

By Bill Zimmerman, Creator of MakeBeliefsComix.com



## Comics + the news + classrooms all go together. Let me tell you why and how.

My happiest memories as a kid center on Sunday mornings when my father would leave the house early in the morning to pick up some jelly donuts and also bring back an armload of newspapers. I'd grab my beloved funny sections to read about the latest adventures of my comic heroes and enter their exciting, imaginary worlds. The comics made me happy and helped me become a great reader.

After going through the comics, I'd rustle through the rest of the newspapers to learn what was happening in the real world, to read about famous people, to see how others in the world lived their lives, and, of course, to look at the great photographs. The newspaper was my daily treasure chest – I never knew what exciting piece of information I'd discover each day.

I grew up to become a newspaper reporter and editor and also worked with the best cartoonists and illustrators for my newspapers and for the books I wrote. For many years, too, I created a syndicated newspaper page to teach youngsters about current events. I taught writing and reading, too, to literacy students and 12 years ago I launched this free web site, MakeBeliefsComix.com, where youngsters can create their own digital comic strip stories. Educators worldwide use it to encourage student literacy and creative expression.

All this to say that newspapers and comics go hand in hand beautifully in the classroom, providing a painless way for students to learn language arts, to better understand current events and history and to foster creativity.

### THE CHALLENGE

With my great love for comics and newspapers, I challenge teachers for the new school term to set up a daily 20-minute comic strip segment during which your students create comics about what they've read in the newspaper and discussed in class. By so doing students explore the news in greater depth. They can create their daily comics diary entrees by using either MakeBeliefsComix.com or by simply drawing their own comics with pencil or crayons. (Stick figures are fine, too.)

The basic idea is to encourage each student to first read an article from a newspaper and then create comic strips summarizing or commenting on what is in the news. Let the comic characters express the students' thoughts or questions or opinions about what they read. If they do this on a daily or frequent basis, and print out the comics they created, over the course of a school year your students will build wonderful portfolios of art summarizing all the interesting things they learned from exploring the newspaper.

To begin, first look upon the newspaper as I do, as a deep, daily replenished treasure chest of fascinating information waiting to be explored or commented on. Start with the front-page news stories, then work your way to the different sections that appear over the course of the week – from business to the arts to science to entertainment to the health pages, to the letters to the editor and

editorials, along with the weekly news review and, of course, the rich book and Sunday magazine sections. Let your students choose the section they love best. Each section is waiting for students to put together their comics in which their comic characters talk about the issues raised on these news and feature pages. I promise you this: the minute a student starts creating a comic strip to deal with the news she is reading, she will begin owning the information in the article and on the way to fully engaged with the news. These informed students will become our informed citizens.



Let's just start with the front pages with their stories on the spate of horrific school shootings. Creating comic strips provides an opportunity for students to discuss this terrible situation and to air their views and feelings. Why not have students creating a comic strip in which the comic characters raise and answer such questions as: What do you think should be done to prevent future deadly shootings at schools and elsewhere? Is it a good or bad idea to arm teachers with guns to protect students? Should students go out on strike to force legislators to deal with this problem? What can students do about violence at school? How can a school better handle problem students who may be prone to violence? Let the students share the comic strips they create with classmates and friends to promote discussion and debate on this very important subject.

Or, how about a comic-making session on the hurricanes and flooding events of recent times. A student reading about the tragic stories emerging from this disaster – people separated from their homes, worried about their elders and their pets, desperate from losing everything important in their lives – will find many thoughts coming to the fore. One of the first questions we ask ourselves is what would be it be like to be in the place of those experiencing such havoc? What treasures would we hope to salvage from the disasters? How would we survive? What if we lost loved ones? What can communities do to protect themselves?

So take the next step: why not create a comic strip in which students ask themselves: what would be the most treasured possessions they'd grab to take with them if they were forced to leave their home? Hard choices: a family pet, family photos and documents, a beloved book or possession? Or put together a comic dealing with what it would be like to rescue people stranded by the flooding? Such comic-making also encourages empathy for others, something we need to encourage in our young people.

Take another major front page news story – the possibility of ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that shields from deportation young undocumented immigrants (known as "dreamers") who were brought to the U.S. as children. What's going to happen to these young people if they are forced to be deported? Perhaps a student will want to create a comic strip in which he has characters express the "dreamers" fears and disappointments. Again, creating such comics encourages your students to place themselves in the shoes of others. Let the characters in the comic strip also debate the pros and cons of Congress' enacting legislation to legalize these dreamers.

Do your students follow sports? Skip to the sports section. There, you might read a piece about football player Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who knelt for the national anthem before National Football League games. He was protesting against social injustice, especially the deaths of African-Americans at the hands of police. Each of us may have different opinions about Kaepernick's gesture – he makes some people very angry, others very proud of what he did. So, then, how about a comic strip where comic characters comment about his surprising gesture and debate whether or not he did the right thing? It's always good to get two sides of a story. Would your students do what Kaepernick did? Let the comic strips answer that question.

Today, did you overhear your students' talking about what's on television tonight, or what's streaming? Take a look then at the TV page. Can't find anything good? Suggest to your students that they can do better and use today's comic strip to storyboard a brand new film or reality program. They've already got the characters to select from MakeBeliefsComix; now all they need to do is come up with great ideas for future programming. Isn't this a great way to encourage creativity and imagination? Coming up with their own ideas empowers students.

One of the most interesting newspaper features is the letters to the editor section. Recently, a group of writers focused on how to resolve the North Korean crisis between the United States and the threat of war over that nation's threat to use nuclear missiles against the U.S. Wouldn't this be a provocative subject for a comic strip in which students, working in pairs, came up with a comic strip offering proposals for the United States to consider in dealing with North Korea's nuclear threat? Let the comic lay out whether it's war, negotiation, more sanctions, or something else. Students have their own perspective and ideas worth sharing.

Onto the business section which recently featured an article about Lego, the toy company cutting 1,400 jobs because children are more interested in mobile devices for entertainment, than they are in building blocks. Ask the students for their comic strips to suggest some new games or products for Lego that might bring back young consumers. You can send these ideas to Lego. Or, perhaps they'll use their comics to recall the types of things they constructed with the blocks when they were younger.

There always are great ideas for comic strip stories from the editorials, essays and columns that appear on the Op Ed pages. Why not have students create a comic about one of the positions taken by a newspaper editorial writer or columnist? Or, have the students in their comics ask a columnist about her job, how she became a journalist, what part of her work she is most proud of. Send her these comic strips. I am sure she would welcome such feedback from young people and maybe they'd even provide fodder for future columns.

In the arts section, there was a recent article about how a girls movie version of the book, "Lord of the Flies," is planned. It's based on the 1954 novel that examined the inherent evil of humanity through an island of boys without adult supervision. Comic strip assignment: Your students are writing the script and using comic strips to storyboard the new movie – how would they adapt or change the story now that girls will play the main roles? Will the girls be as cruel as the boys or will they find a better way to cooperate and survive? Comics can help your students think creatively and develop new ideas.

Here's another idea: ask your students to imagine they are reviewing a new book they read for the book review column. Have them present their review in the form of a comic strip in which they summarize the plot and say what it is they liked about the book or what they'd like to see changed. Do they have ideas for a sequel? Or, how about a comic story about what happens to the characters after the book ends? A fun way to get them to use their imaginations and write!

Then, onto comics! The New York Times recently published a wonderful, beautifully executed comic strip serial on Sundays about the true story of a family's journey from Syria to America. Titled "Welcome to the New World" and created by Jake Halpern and Michael Sloan, the comic strip records the adventures – bad and good – of this family as its members build new lives here. It's offers perfect proof that a comic diary drawn by students can be a great and rich adventure, too. What better way than comics to tell stories about our lives and the world in which we live!



#### HERE ARE SOME MORE IDEAS FOR STUDENTS CREATING COMIC STRIPS

Teachers can also create comic modules using photographs from a newspaper. Let's say it's early in the new year when the President is slated to give his annual State of the Union Address. Cut out a photo of the President from the newspaper and paste a blank balloon next to his mouth, with an instruction on the page for the students: Give Him Some Words to Say.

In teaching about the current nuclear missile crisis between the United States and North Korea, cut out a photo of President Trump and of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un and again paste two large balloons next to each one's lips with the headline: Imagine President Trump and Kim Jong-un are meeting in your school yard. What should they say to one another?

Or, each year when the Nobel Prizes are about to be presented, have student bring in photos of themselves and paste blank balloons next to their face with the headline: Imagine you are giving the speech to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. How would you start your speech? What is the message about peace that you'd hope to convey?

In working with literacy students, I have even taken comic strips from the Sunday funny pages of other newspapers, whited out the words in the talk balloons and asked students to create their own dialogue. Isn't that a fun way of encouraging students to write and think imaginatively.

### THE BENEFITS OF STUDENTS KEEPING COMIC STRIP DIARIES



By creating comic strip diaries, whether through comic generators like MakeBeliefsComix, or through drawing or with pictures cut out from the newspaper, students will realize that they can create their own stories and make art. They will learn that they, too, are capable of generating their own learning materials, their own memoirs, and that their "take" on the world is so very special. Moreover, the process of using drawn characters and writing words for them to say or think provides a way for students to digest and integrate the key information they read in newspapers or watch on television. This will also help them in English class, history, social studies, journalism or science and math. Such comic strip diaries also provide a way for a student to comment about her daily life in and out of school.

### THE RATIONALE FOR USING COMICS WITH STUDENTS

From my own teaching with youngsters and adults, I knew intuitively that enabling struggling students to write and tell stories by building comic strips online would help strengthen their emerging English-language skills and make the difficult job of learning English or other subjects a much easier, more enjoyable experience. That is why, in part, I created MakeBeliefsComix.

You see, comic strips provide a perfect vehicle for learning, for practicing language and expressing ideas. Each strip's three or four panels provide a finite, accessible world in which funny, interesting looking characters live and go about their lives. And students with limited or emerging reading or writing skills are not as overwhelmed in dealing with the size of a comic strip as they may initially be with a book of many pages.

Comic strips don't require long sentences or paragraphs to tell a good story. They encourage students to write and create because only a few words are required for the characters to go about their lives and reveal their stories. And, anyone who sees a blank talk or thought balloon floating over the head of a character wants immediately to fill it in with words and thoughts; doing so is the beginning step to telling a story.

## **STEP BY STEP: GUIDING STUDENTS ON HOW TO USE MAKEBELIEFS.COMIX.COM**

Generally, in showing students how to use this comic generator web site, I will first create with them a group comic strip incorporating their ideas. This becomes a great class collaboration. We'll choose a subject we've read about in the newspaper -- global warming, for example, and how this may be changing our lives. Then we'll create a story together, using one or two characters in each panel. The characters become surrogates for the students to express their ideas without embarrassment.

In filling the first comic panel template I ask students to choose a character and for suggestions for dialogue, and next I'll ask for more dialogue for another character to speak. Then we'll try to move the story along by moving to a second panel. Later, when students start their own comic strips, they are encouraged to work with partners to help each other along. Such collaboration gives students more confidence and ideas in creating a story. In working together students -- especially those learning English -- improve their language skills as they come up with the words and ideas for the characters to express.

This lesson plan is adapted from one created specially for The New York Times Learning Network; a part was included in the [Network's guide on using comics in the classroom](#).