

The Serious Business of Graphic Novels Guide

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1. This is just the title slide, something static yet interesting to have on the screen while the audience is waiting. In addition to specifying the date and place (to make it seem tailored for them), I really like the contrast between a “serious” title and a very “un-serious” image (in this case, my own caricature); it’s also a decent place to “hide” your own logo or company name in plain sight, if such is the case for you.
I would only ask, as people modify and use this presentation as a template, that they mention its being “Derived from *The Serious Business of Graphic Novels* by A. David Lewis, courtesy of the NACAE” as some sort of sub-title. It needn’t even be that big and it gives **you** a bail-out if the audience objects to something or asks a question to which you don’t know the answer.
2. This slide is entirely optional but highly necessary in some fashion if the group to whom you are speaking is unfamiliar with you. That is, if it’s your own class, skip it; they know you, and you already have (hopefully!) a rapport. But, if you’re relatively new to them, then this should be your “credentials slide:” Why should they listen to you about comics? The goal here is “show, don’t tell” -- You’ll explain what your own book covers or university campus photographs or company building means aloud. This slide is to “distract” them, in a sense, with visual evidence.
3. Who’s he? He’s Spider-Man, of course, Marvel Comics’ flagship character and, arguably, one of the most well-known superheroes in modern Western society. Pick someone else if you want, but he’s a no-brainer for most kids. This will help highlight, especially after your “credentials” may have just been given, that the presentation will neither be all about you or ridiculously boring.
4. Who’s he? He’s the incredible Hulk, another easily recognized superhero, though one with distinctly different motives, abilities, and conflicts than Spider-Man. Moreover, kids might relate to him best for his temper. Again, this is just to drive the point home to them that they know something about comics already, even if it’s just through movies or other separate media.
5. Who’s he? It’s Superman, at least the cinematic Christopher Reeves version. Mixing the media here is important not just to set up the next slide, but, again, to emphasize that the impact of comics is everywhere in our culture. (As a side note, showing this Superman as opposed to *Smallville*’s or the *Superman Returns* version may lead, in post-presentation discussion, to more mature students addressing either death or (im)mortality surrounding comics. Take advantage of that opportunity!)
6. The trait all these movies have in common, some more obviously than others, is that they are all adapted from comic books and graphic novels. Once more, these

opening slides are to (1) knock down comics' isolation from other media, (2) establish that comics and television or film are very closely connected, and (3) have the audience feel they already know a good deal about comics.

7. We leave (briefly) other media and recenter on comics themselves, though we do so by trying to deconstruct them. That is, this next sequence aims at problematizing the definition of a "comic book."
To paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Stewart, it's hard to define what a comic book is, but we know it when we see it...even if we don't think we've ever read one! How do we do that?? All this slide can do at the moment is elimination some false assumptions and stereotypes about comics. You can also, before you reveal the big cross-out symbol, poll or question the audience as to what they *think* a comic book is (or, even better, what they think *others* think a comic book is).
8. Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* is used as an example here of what *might* be a comic. There's a decent chance that it's been read or seen by several members of your audience. Do they think it's a comic? That is, it has words, it has pictures, it presents them in a sequence (FYI, that's why comics are sometimes called or lumped in with "sequential art"), and it tells a story. Yet, we do not consider it a comic – Assure the audience that you'll get to why or why not in a moment.
9. A standard safety card taken from an airline flight. Much more sequentially here and far fewer words. Are words required for something to be a comic? (There's no concrete answer here; some theorists & creators say yes, some say no.) Is it not a comic because it's only instructional and serious?
10. A much less serious (and, in some ways, disturbing) version of the airline safety card. (If the audience is quite young, don't dwell here; tell them it's funny and they'll believe you, but there's no real need to explain why crashing is such great ironic fun.) How much does this change things?
11. The issue of what a comic is should be good and complicated now. It's time to alleviate some of that pressure. To do so, this slide presents Scott McCloud, a highly regarded comic book scholar (and comic book creator, too, of *Zot!* among other titles) who wrote *Understanding Comics* in 1994.
12. McCloud was largely inspired by comics legend Will Eisner (who died rather recently); in addition to creating *The Spirit*, Eisner wrote, before McCloud, one of the first and only serious books on the creation of comics. His book, *Comics & Sequential Art*, eventually led McCloud to write his own, from which the definition on the screen is taken. It's a big, ugly definition, and, as such, assure the students that a lot of people have problems with it...but few people can come up with a better one.
Incidentally, Eisner is also credited to have published the first comic book work called a "graphic novel." Others had thrown the term around before and some may have referred to their work this way, but his *A Contract with God* is the acknowledged title holder. As for what distinguishes a "comic book" from a

- “graphic novel,” tell the kids that’s even **harder** to figure out – Usually, though, it’s just a matter of size and format, sadly.
13. R.C. Harvey’s definition of comics is one of the few that stands up to McCloud’s. (Like McCloud, Harvey is a long-time comics creator as well as intellectual on the medium.) While his definition emphasizes the interplay between pictures and words, he leaves out the idea of sequentiality. Harvey’s definition extends to comic strips like *The Far Side* or *Family Circus* with their single slides rather than exclusively comic books. (FYI: McCloud never mentions words outright in his definition – He simply lumps them in as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence.”)
This isn’t a bad time to ask the audience what the difference is between a comic strip and a comic book; this presentation deals rather exclusively with comic books, so it isn’t a bad idea to draw that line at this point for them. Emphasize the “**book**” part of the name: Does it have multiple pages to tell a story (which **usually** – though not always – differentiates these two, technique-sharing media)?
14. Jumping from a dicey topic into something more comfortable, I’ve used this slide to explain how I got into comics. That is, I bought comics in the 1980s because they featured toys that I played with. Even if this is not true for you, it could be worth keeping this slide if only to note how people can become familiar with comics without reading them. (Or, you could substitute this slide for video games featuring comic book characters, perhaps.)
15. This slide lays the groundwork for introducing **genre**. It’s not helpful for students to think comics are only about superheroes. Here, though, I did try to portray – though my own autobiography – that a majority of the comics market is superheroes and, thanks to my introduction through toy-based titles, I was led to superheroes.
While superheroes do generally have their origins in the field of comics, it’s worth reminding students that there were super heroes (two words!) before comics. That is, costumes, powers, secret identities, and so forth are the hallmark of the modern superhero which **did** arise from American comic books in the 1930s; however, there have been plenty of do-gooders (some with powers, some with costumes, etc.) long before comics (e.g. Zorro, Beowulf, Sherlock Holmes). This medium merely formalized them, if that’s any help.
16. Another way students (and adults!) may know about comics and its characters is through other non-storytelling products, like commercial tie-ins. Costumes, cereals, and even bed sheets could have influenced all of us. This is another nice time to poll the audience: Who’s gone trick-or-treating as a superhero? (Be careful, though – Younger generations may never have heard of “underoos!”)
17. Just so that the presentation doesn’t get too side-tracked in the world of children’s fantasy and toys, this slide jumps ahead to the medium’s watershed year of 1986, when a number of “serious” graphic novels and comic books suddenly emerged in the mainstream. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* both

deconstructed the aging, laughable superhero genre, while the underground-inspired *MAUS* came out to deal address the Holocaust, winning itself a special Pulitzer Prize. (More on underground comics in a moment.)

18. A quick list of comics' bigger accomplishments in recent years. As this presentation ages, this content can be updated. The take-away point for the audience here should be simply that comics are being noticed as not being **only** for kids.
19. Following on that point, this series of questions is intended to stress how unique the medium really is. As with any medium, comics accomplish some rare effects that no other format can replicate. By having students imagine these piecemeal scenarios, we want to lead them to the (possible) conclusion that words and pictures together are not (only) for little kids; our mind might be **wired** for words and pictures together, making it easiest for toddlers to read a picture book but **also** making it more powerful for adults to read graphic novels. However, you're not trying to convert them, nor should you take away from the power and the beauty of prose novels. Just assure them that comics aren't **only** for kids. If they can accept that premise, then you are ready to move on confidently.
20. A snapshot legacy of comics is given, starting with *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. **It is not the first comic!** But it is such a significant comic, the first appearance of Superman, that most historians and price guides start their listings with this date, the onset of "the Golden Age."
Particularly bright or mature student audiences could be asked why it's called the Golden Age (followed by Silver and Iron). If you like, inform them about the Greco-Roman concept of the "Ages of Man," starting with the first, best generation of humanity, the Golden Age, and then the second, lesser generation, etc.
21. Keeping with the Age-dating theme, this slide moves us to the first appearance of the new Flash, thereafter called "the Silver Age Flash," since this issue kicked off the beginning of the Silver Age for most observers. The differences between the two ages were subtle at first, but you can highlight WWII being a major part of the Golden Age whereas, by the Silver Age, the war was over and readers were more accustomed to the superhero genre.
22. The beginning of the Bronze Age is hard to pinpoint by many; if you choose an alternate issue & date, no one would fault you. However, it certainly took place in the 1970s, when comics became slightly more experimental and influenced by the independent underground (more on that later). Also, real-world issues took on greater significance (e.g. Vietnam, racism, misogyny), and the publishing market itself went through a good deal of upheaval, creative shifts, and price inflation.
23. Ages after Bronze are hard to pinpoint, so I offer a few of the nominees. Whether the "grim-and-gritty" '80s were part of the Bronze Age is also hard to say. What

- is clear is that the aforementioned “grim-and-gritty” period has subsequently been passed, perhaps arguing for yet **another** age-marker.
24. The ‘90s are given specific focus here both because of the murkiness of the post-Bronze age and the actual ages of the audience members. That is, the 1990s might actually mean something to them!
Essentially the market boom and eventual bust is noted, fueled by speculators investing in comics for potential long-term investments; when speculators ceased, the over-inflated market – full of extraneous publishers – largely collapsed, and that bubble bursting took with it a number of companies. Marvel Comics and DC Comics remained the top two heavyweights (with Image Comics a distant third, as well as other more “artsy” companies).
 25. This is the moment to strongly emphasize the life of comics outside of the superhero genre. That is, at least as early as the 1970s, a number of independent comics were being produced, oftentimes by self-publishers. Many of these titles did not feature superheroes (or, they did not feature them in their traditional, “mainstream” way), and several managed to maintain decades of success. In fact, rising artists were often highly influenced by the underground “commix,” leading to innovation even in the mainstream. While the dating of comics is often marked by events/publications in the superhero genre, this does not mean that excellent work wasn’t being done elsewhere. (In fact, comics before 1938 have been given the designation of the Platinum Age.)
 26. The last set of 15 slides chronicles one way – **my** way – of creating a comic book. Hopefully by this point, the audience has become intrigued by the concept of comics as a creative outlet, and some may have even mentioned creating comics of their own. **Any** efforts they have made should be applauded, of course, since even photocopied and stapled mini-comics are a legitimate form of storytelling and welcome by the industry. (Scott McCloud, in fact, has a piece in one of his books about that being the **purest** form of comic book creation, not the **least**.) So, some of the terminology I use here might be over some audience’s heads. It certainly does not have to be emphasized; I present it here because (at the moment) there are few **simpler** terms that have been coined for these concepts. This first slide is to denote the options of working on a book all alone, as both the writer and artist, or to collaborate with someone else (as legend Stan Lee did with several equally renowned artists, though Lee himself didn’t draw and added actual dialogue **after** the art was done). In either case, it should be emphasized that, as with any medium, there has to be a **story** for it to result in being a serviceable comic book.
 27. Some details on how to construct a story are given here, though they are by no means the only ways. This is primarily for the writers, since artists might choose to begin with sketches or doodles, then find inspiration there for a full-fledged story.

28. Once a story is in mind, many writers will move to the script (to be thought of like, but not exactly equivalent to, a movie script); again, Stan Lee-teams determined the story, **then** the artists drew the pages, and, in the end, Stan added “script.” But here, we have an example of a script based on comics guru Alan Moore’s style. It is hyper-detailed and, for each and ever slide, gives the artist a huge amount of information. The dialogue still follows as numbered lines so that, later, a letterer will be able to make the best use of them over the art.
29. On the other end of the scripting spectrum, there is the “Joe Casey” approach giving the artist-collaborator only essential information. The rest is left up to the illustrator’s free imagination. Both this and the previous slide describe the same panel for a comic book page. Neither one should be said to be better – It’s up to the individual writer (and, hopefully, audience member) to determine what’s best for him or her.
(P.S. **Watch your pronouns!** Girls can be comic book creators just as likely as guys. It’s minor, but throw in “her” from time to time so that this idea of equality is subtly underscored.)
30. A little self-explanatory advice for the would-be writers out there. Also, for those with more of a gift for art than writing, this is meant to credit them as essential to the process of creating comics.
31. Generally, as I script a story of which the plot has already been determined and agreed upon, the artist is busy sketching possibilities for the characters. In this case, my collaborator Jason Copland designs some potential “looks” for Marlo, who I described at the bottom of the slide.
32. A quick slide of what my scripts usually look like. Almost any comic book can be “reverse engineered” back to a script like this (even if the creator or creators did really use one!).
33. A comparison between the rough sketch Jason would do of a page and the final pencils at which he’d arrive. Again, some artists go straight to the pencils, while others have several rough sketches/outlines before going further. (Some artists even do smaller, stick-figure diagrams before the rough sketch that they call “thumbnails”; usually, these are used to figure out where all the panels should go. In fact, some writers do these for their artists to better convey their ideas!) This can be likened to doing a first, second, or third draft of an essay, potentially.
34. Now, a comparison between a final pencil of the page and its being inked. (And, as before, some artists are so sure of their work that they go from roughs directly to inks.) In many big comic book companies, the roles of penciler and inker are given to different people. The movie *Chasing Amy* – probably too racy for most student audiences – jokingly ridicules inkers, calling them “tracers.”
35. Now, letters from the script are added by a letterer who creates word balloons, thought balloons, caption boxes, and sound effects over the final art. For many

- decades, this was done by hand; now, much of the industry has shifted to digital lettering by computer. Reengage the audience here and ask what they would prefer to do.
36. Whether it's stapled together or sent to a big, professional printer, these comics need to be sold! I mentioned two distributors here whose business it is to collect orders from comic shops and bookstores nationally then work with publishers to get the ordered quantities to each location. Of course, many people have been going online to "publish" their comics on the screen; each method has its advantages, but students should be encouraged even to start small, just selling to friends, family, neighbors, or *teachers*!
 37. Coming to the end of the presentation, I do mention other venues for learning about comics, discussing comics, and selling comics **all in one place**: comic book conventions. Dozens are held annually in the United States, and a Google search can easily find one in your area. This is the closest to "field research" a student can do –
 38. – and they're also a lot of fun, with all sorts of bizarrely dressed fans attending in droves! This is *Return of the Jedi*'s Princess Leia & Boba Fett, as well as the Burger King Stormtrooper.
 39. More fans dress as the Blue Beetle and Shadowcat (with the robotic Widget in her hand).
 40. Finally, the X-Men's Phoenix and...me.
 41. Again, this closing slide can be altered with your own details or other online resources that you have found. Enjoy!