

Explanation of workshop and the end goal

Comic Book Terminology:

    Page

    Gutter

    Bleed

    Splash Page

    Panel

    Word Balloon

    Caption

    Thought Balloon

3 Rules of Readability:

    You have to understand what you're looking at

    You have to be able to read the text

    You have to know where to go next

Thumbnail exercise

### Day 2:

Work on comics in class

### Day 3:

Work on comics in class

### Day 4:

Work on comics in class

Collect finished comics at the end of the class

After the introductions, you'll want to explain the purpose of the workshop and what your end goal is. In this workshop, participants will be creating short graphic works of two to six pages. For the first session, you are going to go over some stuff and do some creative exercises, but every other session will be dedicated to creating comics during the workshop. The end goal is to collect everyone's finished work and publish it in an anthology book. I use the two to six pages as a good average of what students can realistically complete in a four-part workshop. I always get asked by one or two students if they can make more than six pages. And I always answer, "Yes, you can make more than six pages. But I'm only guaranteeing that we will print up to six pages in the final anthology book, so please try to make something that is a satisfying read in only six pages, even if it goes on after that."

It is not easy to tell a satisfying story in two to six pages, and I tell workshop participants that. It is hard. But it is a good creative challenge. A classic formula for a good short story is to set up expectations and then have something unexpected

happen—in the style of O. Henry or Shirley Jackson. *The Complete Future Shocks*, by British comic publisher 2000 AD, is a collection of short comic book stories that exclusively follow the twist ending format. But short stories can have more in them than surprise. *Love is Love*, a comic book response to the tragic Orlando nightclub shooting, is a compilation of dozens of one- and two-page comic book stories that explore loss and tragedy and resilience with devastating impact in a minimal amount of pages. *1001 Nights of Snowfall* is a short story comics collection that has many twist endings and also some significant emotional impact.

After you cover Comic Book Terminology and the 3 Rules of Readability, you can cap off day one of the workshop with a thumbnail exercise. Thumbnails, as we explained in Chapter 2, are a quick way of laying out your design and figuring out any problems you might have before you commit a lot of time to drawing. I like to give students real scripts from comic books to use. If you want, you can use the Linda Splitz script from Chapter 2. Or any comic book script will work. Trade paperback collections of comics often have scripts in the back. Find one you like. Give each student the copy of the script and challenge them to thumbnail a page or two. Only give them a few minutes to do this. Remember, thumbnails are quick, not pretty. Once everyone is done, compare the thumbnails and talk about the difference. Point out any obvious errors, and praise things that are inventive. Even working from the same script, there will be incredible diversity in what each student comes up with. Then compare the thumbnails to the final art of the comic.

When you wrap up your first workshop, don't forget to collect the Comic Jam that's been going around the room. End the day by telling everyone that their job before the next class is to decide what they want their two- to six-page comic to be and thumbnail it before the next workshop session. The next three workshop sessions will be dedicated to drawing the finished comics in class. As students work on their comics, circle the room and ask questions or offer advice.

I like to play documentaries on comic books in the background during the workshops. There are all kinds of great mini workshop videos online. Some feature-length documentaries I like to show include: *STRIPPED: The Comics Documentary* (<http://www.strippedfilm.com>) and *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*. The film *Comic Book Confidential* is quite good as well, but be warned that when it covers the underground comix scene of the 1960s and 1970s, it shows some comics with decidedly adult content (I always skip over that part when I show the film to teens). Playing documentaries in the background gives the experts a chance to do a little teaching via osmosis. And it creates a nice background while everyone is hunkered down, drawing.

When you've concluded all your workshop sessions, gather up everyone's work and print it in a book. Give a copy to each student. Add some to your library's collection. It's going to be great!



**MURDER MYSTERY,  
GRAPHIC NOVELS,  
AND MORE**

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Empowers librarians to teach graphic novel creation, create murder mystery events, make animated films, and offer other creative programs on a shoestring budget

Provides exercises and games librarians can use to kick-start creativity in teens

Includes other fun elements such as further information offered in word bubbles in the graphic novel section and a built-in flip book

**Thane Benson** is librarian for Denver Public Library. He is the writer and artist of the mystery graphic novel *Burnt*, the comic book miniseries *Quick: The Clockwork Knight*, and the serial web comic *HellHole*.

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