Activity 1B: Stories on Screen and Page

Storytelling is the driving force behind much contemporary media and entertainment. In this activity, students consider how visual elements help to tell a story.

Sequence

1B.1: **Visual Elements That Tell a Story**	Students analyze and compare the visual elements of storytelling that are used in a movie and a comic book.
1B.2: **Creating Thumbnails (Studio)**	Students create thumbnail sketches for comic book panels based on a piece of fiction.
1B.3: **Drawing Comic Book Panels (Studio)**	Students draw their comic book panels.
1B.4: **Show and Tell**	Students present their comic book panels to the class.
1B.5: **Team Meeting**	Project teams meet to decide on the community story that they will research and tell in their storyboards.
1B.6: **Unit 3 Careers**	Students are introduced to careers related to the work they are doing in Unit 3.

Materials Needed:

- DVDs of two movies based on comic books, such as Spiderman and X-Men (see Advance Preparation)
- DVD player and monitor
- Photocopied pages from the comic book on which each movie is based, with the words blacked out (see Advance Preparation)
- Chart paper
- Optional: Sample comic book pages, for posting
- Work of fiction students have chosen
- Pencils
- Optional: Other drawing tools, such as pens and colored pencils
- Paper
- Erasers
- Optional: Ames lettering guides
- Optional: Compasses and/or circle or oval templates
- Rulers or T-squares
- Optional: Bristol board
- Optional: Pigment pens and/or ink, nibbed pens, and brushes
- **Handout 7: Unit 3 Career Information**

1B.1: Visual Elements That Tell a Story

1. Discuss the elements of storytelling.

Begin the activity by asking students the following questions:

- What are the elements that make up a story?

  Possible answers: Stories usually have a logical structure, with a beginning, a middle, and an end; stories typically have a plot, which often involves conflict and resolution; they have characters with whom readers can identify.

- Think about movies and works of art that you have seen. What are the visual (nonverbal) elements that directors, artists, and designers use to help tell a story?

  Possible answers: Students may refer to the elements they identified when looking at the Artemesia Gentileschi painting, or ones they learned about in other units, such as camera angles and lighting in Unit 2.

2. Model how to analyze a movie.

Model for students how to analyze the visual elements in a movie:

- First, show a short clip (no more than five minutes) of a movie based on a comic book, with the sound turned off.
- Next, identify for students the visual elements that have been used to help tell the story, eliciting students' help as you do so.

Teacher's Notes: Visual Elements of Storytelling in Movies

Both movies and comic books use specific visual conventions to tell a story (such as "shot/reverse shot" in the movies). However, Activity 1B.1 is intended as an introduction to the visual elements used to tell a story, rather than an in-depth analysis of techniques specific to each medium.

Examples of visual elements used in movies:

- Lighting (can create a mood, can highlight or obscure elements on the screen)
- Costume (shows the period in which the story takes place, may also help to convey character)
- Facial expressions
- Body movement
- Color (can be used to create a mood or symbolize an idea)
- Shot tracking (different effects are created when the camera is still and when it follows a subject)
- Camera angle (the subjects may appear looming or powerful if shot from a low angle, or diminished or more distant if shot from above)
- Camera's distance from subject (close-ups may focus attention on a character's emotions, while longer shots can help establish the overall scene)
- Editing (quick cuts may point to intense or chaotic activity; cuts may also show different characters' reactions)

3. Analyze a comic book with the class.
Distribute comic book pages from the comic book on which the movie is based. Challenge students to identify the visual elements that they believe help to tell the story.

For your part of the discussion, point out how the elements relate to one another (such as line style, color, and shadow/light). Be sure to note the elements of art and principles of design that students have been learning about throughout the course.

Teacher's Notes: Visual Elements in Comic Books

Examples of visual elements used in comic books:

- Line style (thick vs. thin or clean vs. messy, which can indicate different emotions or moods)
- Facial expression, especially the eyes
- Body positioning within the frame (or extending from the frame)
- Perspective (denotes space and creates drama)
- Gesture (indicates or implies action)
- Movement lines (indicates motion)
- Shadow/light (creates a mood or focuses attention on one aspect of the frame)
- Color (used to create a mood or symbolize an idea)
- Composition within a frame (the relationship between characters and the characters' relationship to the space they are in)
- Balance of high and low panel count on a page (helps to control the viewer's absorption of the visual material and the story)
- Relationship between panels (what scenes follow one another and how this propels the story forward; how the comic book should be read)

4. Have students analyze a movie clip on their own.
Show students a short clip from another movie adapted from a comic book, again with the sound turned off. Before showing the clip, tell them to take notes about how the movie tells its story as they watch.

5. Have students analyze a comic book.
Give students the second set of comic book pages, and have them analyze the ways that the comic book uses visual elements to tell a story.

6. Discuss and compare movie and comic book analyses.
Ask students the following questions:

- How does the movie tell the story? What visual elements does the director use to move the story forward?
- How does the comic book tell the story? What visual elements does the comic book artist use to move the story forward?
- What are the differences between the way the movie and the comic book tell a story? What are the similarities?
- How does the comic book make use of the elements of art and the principles of design that you have learned about?

  Note: You can have students refer to the elements of art and principles of design on Handout 1.1 if they need a reminder.

- Based on your earlier analyses of the comic book and the painting that you looked at earlier, what are some of the visual (nonverbal) elements that artists use to tell a story?

7. List visual elements used to tell stories.
Record students' answers to the last question on chart paper. You can use the visual elements in the Teacher's Notes above as a guide. Post this paper in the classroom and have students return to it throughout the unit to add elements or refine their ideas.

> **Teacher's Notes:**
> **Alternatives—Considering the Effects of Sound and Words**
>
> After students have analyzed the movie without sound and the comic book without words, have them watch the same clip with sound and look at the comic book pages with the text visible. Have students compare their experiences and analyze the role that verbal elements, sound, and music play in telling a story.

1B.2: Creating Thumbnails (Studio)

1. Discuss the structure of comic books.
Begin by explaining to students that comic books follow a specific visual structure, as they have just seen. Ask students to identify the components of that structure, and describe any that students do not mention.

Possible answers:

- *Each page has a number of panels (often six or nine), which are usually but not always square or rectangular.*
- *The action is usually contained within these panels (although it sometimes breaks out of the frame).*
- *Each panel is separated by a set amount of white space, called a "gutter."*
- *Spoken words are represented by a word balloon (also known as a "speech balloon" or "speech bubble") that usually has a pointer to the person who has spoken the words.*
- *Thoughts are often represented by a word balloon that has a trail of small bubbles leading from the character to the balloon (often known as "thought balloons.")*

2. Describe the process of creating comic book panels.

Tell students that comic book artists have traditionally followed a specific process to create their work:

- Artists, called pencillers, decide how to arrange the panels to tell their story and determine how much speech or action they want to fit on each page. These decisions can be based on a number of factors, such as how they want to establish a scene, or how much importance they place on showing action versus expression in a particular sequence.

- Next, they divide each page into panels based on what type of "shot" will go into each panel and how big they want the panels to be. Important panels may take up more space on the page.

- Once the page is composed and has been laid out, the artists make thumbnail sketches of each panel, continuing to make new sketches until they have figured out how they want to arrange the elements within each panel.

- Next, they draw final versions of the panels in pencil. Finally, they "ink in" the pencil drawings, using ink pens or, more commonly, nibbed pens that are dipped in India ink.

  Note: Choose whether or not to have students ink in their panels. Let students know whether they will complete this step.

Teacher's Notes: Hand-Drawn and Digitally Created Comics

Although students are learning how to draw comic book panels by hand in this unit, many comic books and graphic novels are created partially or entirely by digital means. However, any comic book artist or graphic novelist needs to have a solid foundation of drawing skills. The general principles are the same in both hand-drawn and digitally-created comics, and doing the work by hand gives students the opportunity to see and practice making comics in the traditional way.

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3. Create thumbnail sketches.

Have students use paper and pencils or other drawing tools to create thumbnail sketches of their chosen scene for each panel of their comic book page. Encourage them to refine their thumbnails until they feel that they reflect what they want to express about their scene.

  Note: You may want to post some sample comic book pages so that students can see the range of subjects and the different ways that action is represented.

4. Teach drawing techniques.

As students work, teach them drawing techniques for creating their panels. Remind students that they should incorporate into their panels the elements of art and principles of design they have learned so far in the course. For example, they should be thinking about the visual impact of the kinds of lines they are creating on the page, and what each line style says about the story to viewers.

Teacher's Notes: Teaching Drawing Techniques

Simplifying Shapes

Have students look at a photograph or still-life arrangement and create a representation of the scene, using four basic shapes: circles/ovals, squares/rectangles, triangles/cones, and cylinders. Comic book drawings usually simplify the shapes of objects rather than try to capture all of the detail. This exercise is a way for students to begin using that simplification process.

Drawing the Human Figure

Have students draw basic human figures from photographs or by modeling for one another. You may want to have them begin by drawing stick figures, or using shapes such as ovals, circles, and rectangles, so they can see the basic forms and lines of the body. Have students practice drawing the body in a variety of positions, emphasizing such elements as posture and proportion. Students should draw a variety of body types. You can also have students focus on drawing specific parts of the body, such as the torso, legs, or hands.

Creating Facial Features

Have students practice drawing specific features, such as eyes, lips, nose, and ears. They should draw both male and female facial features. Once students have practiced drawing the features in isolation, have them combine these elements to draw a face.

Lettering

The dialogue in comic books needs to be well laid out and easy to read. It can be all uppercase (as is often the case in traditional comic books), or use both upper- and lowercase letters. The letters can be in print or script, in a variety of fonts, as long as they are legible and the style makes sense in the context of the comic.

Have students practice creating word balloons with lettering that is legible, evenly spaced, and written in straight lines. Optionally, you can teach students how to use an Ames guide and a T-square to space letters and a compass or a circular or oval template to create word bubbles.

An alternate activity is to have students create text on a computer, print it at the correct scale, and paste it into their panels. This method gives students the satisfaction of seeing neat and clean lettering in their panels, but doesn't give them the experience of hand-lettering.

A Note on Perspective

Although students study perspective in more depth in *Unit 4: Make Me a World*, you may need to teach them about perspective here. This will help them to create space and manipulate objects in that space. For more about teaching perspective, see Unit 4.

Teacher's Notes:

Alternatives—Using Technology to Create Comic Books
In addition to having students draw their panels with pencil and paper, you can have them create the panels in a software program such as Comic Life or Illustrator. You will need to teach students how to use these programs and, depending on the amount of time it takes, you may need to add additional time to the unit.

Optional Extension—Giving and Receiving Feedback on Thumbnails

You may want to have students present their thumbnails to the class for feedback using the Critical Response Process and to revise their work based on the feedback.

1B.3: Drawing Comic Book Panels (Studio)

1. Lay out and draw comic book panels.
Have students use rulers or T-squares to lay out their comic book panels on a piece of paper or Bristol board, being sure to leave a gutter between the panels. Then have them draw their panels in pencil and letter them. Have students lay out the page in rough form first, and then go back and refine the panels. As they work, they should plan how they want to incorporate the lettering into the panel rather than try to fit it in once the drawing is done.

> **Note:** You may want to remind students that details may get lost when comics are reproduced and that they should strive to make the panels clear and legible. The cleaner the pencil lines are in their panels, the easier they will be to read and to finish in ink.

2. Optional: Ink in panels.
Once students have drawn their comic book panels, you can optionally have them ink in their panels with pigment pens or with nibbed pens and brushes.

3. Complete Journal 2.
Have students complete Journal 2 in class or as a homework assignment.

> **Note:** Journal assignment 2 is a good opportunity for formative assessment.

> **Journal 2**
> Choose one of the community stories you learned about during your research—the one that you find the most interesting and would like to storyboard. Write a paragraph that describes this story for your teammates. Describe what the story is about, who the people involved are, where it takes place, and what happens during the story. Draw one or two sketches depicting some aspect of the story.

1B.4: Comic Book Presentation

1. Display work and identify visual elements of storytelling.
Have students display their comic book panels to the class. Before they share any information about their work, ask the class the following questions:

- What are the visual elements of storytelling that you see in the comic book panels?
- How has the artist used these elements to move the story forward in each panel?

2. Share information about comic book panels.
Give each student a few minutes to share information about his or her comic book panels and the writing that inspired the work.

> **Teacher's Notes: Optional Extension—Creating a Zine or Book**
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> If time permits, you can have the class lay out and create a "'zine," a do-it-yourself publication often devoted to specialized subject matter, or create a book using an online publishing service, to share with a wider community.

1B.5: Team Meeting

Have students meet in their teams to share their write-ups of the stories they would like to tell. Have team members decide as a group what community story they will research and use as the basis for their storyboards. Each team should choose a subject containing something of interest to all of its members, as well as one for which there will be resources available.

Once they have decided which story they are planning to tell, collect the write-ups from each of the teams.

> **Teacher's Notes: Reviewing Teams' Story Choices**
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> Make sure that the story each team has chosen to tell is a feasible one—particularly, one that is manageable in scope. For example, it may not be feasible to tell the story of an entire community that has immigrated to the United States from another country, but it might be possible to tell the story of one person's journey to the United States (or of one day during that journey).

1B.6: Unit 3 Careers

Give students **Handout 7: Unit 3 Career Information**, and give them a few minutes to read it.

Ask students the following questions:

- How is the work that you have engaged in so far during Unit 3 similar to kinds of work done in the careers mentioned in the handout?
- Which of these three careers is most interesting to you, and why?

> **Teacher's Notes: Having an AME Professional Speak to the Class**
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> Activity 1B.6 is an ideal point in the unit to have an AME professional speak to the class and, if possible, critique students' work. He or she should be working in a field related to the material being covered in this unit. If necessary, you can schedule this activity to coincide with a class visit, and complete the activity later in the unit. Alternatively, you may want to have students look at interviews with AME professionals that are available online. (See *Media & Resources*.)

Handout 7:
Unit 3 Career Information

Range of Careers Related to Unit 3

Below are some of the arts, media, and entertainment careers that make use of the skills you're learning in Unit 3:

- Animation assistant
- Animator
- Assistant editor
- Comic book inker
- Comic book penciller
- Editor (film, TV, or animation)
- Flash designer
- Graphic artist
- Graphic novelist
- Manga letterer
- Multimedia producer
- Storyboard artist
- Storyboard assistant

Key Careers

Key AME careers that make use of the skills that you are learning in Unit 3 include comic book penciller, storyboard artist, and editor.

Comic Book Penciller

Comic book pencillers receive written stories from comic book writers and translate them into visual stories. Pencillers create the original artwork for comic books. They may suggest additions or cuts in the stories, interpret and create characters and places in the stories, and determine the number and size of the panels.

Pencillers should be good illustrators, with excellent composition, perspective, and life drawing skills. They must be able to clearly depict facial expressions, actions, and body language, and must be able to draw characters and places consistently, so that they are immediately recognizable. Though pencillers may have individual styles, they are often asked to work in specific styles (for example, a style similar to that of another artist in the company) for different comic books.

Pathway: Although a college degree is rarely a requirement to become a comic book penciller, many pencillers gain drawing skills, experience, and contacts by studying illustration in a two-year or four-year program. Pencillers must have a portfolio of work that shows clean, detailed drawings, an ability to draw in diverse styles, and excellent visual storytelling skills. Pencillers' portfolios represent the work they are

trying to obtain, so the portfolio focus is usually a series of pencil drawings rather than finished (inked and colored) artwork.

Art directors and story writers need to be able to trust pencillers to create the artwork they want, and they usually expect pencillers to have experience in the comic book industry (as well as portfolio work that interests them). Pencillers may gain experience as studio assistants, manga letterers, retouch artists, or colorists. Pencillers are usually freelance artists, paid per page, but some major comic book publishers hire permanent pencillers.

Storyboard Artist

Storyboard Artists turn written scripts into visual stories. Because storyboard artists express action through drawing, they should be very good at life and gesture drawing, as well as composition. They also need to be able to sketch ideas clearly and quickly. Most of all, storyboard artists need to be good at telling stories through drawings.

In the TV and film industries, storyboard artists are responsible for visualizing screenplays. They help directors imagine what productions will look like and help plan the needs of the shoot (such as locations, props, and special effects). These artists need to understand how films and TV are shot, because storyboards include character cues and descriptions of camera shots and angles.

In animation and video games, storyboard artists need to be able to follow styles and designs that others have created, to draw the events and characters in a way that is consistent with the original design ideas. They use model artwork, or concept artwork, to guide their illustrations. In smaller productions, the storyboard artist may also contribute to the *concept art* (concept art is used to illustrate an idea, design, or look of a film, animation, or video game before it is made).

Pathway: As formal art training will help storyboard artists gain necessary drawing skills, the artists are usually expected to have a two-year or four-year degree or certificate with a focus on animation, film, or illustration. They are hired based on the quality of their portfolios, which need to show excellent drawing skills in a variety of styles. Portfolios typically include a number of sample storyboards and may also include a "show reel" (a video of the artist's work).

Aspiring storyboard artists often start their careers as storyboard assistants, filling in details and cleaning up drawings, before becoming full-fledged storyboard artists. They may have prior experience with illustration, graphic art, graphic novels, layout, or animation. Storyboard artists often work as freelancers but they may also be employed by art departments, especially in large film or animation studios. In the animation industry, storyboard artists may become animators, and vice versa.

Editor (film, TV, or animation)

Editors assemble and sequence visual material to tell stories in movies, TV, and animation. They communicate with a director to understand the director's vision of how the story should be told and how the final production should look.

Movies and videos are usually not shot in the sequence they will ultimately be shown. For example, even though the action moves back and forth between a house and a beach, all the scenes in the house may be shot on one day, and all the scenes at the beach the next. This saves travel time and reduces expenses. Editors must go through all the footage and arrange the shots (segments of footage) so that the story is told in the correct sequence. Editors decide the order of the shots, which ones to use or omit, and how long each shot stays on screen.

Editors need to understand timing, the impact of images and sound, and how to tell a story visually. They also must be very organized and able to interpret and communicate others' ideas.
Editors often work with other specialists—such as sound editors, title designers, and special effects artists—to create and add elements such as additional voices, graphics, title animations, credits, sound effects and music, and special effects. On smaller projects, a single editor may handle all aspects of editing, often with the help of production assistants.

Pathway: Editors often gain the necessary technical skills by attending two- or four-year programs with a focus on film, video, or animation. They need up-to-date knowledge of the editing systems (and, in some cases, graphic programs) used by their employers. Editors are often hired because of their experience on other productions, so they generally break in by interning or apprenticing to other editors. They often work as assistant editors and, sometimes, production assistants before gaining work as editors.

Editors may become involved in directing or producing—for example, some become directors of photography in film and video—but they also may stay in post-production. *(Post-production is the phase when footage is put together after it has been shot.)* Editors may work as freelancers, or have full-time jobs at large companies such as production houses or TV stations.