

Mix and Match Rows – Comics Handouts for Younger Students

Contributed by Ben Towle

The Background

I've taught comics classes for various age groups—as young as second grade, up through college level— and without at doubt, the most challenging classes to teach are the ones with the youngest students. Paradoxically, the very love of spontaneous drawing that makes this age group so interested in and enthusiastic about comics, is itself opposed to the laborious, and often painstaking, process of planning and slow, progressive execution that goes into creating professional comics.

Any teacher who has attempted to teach comics classes to very young students—say, 2nd grade through 5th grade—is likely familiar with the breakneck speed with which they produce pages of comics. Coupled with this is this particular age group's well known adversity to pre-planning of any variety. Even the concept of drawing first in pencil, then later inking over those drawings, is a difficult "sell," and generating any understanding of or interest in doing thumbnails of a story before executing it is unlikely.

Similarly perplexing to young students is the idea that comics are *drawn* at a larger size than they're *printed*. Although a standard 6" x 9" inch comic book is usually drawn on a 10" x 15" inch page, good luck explaining *why* this is done to a third-grader! "Because it looks better when it's printed," doesn't carry a whole lot of weight with this group. Even in situations where I've gotten the students to work large, I've found it's very difficult to get them to engage in the somewhat unnatural but necessary behavior of writing one and a half times as large as their normal handwriting, such that when the artwork is reduced back down the words will be legible. If you find a second-grader's handwriting difficult to read normally, try it when it's been reprinted at 65% of it's normal size.

Further complicating matters has been the fact that most of the classes I've taught to young students have been relatively short workshops: classes totaling maybe four or six hours, spread over two or three sessions. Given the limited time available, I've tried to eliminate anything from the comics-making process that's not 100% necessary—and not 100% *fun*. Among the chief offenders in the category of "stuff that's not fun" is learning how to rule a page of bristol board to create panel borders. This task involves a fair amount of measuring and even some math to figure out how to divide pages into halves, quarters, thirds, whatever. At one point I ordered some pre-blue lined Manga sized paper for students to use, but this was almost as confusing because of the way these pages are ruled.

I've known teachers to really bang their heads against the wall trying to figure out ways around these problems—to *force* the students to thumbnail their stories, to plan the layout of each page and the sizes and shapes of all the panels, to learn to use a t-square to draw page borders, etc. But as far as I'm concerned, this is just banging the proverbial square peg through the round hole. As far as I'm concerned, your job as a comics teacher when dealing with this age group is mainly to foster a love of drawing comics, and to make the process of drawing comics as fun and exciting as possible, and to avoid weighing down what little time you have in class with activities that these young students aren't interested in and won't find enjoyable or enriching.

So, my challenge was to figure out a way to facilitate young students' comics-making, but:

- With no drawn advance planning—AKA: no thumbnails,
- With no page ruling. Whatever they're going to be drawing on, it's got to be ready to go,
- They've got to work at normal, printed size,
- Yet be somewhat flexible as far as page and panel layout goes.

And, to make life as easy as possible, given a room of 2nd, 3rd or 4th graders all demanding my attention simultaneously, it'd have to be:

- Able to be prepared in advance,
- And fairly self-explanatory and self-directed once the comics-making gets going.

The Handouts

So, I've come up with what I call the "mix and match" comics creating system, which seems to satisfy all of the above requirements. I've used this in a classroom environment several times now and it seems to pass the "real world" teaching test pretty well. Other than standard drawing tools, all you'll need besides the handouts are some glue sticks.

Here's what to do:

Print out the page 4 of this document and make a ton of photocopies of it. Using a paper cutter, cut along the dotted gray lines. Discard the left over white strips from the very top and the very bottom of the pages. What you've got now are discrete rows of panels, all based on a standard nine-panel comics page grid. Be sure to keep the three types of rows (one panel, two panel and three panel) in separate piles.

Now print out the 5th page of this document and make a ton of photocopies of it as well. This is the template page—no need for any cutting.

Now that you've got your supplies, here's how it works in the classroom:

Put all the stacks of paper—all three panel row choices, as well as the template pages—out so the students can get at them.

When students are ready to start drawing their stories, they will basically have zero pre-planning to do; they simply decide whether the first row on their page needs to have one big panel, two medium sized panels, or three tall skinny panels. Whatever they chose, they can just go up and grab whatever type of row they need and get going.

Note that all of the panels have a very light dotted line up at the top (along with "words" written out). If you tell the students to keep their pictures below that line and their words above it, you won't have to worry about trying to get them to draw their word balloons *before* they draw the pictures—yet another practice that kids seem to find counterintuitive and tend to resist. I've found that the dotted lines, and the other stuff printed in gray, will generally not show up if you scan the student work later to put together a class comic book—especially if you can get the students to go over their work in black ink.

Once a student has completed three rows of panels, he or she can grab one of the template pages and a glue stick, and glue the three panels down onto the template page in the proper order. The dotted lines on the template page show the student right where to glue each of the completed rows down. Now the student has a completed "page"--no measuring, no thumbnailing, no enlarging/reducing. They can continue on in this fashion until they've got a completed story.

The only minor stumbling block I've encountered to this method is just being sure to emphasize to the students that their stories should end with a completed page—meaning, the *last* page should always be a *full* page of three rows. When I see a student getting toward his or her last page, I usually go over and ask them how they're going to end the story to make sure they know to have it end on a completed page.

The pages produced by this method are the correct size to be turned into a finished class anthology comic book if you so desire—without any reducing or enlarging required. While older students are sometimes really interested in the production aspects of making the anthology as a "mini-comic" using a photocopier, younger students I've found not to be much interested in this. Given that, and the usual restrictive time frame, I'll generally make a single quick photocopy of each student's best story (or just take the originals and return them later) and assemble a print-on-demand comic book from some place like Lulu.com that the parents can purchase and have mailed to them.

Arts Academy Comics #1, shown here is one I've done using the mix and match comics method. You can download it for free as a PDF by clicking "Add download to cart":

<http://stores.lulu.com/benzilla>

Happy comics-making... and teaching!

-Ben

3 PANEL ROW

WORDS

WORDS

WORDS

2 PANEL ROW

WORDS

WORDS

1 PANEL ROW

WORDS

ROW 1

Empty rectangular box for Row 1, defined by dotted lines.

ROW 2

Empty rectangular box for Row 2, defined by dotted lines.

ROW 3

Empty rectangular box for Row 3, defined by dotted lines.