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# Using student-generated comic books in the classroom

Designing their own comic books can help students develop their writing, comprehension, and research skills.

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Media messages dominate our lives. Because we are surrounded by media—from books, magazines, film, television, computer games, the Internet—teachers should help their students become critical users of a variety of media sources (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Dyson, 1997). Students ought to recognize the impact popular culture has on their identities. They should also develop critical media literacy, including the ability to appraise the content of media messages (Buckingham, 1998). However, we join Luke (1997) in cautioning teachers not to require their students to overanalyze the very culture from which they derive so much pleasure and meaning.

Some teachers are reluctant to use film, comic strips, contemporary music, and other popular media in the classroom. They fear that such a nontraditional approach denies students time during which they could gain additional exposure to the canon. Many teachers want their students engaged in rigorous scholastic endeavors, and they may resist activities that appear frivolous. It can be difficult to validate outcomes of popular culture experiences in terms of teachers' goals and objectives.

Other teachers, however, welcome these additional sources of instruction. For three reasons, we recommend the use of popular culture with middle and high school students in all subject areas. First, popular culture is integral to the lives of most middle school students. Use of popular culture can, therefore, diminish the disparity

children perceive between their lives in and out of school by legitimizing many of their after-school pursuits (Buckingham, 1998). Second, students ought to become critical consumers of media messages, having developed the ability through exposure to accurately appraise media content for quality and accuracy (Alvermann et al., 1999; Dyson, 1997). Third, there is no denying that popular culture is popular. Students do enjoy it (Wright & Sherman, 1999).

Many advocate a popular-culture approach to teaching across the curriculum (Alvermann et al., 1999; Chilcoat, 1993; Dobrowolski, 1976; Koenke, 1981; Schoof, 1978; Swain, 1978). We suggest having students create comic books, particularly as a culminating activity to present their learning at the conclusion of a study unit. Our purpose in this article is to describe how comic-book design can be used to help students develop their writing, comprehension, and research skills in a cross-curricular activity.

## Comic-book history

The comic book has been staple reading material for children and youth since the 1930s. From their introduction until the 1950s, comic books were a central aspect of the culture of the United States. During World War II, comic books served two military purposes: as ballast for ships bound for Europe and as reading material distributed to American soldiers serving in the trenches (Bunce, 1996). In 1954, however, comic books came under severe attack for "corrupt[ing] the innocent minds of the American youth" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1994, p. 35). Throughout the 1950s and 60s, as many Americans fought for their civil rights, comic books fought for survival. Ideological publications called "comix" developed as underground tools to champion social causes (Bunce, 1996; Chilcoat & Ligon, 1994). In the 1970s comics reassumed their position of prominence. Even today, comic books remain popular worldwide, and "their scope continues to expand" (Bunce, p. 12). Indeed, one publisher claims that comic books are about to exert a greater impact than ever before (Wolk, 2000).

Recently the market for the graphic novel, a long-form comic book, has boomed. Wolk (2000) reported that "every couple of years there's a graphic novel so strong that it pulls in tens of thousands of new readers who haven't looked at comics in decades" (p. 38). One such graphic novel, *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* (Winick, 2000), was named a year 2000 Robert F. Sibert Award Honor Book. This new award is presented by the American Library Association for the "most distinguished informational book(s) for children" published in the preceding year (Clark, 2001).

## Comic books in the classroom

It is evident that comics are familiar to and popular with middle and high school students. The comic is a form of literature these students enjoy. Given the opportunity to create and share their own comic books, students engage in greater literacy exploration than they otherwise would, due to comics' popular and easily accessible format. Through comics students investigate the use of dialogue, succinct and dramatic vocabulary, and nonverbal communications. Such methodology helps to enliven a classroom. For example, creating a comic book can prevent historical content from being "boring and meaningless," as it often is in typical classrooms (Chilcoat, 1993, p. 113).

Designing a comic book provides an opportunity for students to be creative in the presentation of their writing. Constructing and sharing books is an essential ingredient in a holistic approach to language arts instruction. But in many classrooms, shared student writing is limited to two particular types—personal narratives of events from the students' lives or fictional constructions of their imaginations. Designing comic books generates expository composition, including historical and biographical writing. As well as providing opportunities for the expansion of students' linguistic intelligence, comic-book design allows students to explore and expand their visual-spatial intelligence (Gardner, 1999). Students who have artistic talent may be able to reveal their understanding in a way that is more compatible with their strengths than if they are limited to traditional forms of expression.

Use of comic books also enhances instruction in comprehension strategies. Ever since Durkin (1978–1979) called attention to the failure of reading and social studies teachers to effectively teach comprehension, teachers have been more aware

of the necessity of focusing on this area of student learning. Reviews of research indicate that retelling and determining importance of text are two of a relatively small set of comprehension strategies (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995). Constructing a comic book requires students to determine what is most important from their readings, to re-phrase it succinctly, and then to organize it logically. Indeed, one can consider identifying key ideas and then summarizing and reorganizing information in a comic-book format to be an illustrated, intensive version of the proven story-retelling strategy described by Gambrell, Pfeiffer, and Wilson (1985).

A further advantage to this approach is that it offers students an opportunity to refine their research skills. As a methodological tool, the comic book can narrow the scope of research and allow students to crystallize complex issues into logical and orderly patterns of understanding. During the process of comic-book design, students select and gather relevant information. They examine and then present this information in a visual manner that both informs and entertains. Thus, students are engaged in cross-curricular activities embracing language arts, visual arts, and content areas.

Discussing the use of comic books for literacy instruction, Fenwick (1998) wrote, "Teachers who allow their use, often feel uneasy about it, anxiously keeping an eye on the classroom door and hoping no-one will come in to question the legitimacy of their decisions" (p. 142). We, on the other hand, possess no such timidity, believing that for children the important thing is not so much what they read, but that they read. While the use of comic books in school may be controversial, there is no doubt that the comic is a popular source of reading for students.

## Comic-book construction

We will now outline the general procedures that one might follow in incorporating this technique into classroom instruction. This format can be adapted for group projects or for individual assignments. We also provide an example of one middle school student's comic-book presentation.

Before students actually begin to design their comic-book creations, they need to select their topic focus, which ideally is related to a current unit of classroom study. They also need to locate, collect, and organize their information.

***Page layout.*** A comic book is made up of a number of pages with two to nine panels per page. The panel is the fundamental unit of comic-book art. As a series of still pictures, panels combine with other panels to convey scenes in the comic-book story. Each panel is a bordered illustration that contains visual information—drawings, word balloons, captions, and sound effects.

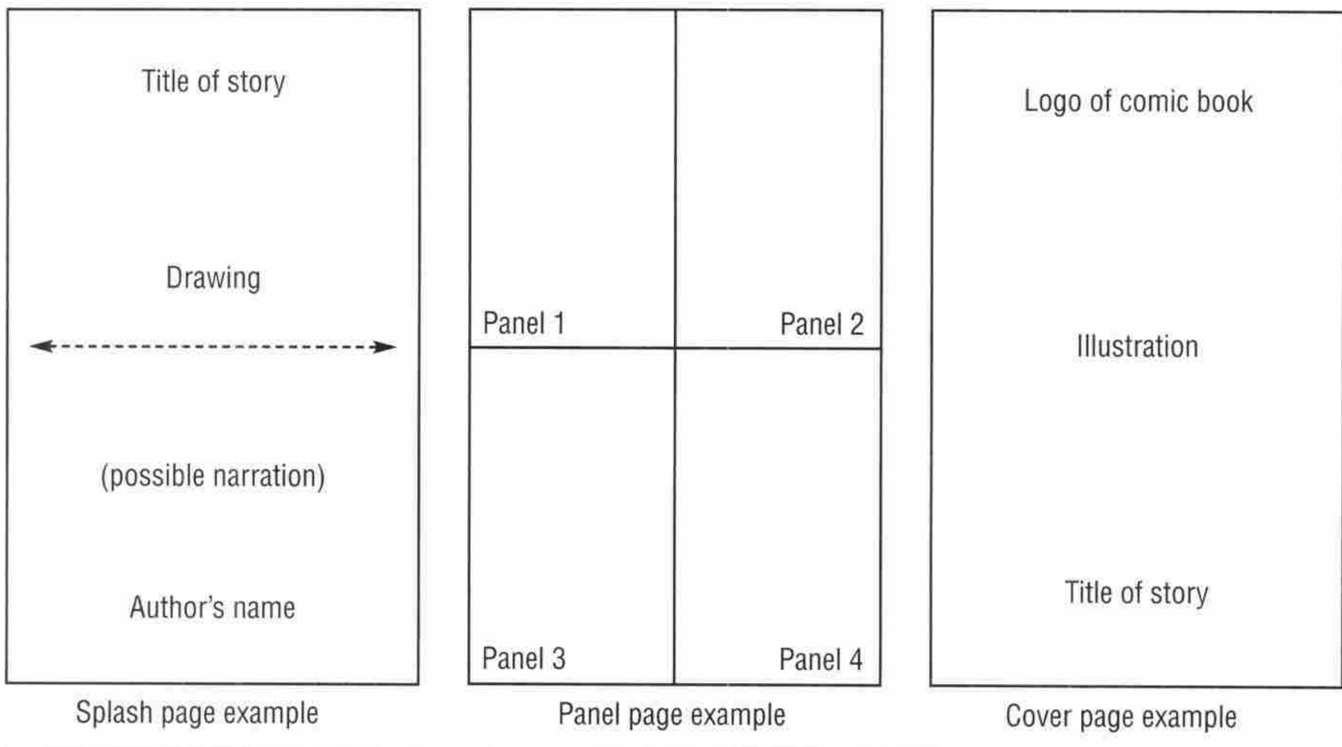
To structure a comic book, one must first determine the number of scenes required to tell the story. Scenes can be as brief as two or three panels, or they can stretch out into several pages. Group each sequence of panels into an arrangement that portrays the scene. Determine the size and shape of each panel. The panel's shape is designed to accentuate feeling, provide dramatic impact, and define movement. Varying the size of the panels is one way of slowing down and speeding up the action within a scene. Adding more panels speeds up the action, while reducing panels slows the pacing.

In order to keep the story flowing smoothly, panels are usually rectangular. The number and placement of panels on a page influence the ease with which readers follow the story. Modifying the size or shape of panels makes the story more readable and dramatic. Layouts should be simple, clean, and concise. Too much information in one panel or unusual panel shapes can both inhibit the flow of a story and interfere with understanding.

Panel borders can be drawn freehand or with a ruler. The space in between the panels is called a "gutter." Sometimes this is no more than a simple dividing line. Other times it can imply action, movement, or transition between panels.

The author might effectively use a variety of panels to satisfy different purposes. Contiguous panels provide a montage of same-size panels and suggest rapid movement. For example, five or six individual thin vertical panels presented together create a rapid-fire exchange effect. Text-heavy panels may contain a picture with a side caption bar, an unusual amount of text, a large number of narrative boxes, or a cluster of captions. Insert panels are usually small rectangular panels that highlight in detail something occurring in a larger panel.

**FIGURE 1**
**Sample panel designs**




Metapanels are a set of effective smaller insert or inner panels. See Figure 1 for design examples.

The cover page and the "splash page" are important to every comic book. The cover is a striking fully illustrated page that tells the story in one picture. The illustration highlights the basic story line, giving the reader a hint of the comic's content. It should portray the major character(s). The drawing must be clear, visually concise, powerful, dramatic, intriguing, and energetic. The cover page should also include the comic's title and author's name.

The splash page is a one-page panel that introduces the story, establishing a frame of reference and the setting. It usually contains the beginning scene with a caption box floating on the page, the title of the story at the top of the page, and author credits somewhere near the bottom. The title of the story can be both a pictorial element and a narrative device.

***Story development.*** To develop the plot for a comic-book story, three components need to be considered: story structure, script format, and characterization. Attention to each of these will lead to an effective structure for the comic book.

*Story structure.* Story structure is a narrative device used to help balance the story by dividing the series of events into three basic parts—a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The beginning establishes the main characters and the conflict or problem of the story. The middle contains the bulk of the story. Through a series of events, the story develops and escalates as characters face difficulties in achieving their goals. The ending provides the climax and resolution of the story.

The opening scenes describe the setting, introduce the characters, establish their situations, and present opening events and conflicts. The middle scenes introduce additional supporting characters, emphasize a number of interconnected events, and create conflict important to the story. The closing scenes build further tension and action, reaching a climax and leading to a satisfying resolution or ending.

*Script formatting.* After the plot has been developed, one needs to create a visual road map for the design of the comic book. The story needs to be translated into a number of panels and pages. One must determine how many panels and pages are needed for the beginning, middle, and end scenes and decide how many panels will fit on each page. The number of panels on each page depends on how the sequence of each of the individual scenes will play out. Each panel includes a rough sketch of its setting, action, and characters, and also notes about possible dialogue, captions, or sound effects. These panels can serve as a story outline. For example, one might show borders, make notes about story events, sketch stick figures representing characters, and jot down possible conversation. Script formatting affords an opportunity to check for inconsistencies and errors of action and sequence before making final drawings.

*Characterization.* Comic characters are generally not developed as completely as one would normally expect in story narratives. Comic book characters are usually portrayed stereotypically, as larger than life. The protagonist is all conquering, all capable, and all good (e.g., Superman, Batman, the X-Men), whereas the antagonist is the opposite (e.g., Lex Luthor, The Riddler, Magneto). By contrast, as this activity is a means through which students demonstrate learning, the teacher should stress that students invest care in developing their characters. For example, if students are reporting on a historical figure, a scientific event, or a medical breakthrough, they must ensure characters are portrayed as rounded, somewhat realistic individuals.

To avoid confusion, it is important to exercise care in constructing and drawing characters that can be easily distinguished from one another. One needs to portray characters' abilities, attitudes, appearances, strengths, and weaknesses in simple and accurate terms.

**Drawing.** Although the purpose of this project is not necessarily to produce fine art, if the teacher reminds students of a few simple guidelines their end products will be more visually pleasing. We suggest students draw each panel as realistically and as believably as possible. In each scene, students should endeavor to reflect what they have derived from their research. Students should keep their drawings simple, avoiding the clutter of too much detail. Finally, it is best not to place the "center of interest" in the middle of a panel. A more compelling alternative is to place the focus somewhere else in the panel.

The teacher may encourage students who lack necessary confidence in their drawing ability to use computer clip art. Alternatively, because students possess diverse talents, class members could select different roles in creating group comics. Possible roles could include researchers, writers, and artists. The more talented artists might be assigned to create the art around which the comic will be built.

*Foreground and background.* In comic books, there are two planes where action takes place—foreground and background. Generally, people or things in the foreground are the main focus of the panel. This is where most of the action takes place. Foreground illustrations are often larger and more detailed, sometimes partially obscuring background objects.

Along with narration, the background helps create the panel's setting. Background action usually complements the main action. A background can also serve an integral purpose, depicting such things as fire, storms, or buildings. Excessive background detail can, however, slow the story's pace, distracting the reader from the plot.

### Picture books on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Alder, D.A. (1986). *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Free at last.* Ill. R. Casilla. New York: Holiday House.

Alder, D.A. (1989). *A picture book of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ill. R. Casilla. New York: Holiday House.

Bray, R.L. (1995). *Martin Luther King.* Ill. M. Zeldis. New York: Greenwillow.

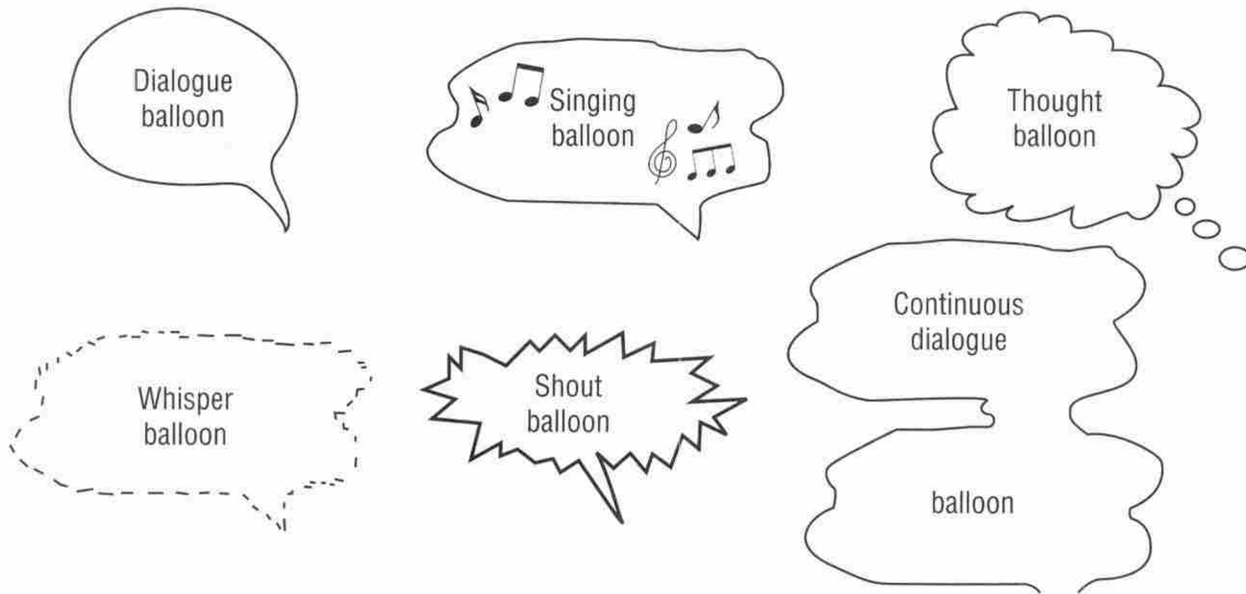
King, M.L., Jr., (1997). *I have a dream.* New York: Scholastic.

Livingston, M.C. (1992). *Let freedom ring: A ballad of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Holiday House.

Marzollo, J. (1993). *Happy birthday Martin Luther King.* Ill. J.B. Pinkney. New York: Scholastic.

Ringgold, F. (1995). *My dream of Martin Luther King.* New York: Crown.

**FIGURE 2**
**Sample dialogue balloon designs**




Provided the background details have been established in an earlier panel, one might omit background details and merely draw characters against a white backdrop.

*Drawing characters.* While narration helps tell the story, images show the story. Backgrounds and foregrounds provide the context for action, but it is the characters that carry the action. One must, therefore, take care in depicting characters. Their moods, feelings, and attitudes can be expressed in facial expressions, gestures, and body movements.

*Penciling, inking, and coloring.* Cartooning requires penciling, inking, and coloring. Penciling entails lightly drawing background and foreground details in all panels. After the details of the panels have been penciled in, the inking stage involves tracing the pencil lines to make them permanent. Adding color helps create mood and stimulate interest.

*Camera angle.* A persistent problem in comic books is the sameness in the pages. To make a more dynamic story, one generates interest by providing different visual perspectives. One way to accomplish this is to consider the composition of each panel in terms of a "camera angle." The illustrator needs to be aware of the various types of shots or angles available to lay out a panel. Common camera angles used in comic books include the following:

1. Establishing shots are used to establish the setting of a scene.
2. High-angle shots portray the scene from any angle higher than eye level.
3. Low-angle shots are those that depict the scene from angles lower than eye level.
4. Long shots, which are also referred to as wide-screen shots, capture all characters, action, or settings within a single panel.
5. Medium shots host action in the foreground and the background concurrently.
6. Close-up shots are visual exclamation marks, portraying a character's emotions through facial or other expressive gestures.
7. Extreme close-up shots, where only part of the face is shown, reflect intense emotion. When used on inanimate objects, they draw attention to specific details.
8. Down-shots, which are also referred to as "bird's-eye-view shots," show an aerial

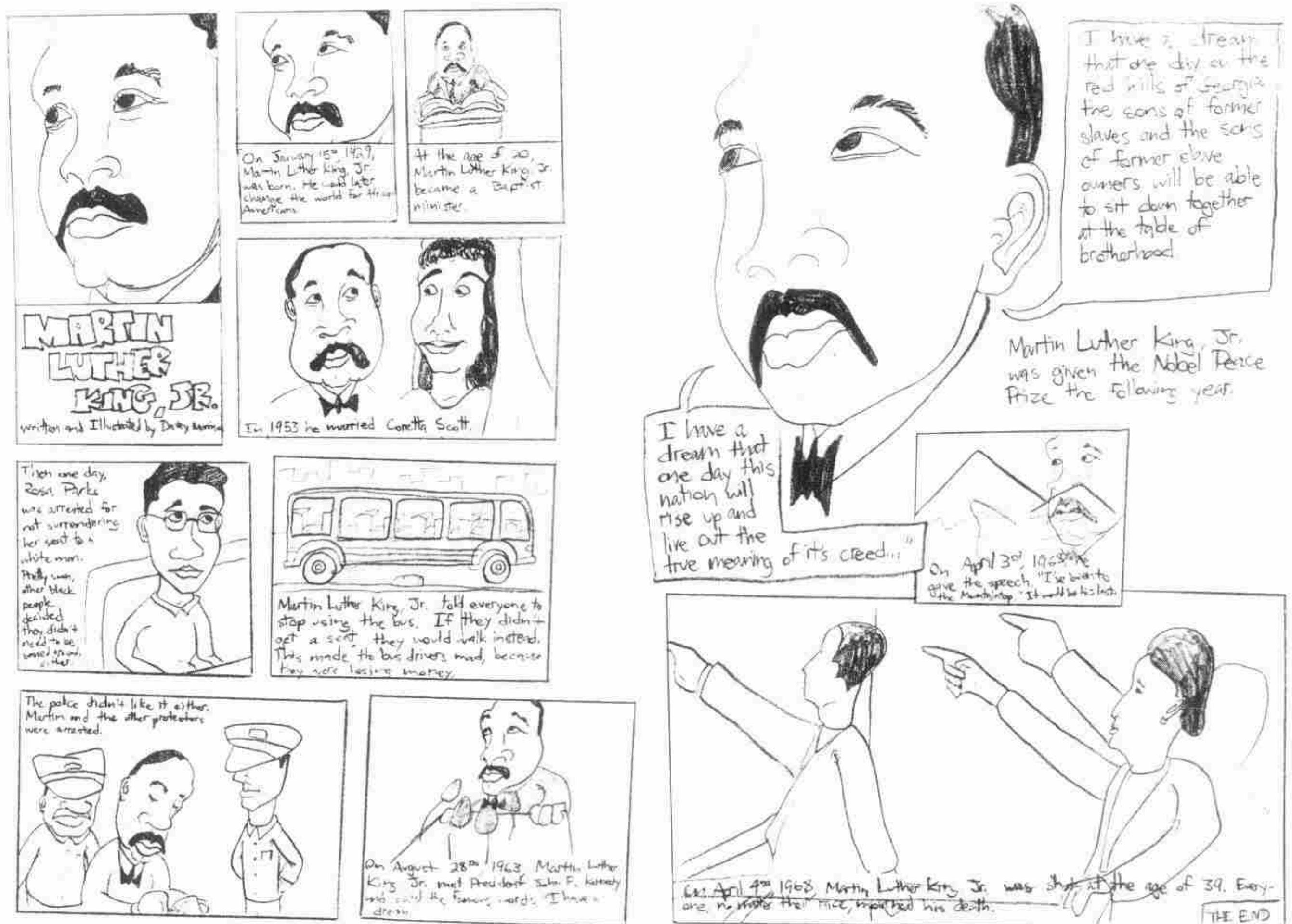



**FIGURE 3**
**Student's comic book**

perspective, looking straight or nearly straight down.

9. Up-shots, which are also known as "worm's-eye-view shots," portray a low perspective. These shots may make a character appear more impressive or menacing.
10. Over-the-shoulder shots literally look over a character's shoulder, with the character's head and shoulders visible near the edge of the panel.
11. Point-of-view shots are meant to represent what one of the characters sees.
12. Reverse angle shots provide the opposite perspective to that of the preceding panel.

***Narration.*** Narration is chiefly used to convey essential written information and to carry the plot forward. There are three basic types of narration: caption boxes, dialogue balloons, and sound effects.

The caption box contains the narration. It is third-person commentary describing the action in the panel. It may provide information about time, dates, names, or locations. It is usually squared off at the top or bottom of the panel with text inside.

The dialogue balloon is a graphic dramatic device inside the panel that contains characters' thoughts or words. It is a shape linked with a "tail," or a row of ellipses, pointing to the character whose thoughts or words are being portrayed.

An off-panel balloon, with the tail pointing to a side of a panel, is a useful device to emphasize a point or just to make the panel more interesting. Most balloons occur in the top third of the panel. When more than one balloon appears within a panel, the highest balloon is read first. Manipulations of graphic elements of the balloon, such as its shape, size, and boldness, combine with words and illustrations to render desired emotions. Figure 2 provides several sample balloon designs.

A sound effect is a graphic written representation of a particular sound. It is a bold, onomatopoeic word located near its source. The size, color, and arrangement of the lettering help to capture the essence of the desired sound.

When inscribing caption boxes, dialogue balloons, and sound effects, one should remember to keep lettering simple, straight, direct, and legible. This contributes to the overall quality of the comic-book presentation.

## Culminating activities

Culminating activities give students opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to share their creative work with others. Among the many possible alternatives, we suggest two: a comic-book convention and a panel discussion.

The convention is a social event that features displays of students' comic books. Students design trade-show booths, each with a dramatic backdrop featuring a giant display of the student's cover pages. Within these booths, students feature the original pages of their comic books and summarize their content. In addition, students provide information on how their comic book was designed, what kind of research was invested into its development, and how the book relates to the assigned topic.

At a given time, approximately one third of the class members present their comic books in this fashion, as the others view and discuss the various comic books with their creators. Alternatively, others could be invited to attend this event, allowing all comic book creators to present simultaneously.

A second activity might take the form of a panel discussion. Students are divided into small panel discussion groups of four to six, within which they

## Suggested further reading on comics

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Barrier, M., & Williams, M. (Eds.). (1981). *A Smithsonian book of comic book comics.* New York: Smithsonian Press.

Brodsky, G. (1999). *How to draw comics for dummies.* New York: Solson.

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Buckler, R. (1986). *How to become a comic book artist.* New York: Solson.

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Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and sequential art.* Tamarag, FL: Poorhouse Press.

Eisner, W. (1995). *Graphic storytelling.* Tamarag, FL: Poorhouse Press.

Feiffer, J. (1977). *The great comic book heroes.* New York: Dial Press.

Gifford, D. (1984). *The international book of comics.* New York: Crescent.

Giordano, D., & McLaughlin, F. (1982). *The illustrated comic art workshop* (Vols. 1 & 2). New York: Garco Systems.

Goulart, R. (1986). *Great history of comic books: The definitive illustrated history from the 1890s to the 1980s.* Chicago: Contemporary.

Grouth, G., & Fiore, R. (Eds.). (1988). *The new comics.* New York: Berkley.

Hall, R. (1997). *The cartoonist's workbook.* New York: Sterling.

Hamm, J. (1982). *Cartooning the head and figure.* New York: Perigee.

Hamm, J. (1982). *Drawing the head and figure.* New York: Perigee.

Hart, C. (1995). *How to draw comic book heroes and villains.* New York: Watson-Guptil.

Hart, C. (1998). *How to draw comic book bad guys and gals.* New York: Watson-Guptill.

Harvey, R.C. (1996). *The art of the comic book: An aesthetic history.* Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi.

*(continued)*

## Suggested further reading on comics (continued)


Inge, M.T. (1990). *Comics as culture.* Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi.

Kubert, J. (1999). *Superheroes: Joe Kubert's wonderful world of comics.* New York: Watson-Guptill.

Lee, S. (1978). *How to draw comics the Marvel way.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lewandowski, J. (1996). *The new official Marvel try-out book.* New York: Marvel Comics.

Lupoff, D., & Thompson, D. (1970). *All in color for a dime.* New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House.

Martin, G., & Rude, S. (1997). *The art of comic book inking.* Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art.* Northamption, MA: Tundra.

McKenzie, A. (1987). *How to draw and sell comic strips for newspapers and comic books.* Cincinnati, OH: North Light.

O'Brien, R. (1977). *The golden age of comic books, 1937–1945.* New York: Ballantine.

Robbins, T., & Yronwode, C. (1979). *Women and the comics.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sabin, R. (1996). *Comics, comix, and graphic novels: A history of comic art.* London: Phaidon.

Salisbury, M. (1999). *Writers on comics scriptwriting.* London: Titan.

Savage, W.W. (1990). *Comic books and America, 1945–1954.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Shooter, J. (1983). *The official Marvel comics try-out book.* New York: Marvel Comics.

Thomson, R., & Hewison, B. (1985). *How to draw and sell cartoons.* Cincinnati, OH: North Light.

Van Hise, J. (1989). *How to draw art for comic books: Lessons from the masters.* Las Vegas, NV: Pioneer.

Whitaker, S. (1994). *The encyclopedia of cartooning techniques.* London: Quarto. Witek, J. (1989). *Comic books as history.* Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi.


exhibit and discuss their comic books. Behind each discussion area is a backdrop similar to the trade show booths. The activity begins with students displaying their comic books and giving brief synopses. Then they discuss the development, research, and motivation for their comic books. Finally, they field questions about their experiences. The teacher may encourage students to develop a set of questions they could ask panel members.

## Student example—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Although there are many possible uses of comic-book design within the classroom, for the purpose of this article we provide a social studies example with Martin Luther King, Jr. as its focus. For this project, students were encouraged to read from a variety of sources to find information regarding the life of this civil rights leader. This unit might occupy a 2- or 3-week period during which students can explore the topic from many perspectives. After becoming familiar with the topic, students can begin creating their comic-book presentations.

Initially students familiarize themselves with the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition to a number of other informational resources, a variety of quality picture books are readily available from many libraries. Students can begin with these abbreviated texts in order to quickly gain an overview of the main features of King's life. The sample comic about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., created by seventh-grade student David Morrison, appears in Figure 3. We have also included references for selected works appropriate for middle school readers in the Sidebar.

Students who have created comics have commented on the large amount of time (approximately 10 hours) required to complete this activity. Despite the time commitment, they report positive feelings regarding comic-book activities. One student observed, "After I completed the project I felt pleased with myself. My artwork turned out better than expected and I felt that I had learned a lot about Helen Keller." Another student commented on his lasting feelings of pride associated with the activity: "After completing this project, I was very proud of what I had accomplished. I kept looking through it amazed at myself. I don't think I will ever throw it away. It creates a real sense of ownership."

## A means to an end

Student-generated comic books serve a variety of purposes. Comic-book construction "is like literature in that it is concerned with telling a story, like illustration in that it uses drawings to give visual information, and like cinema in that it uses a combination of words and images to carry its message" (Tiner, 1997, p. 145).

The comic-book activity described in this article is a means to an end. By creating and sharing their own comic books, students engage in literacy exploration. They also investigate use of dialogue, succinct and dramatic vocabulary, and nonverbal communications in interesting and lively ways. A creative presentation of student expository writing can be achieved by designing comic books.

Constructing comic books requires students to thoughtfully use appropriate comprehension strategies. Students determine main ideas from their research and summarize their learning in comic-book format. Students display information in a manner that both informs and entertains, while engaging in cross-curricular activities that embrace language arts, visual arts, and content areas. For further readings about the history, art, and construction of comic books, see the Sidebar.

The comic-book activity presents an innovative outlet for students, providing them with an avenue to construct meaningful associations and relationships. Students who have participated in this creative process support it enthusiastically. They generally believe that they learn a great deal more from this type of approach than by traditional teaching methods.

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