All Levels

How to Draw a Comic

Rama Hughes

Over the summer, I had the pleasure of teaching cartooning workshops at the Art Center for Kids in Pasadena, California. I created this instructional comic to teach my students the step-by-step process by which they could create their own comic strips.

I distributed the "How to Draw a Comic" comic at the beginning of each workshop. I used each panel of the comic as the introduction to a new cartooning lesson. In our first classes, for example, we discussed how cartoonists and comic book artists come up with their ideas. I provided students with a list of "story starters" to get their creative juices flowing.

Comics don't *have* to be funny, of course, but I did challenge my students to write a joke for their first comic strip. To that end, we also discussed several joke-writing techniques. Some of those techniques include surprise endings (or "gags"), juxtaposition, exaggeration, list making, and schadenfreude (or "pleasure at the misfortune of others").

In later classes, we discussed story structure: How to create a comic with a problem, complications, and a resolution. Students wrote or doodled their own ideas in a sketchbook or on loose sheets of paper.

Teaching Through Questioning

I like to teach through questioning whenever I can, so I tried to present each new panel with a question. "Why should you plan your comic with rough sketches?" I asked when we began our work on panel three. Students offered their ideas and grasped the reasons pretty quickly.

My favorite student response was, "Because your first idea isn't always your best idea." Rough sketches help cartoonists to see their ideas and improve upon them before they commit to more detailed work. Panel four is basically a checklist that helps students plan their rough sketches.

I gave students rulers and triangles with which they could draw their own frames, or panels. This is the step students needed the most hands-on help with. I circled the room to provide it, but, for the youngest students, I also provided comic strip templates with four, six, or nine panels already printed onto it.

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Words Before Pictures

"Why should you write your words before you draw anything?" This was the most controversial instruction on the list, but it was praised by professional cartoonists that I know. To coach my students towards the reason, I relied on a demonstration: Draw a panel on the board, fill it with a drawing, then try to add words and a speech balloon. Students will see that the words will not fit legibly once the drawing is complete.

By writing the words and drawing the talk balloons first, students will have an easier time drawing around the lettering. This is a very important lesson for students because, in their own work, they will be reluctant to erase a finished drawing to make room for their text.

"Why should a cartoonist do all her drawings in pencil?" Students are quick to answer that pencil is easy to erase. This stage of a comic is actually called "penciling." It helps to remind students to draw lightly to make erasing even easier.

Inking Cartoons

"Why do cartoonists ink their drawings?" Yes, it does make it look better, but it usually takes some prompting to get students to the professional answer: Ink drawings are easier to reproduce than pencil drawings.

Encourage students to be careful when they ink. Remind them not to *trace* their pencil drawings but to *improve* their pencil drawings. This is a great time to introduce advanced students to shadows, shading, stippling, or hatching.

For a professional presentation, have students erase any visible pencil lines and whiteout any smudges or spills.

If you have the time and resources, it is fun to collect the cartoons and teach students how to copy and bind them into their own comic books. Each of my classes created, published, and finally bound their own anthology by the last day of each workshop.

If you are curious, you can see some of my students' comic strips and comic books on my Sunday Funnies Flickr set at www.flickr.com/photos/ramahughes/sets/72157619643494099.

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Go to schoolartsonline.com for reproducible comic strip templates from this lesson.

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