CFE Levels 3 and 4 (ages 12-14)

How to write a comic book scene

Adapting novel scenes into comic format

Resource written by Metaphrog, comic writers and artists
Introduction

Comics offer an exciting way to tell a story, bringing words and pictures together in a lively art form.

When you are adapting a novel into a comic, you can exercise your imagination and come up with something unique and powerful, bringing out the themes and ideas of the original text. When adapting a book into a comic, it’s not a case of simply putting pictures to go along with words: comics are not just illustrated texts. You can cut lots of the words of the original novel, because the pictures can give the reader lots of different information about the setting as well as the characters and what they think and feel.

You also need to choose when best to leave out words entirely, and use only the visuals to tell the story or set the scene.

Aims of this resource

This resource will help you to learn about different techniques people use when creating comics. It'll also help you to learn how to use these techniques yourself. You'll learn about:

- what to think about when you’re adapting a novel scene into a comic strip;
- the techniques of comic writing (including narrative boxes, speech bubbles and thought bubbles);
- how to draw a character;
- creating the setting of a comic;
- writing a script and choosing the layout for a page.

If you want to read some fantastic comics and graphic novels to get you started, here are a few recommendations:

- Shaun Tan: _The Arrival_
We’re going to talk about adapting a book into a comic, using Michael Morpurgo’s fantastic book *Private Peaceful* as an example, but you can use these techniques when adapting any book!

**Activity**  
Eng 4-19a

Decide on a scene you would like to adapt from *Private Peaceful*.

There are several scenes to choose from that would work very well in comic form: have a think about your own choice and write down the reasons why you liked the scene. What do you think is its importance to the main themes and ideas of the book?

**Comic adaptations: how faithful should you be?**

When you’re adapting a novel scene into a comic strip, you need to make careful decisions about how faithfully you want to stick to the original story! There are different options:

- You can try and recreate the setting, characters and plot of the original story as faithfully as possible;
- You can take the original story and characters but move it into a new setting. Lots of Shakespeare comic adaptations do this;
- You can choose to create a fresh work of art inspired by the original. You might choose to use the original characters but give them new characteristics, or change details of the plot, or even write an entirely new story with the same characters.

To show you the possibilities available, we’ll briefly discuss three very distinct comic adaptations.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson was published originally in 1886. The story tells of a character Dr. Jekyll who has been experimenting with a serum that transforms him into the evil Mr. Hyde. The story is so well known that the expression ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ has entered our language, meaning a person who changes dramatically from one situation to another.
There are three main comic adaptations of the story.

- Alan Grant and Cam Kennedy’s full colour version, keeps the language, form and chapter structure of the original book.
- Andrzej Klimowski and Danusia Schejbal’s version keeps the structure and themes of the original, but is drawn in black and white.
- By contrast, Lorenzo Mattotti and Jerry Kramsky’s version not only moves the location of the story’s action to another time and place, it also uses the original story as a sort of springboard to create a completely new story and explore fresh ideas as well as some of the original’s main themes.

These three examples show clearly just how diverse comic adaptations can be!

When you’re adapting your scene from Private Peaceful, you need to think about how faithfully you want to stick to the original text. How much of the dialogue do you want to keep, and do you want to change any of it? Do you need to show everything that happens in the scene, or are there parts you think you could leave out? Even if you’re sticking faithfully to the story, you’ll still have to think about these things: in any adaptation to a different form, things will be lost and added.

**Activity**
Eng 4-19a, Lit 4-02a

Consider the following questions:

- What is your opinion on adaptations?
- Should they keep to the original story and characters?

Discuss some adaptations you have seen or read, and whether you think they work well. For instance, The Hunger Games and Divergent have recently been adapted for film, the original Ghostbusters film has been remade with new characters, and the Roald Dahl classic Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was remade with a very different version of the main character Willy Wonka. This video highlights some of the key differences between The Hunger Games book and movie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W7URsRSak0
Introduction to a typical comic page

Each page of a comic should help tell the story while keeping things visually interesting for the reader.

You need to make actions on a page flow, and they should be clear and readable. If the comic is unreadable then a reader will lose interest.

A glance at the page should suggest the atmosphere and ideas of the story and the page itself should attract the reader’s eye.

Activity
Exa 4-07a, Eng 4-31a

Take some time to look at Figure 4 from the comic book *Louis: Night Salad*. The main character Louis and his guiding helper are trying to make their way down a cliff. Try and adapt the scene into a few paragraphs of prose, describing what is happening and what the two companions are thinking and feeling.

![Figure 4: Page from Louis: Night Salad by Metaphrog](image)
Now, think about the following questions:

- What do you feel when you look at this page?
- How do you think the comic creators have tried to convey the companions' thoughts and feelings?
- Is there anything on the page you find particularly interesting or eye-catching?
- What kind of atmosphere do you think is created on this page?
- What sort of story do you think Louis: Night Salad is?

At the end of this resource on page 26 we will discuss what we were trying to achieve with this particular page. Everyone reacts to comics differently and it’s interesting to compare your reactions with others!

It’s not always a good idea to over-analyse – it risks taking the fun out of reading and writing comics! But it can be fun and interesting to find out some of the important techniques comic creators can use when working, so let’s take a look at some of these.

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The techniques of comic writing

Comics can look simple and be complicated at the same time. Lots of different things can appear on the page but in general the building blocks include the following.

Panels

Panels are used in comics to frame and pace the action. The way you choose to lay out the panels on the page is really important, as it affects the rhythm and pace of the story. You can also choose to do page-sized panels, as seen on the left in Figure 5.
Discuss the two comic pages in Figure 5. Do you notice a difference between the way you read each page?

The panel borders can be removed to create a pause or suspend time, as shown in Figure 6.

Larger panels, in general, make it feel like time is slowing down, while smaller panels, in general, speed up the action and make time pass more quickly. However, some comic creators use smaller panels to try and achieve just the opposite effect and slow time down. Have a look at the page from Chris Ware (Figure 7). What does it make you feel? How do you think the artist intended you to read the page? How does time seem to pass on this page?

Smaller panels can even be inserted into larger panels on the comic page to add detail, space action out, or even add or hide information, as you can see in Figure 8 on the next page. Whatever you decide to do, the art should serve the story, and the composition of each panel and how they look together on the page should be carefully planned and considered.

Activity
Eng 4-31a, Exa 4-03a

Read through your chosen scene from Private Peaceful. Are there any parts where you think you would use a particular size of panel? Note these down for your reference later on.
Gutters
‘Gutters’ just means the spaces between the panels. Many comics have these spaces, and the reader imagines or accepts that time passes in these spaces.

Closure
Sometimes it can actually be important to think about what not to draw!

‘Closure’ means that a comic artist only draws a small part of something, and the reader’s brain pictures the rest.

For example, if you want to draw a gigantic monster you can often just draw a huge toe nail or fungal nail infection and the reader will picture the rest.

Bear in mind that if you want to scare your reader, sometimes what we don’t see is much more frightening. In the film Alien directed by Ridley Scott in 1979 we scarcely see the alien and fear builds when our imaginations get to work on what little glimpses we have of the creature in the film.

Activity
Exa 4-03a
Try it for yourself! Think about how you might apply this technique to the things below, drawing only part of the thing and letting the reader imagine the rest. What would the reader need to see?
- An approaching tank or army
- A dangerous animal, for example a tiger
- An earthquake

Alternatively, find something in your chosen scene from Private Peaceful which could be illustrated in this way.

After you’ve given it some thought, draw a comic panel suggesting one of the above things.
**Narrative Boxes**
When some exposition is required, or when the narrator is speaking, you can use a narrative box.

Exposition means details that the reader needs to know to make sense of the story. For example, in Figure 9 from *The Little Match Girl*, we don’t know from looking at the illustrations that it’s New Year’s Eve, so the narrative box needs to tell us this detail.

**Activity**
Eng 4-19a

Have a look through your chosen scene from *Private Peaceful*. Do you think there is any exposition in your scene that you could put in narrative boxes? Note this down for later reference.

**Speech Bubbles**
The characters in a comic can voice their dialogue through speech bubbles.

If you want to show an inner voice, sometimes it is more practical to use a narrative box for the thoughts of a character.

You can also use a different font for different characters’ speech.

**Thought Bubbles**
There is no need for a special effects budget in comics: dreams, imagination and thoughts can be shown in a separately shaped, wobbly-lined bubble.

**Lettering**
You can choose the type and size of font that you think is best for each character.

Larger bolder lettering can be used to show when characters are speaking with louder voices.

Hand lettering can be kept tidy and all the same height by ruling guiding tramlines.

**Activity**
Eng 4-19a, Eng 4-31a

In *Private Peaceful* identify when different fonts have been used and explain why the author has chosen to do this.
Then, look at the scene you have chosen to adapt from *Private Peaceful*. Do you think it would be appropriate to use larger or bolder lettering for a character at any point in this scene? Do you think that certain characters in the scene might require a certain type of font? Why?

**Visual Metaphors**

A simile is when we say that something is like another thing. For example:

*He was like a lion in battle.*

We do this to paint a picture in a reader’s head – it’s a bit better than saying, “He was extremely fierce and brave in battle.”

A metaphor is like a simile, except it actually claims that something is another thing. For example:

*He was a lion in battle.*

In *Private Peaceful* we learn that Tommo does not feel he lives in his big brother’s shadow. On the contrary he says, “I live in his glow.” This is a strong metaphor, suggesting that Tommo somehow has a ‘glow’. But how would you show this in an illustration? Perhaps you could draw Charlie with a golden colour in the background, and Tommo standing in the distance. Or can you think of something better?

As an example of visual metaphor: in this scene from *Louis – Night Salad* the careful reader can see that Louis is ‘feeling green’, a simple metaphor which obviously means he is feeling unwell.

**Activity**

Exa 4-03a

Chose a strong metaphor from *Private Peaceful* and explain how you would make it visual. You could choose the one above, or try one of these:

*Our greatest scourge is neither rats nor fleas but the unending drenching rain, which runs like a stream along the bottom of our trench, turning it into nothing but a mud-filled ditch, a stinking gooey mud that seems to want to hold us and then suck us down and drown us.*

*We're on the firestep looking out into no-man’s-land, and we see it rolling towards us, this dreaded killer cloud we have heard so much*
about but have never seen for ourselves until now. Its deadly tendrils are searching ahead, feeling their way forward in long yellow wisps, scenting me, searching for me. Then finding me out, the gas turns and drifts straight for me.

After this, try drawing your visual metaphor!

**Onomatopoeia**

Onomatopoeia are words that sound like what they refer to. More than visual metaphors or even symbols, onomatopoeia are closely associated (BIFF BANG POW!) with comics.

The constant shelling in the war scenes in *Private Peaceful* gives you an excellent opportunity for creative use of onomatopoeia. The words can be used as pictures in the comic panel. You can choose carefully which font is most appropriate to represent the sound.

**Emanata**

These are the symbols or lines that can emanate from a character or a thing to show their state of mind. Typically emanata can show when someone or something is, for example, hot, frightened, smelly or angry…

You can get really creative with emanata – there are no rules to how you can use them! Just remember that your comic still needs to be readable – it needs to be clear what the emanata are suggesting.

In *Louis: Night Salad* we wished to show how our character Louis was feeling and to do this we used emanata, little squiggles, as you can see in Figure 11 opposite (we also removed the panel borders and backgrounds to focus more tightly on the character and on the fact they do not feel comfortable in the world of the story at this point).

Also on this page we have used thought bubbles to indicate that Louis is having a nightmare.

**Activity**

Eng 4-19a, Eng 4-31a

Look through your chosen scene from *Private Peaceful*. Are there any parts where you could try to use emanata, or any other technique you’ve learned about, to show what the characters are feeling? Write some brief notes for later reference.
Bringing characters to life in a comic

You can bring your characters alive in different ways, particularly by using facial expressions and body language.

When telling a story visually it is important to make the key characters stand out. Each character should be instantly recognisable and also easily distinguishable as this facilitates ease of reading. Various ideas can be used to achieve this, including: a strong shape, colour or outline; a prop or gimmick, like an umbrella; a distinct physical feature, such as a moustache or pot belly; a cluster of flies or even a cloud of dust or smell.

As an example: in our adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s classic tale *The Red Shoes* the main character, Karen, has been created so that she stands out with her red hair and red shoes.

**Activity**
Eng 4-19a, Eng 4-31a, Exa 4-03a

Identify the main characters in *Private Peaceful*, and write a brief description for each. Note down some things you might use to make them stand out, based on the guidance above. Note: it is not necessary to draw the characters at this point but it can be great to sketch or doodle initial impressions on the page.

One of the many excellent things about comics is that they lend themselves well to exaggeration. So if your character is unpleasant then don’t hold back, don’t be afraid to give them a nasty set of warts or even fetid halitosis. Sergeant ‘Horrible’ Hanley is a character who likes to shout and is very unpopular with the other soldiers. It is easy to imagine him spraying spittle and having an angry red face with fuming lines emanating from his rigid body.

Now, choose a character and produce a finished version suitable for a comic adaptation of a particular scene. Bearing in mind what you’ve learned about making characters stand out, write an explanation of why you have chosen to draw the character the way you have.

In *Private Peaceful* it may be necessary to draw different versions of the main characters, to indicate at what point the story is being told. For instance, the brothers will look very different during wartime than they do in peacetime, not only in the way they dress but in their facial expressions and body language.
Character relationships

In a comic, you need to be able to show what the main characters are like, but you also need to show how they get on with each other.

Activity
Eng 4-19a, Eng 4-31a, Exa 4-03a

Think about the relationships between the main characters. Write a little about how they interact.

For example, how does Tommo feel about each of his brothers? How does he feel about Molly? How can you tell from what he says and does?

After this, select two characters, e.g. Charlie and Molly. Think about how you might show in a drawing how they feel about each other and how they get on with each other. Draw them together and write a short description of why you have chosen to depict them this way.

Bringing setting to life in a comic

The setting is where a story or scene takes place. You can draw your reader into the world of the story by making careful choices about your illustrations.

Comic creators don’t always draw the setting in lots of detail! Remember we talked about ‘closure’ earlier on? Some illustrators only draw very small details, and essentially rely on the imagination of a reader to fill in the rest in their own minds. Cartoonists don’t need to draw every leaf on every tree – much may be suggested and will be filled in in the reader’s brain.

In Peanuts by Charles M. Schulz the world of the strips is instantly familiar and recognisable, and yet when you look closely at Figure 13, it’s formed from a simple horizon line and a few drawings suggesting simple trees or bushes.

The real world of Peanuts isn’t just the world that appears on the page. It’s a world that appears in the reader’s head, and it grows larger and more complete as you read more strips.
Bill Watterson’s Calvin and Hobbes is similar and in many cases the strip leaves even more to the imagination of the reader.

**Activity**
Exa 4-07a, Eng 4-19a

Consider the following five pages (see next page), each taken from a different comic. For each page consider the following questions:

- Write down a few words to describe the setting. What techniques do you think the artist has used to make the setting look and feel this way?
- Where and when do you think the story is set? What makes you think this?
Figure 15 (top left): Page from *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell

Figure 16 (top right): Page from *Black Hole* by Charles Burns

Figure 14 (middle left): Page from *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan.

Figure 15 (middle right): Page from *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes.

Figure 16 (bottom): Page from *Louis: Red Letter Day* by Metaphrog
Researching your setting

In order to make your comic adaptation of *Private Peaceful* believable you’ll probably need to do research and investigate World War One.

For instance, if your chosen scene takes place in the battlefields, you’ll need to be able to recreate the soldiers’ uniforms, and you’ll need to be able to accurately draw a trench. If the scene takes place at home, you’ll need to be able to recreate people’s clothes from the time period, and any other things that were different back then.

Over the years the subject of war has been tackled frequently in literature, film and comic. Much of the available material is extremely adult in nature and deals with much unpleasantness.

In France, one of the most highly regarded comic creators, Jacques Tardi, wrote and illustrated *C’était la Guerre des Tranchées*, and it was translated into English and published by Fantagraphics as *Goddamn This War!*

You can see how he has accurately reproduced soldiers’ uniforms. Also, note how he uses washed out blue grey colours to evoke the coldness of war and khaki muddy browns to make the soldiers stand out.

**Activity**

Lit 4-14a

Carry out some research into the setting for your chosen scene. Many of the trench systems in World War I were quite elaborate: you could draw out and label the different parts of a typical trench. Alternatively, you could research different types of tanks used in World War One, or find out what domestic life was like in the countryside in the early 1900s.

**Activity**

Eng 4-31a, Exa 4-03a

Now, using everything you’ve learned about depicting setting, it’s time to try it for yourself!

Think about the following settings in *Private Peaceful*. In the right hand columns of the table, write down what things you’d like to convey about each of the settings: what do you want the reader to know about the setting, and how do you want them to feel? Then write down some things you might do in your comic to create the atmosphere.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>What I want to convey</th>
<th>How could I convey these things?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Rural Childhood</td>
<td>The countryside</td>
<td>The countryside could be represented in some panels by the robin’s nest, the crows and a field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The small village</td>
<td>The small village could be suggested in some panels by depicting its inn and church tower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The happiness of Tommo and Charlie’s childhood</td>
<td>Bright colours could be used to show the happiness of childhood in the countryside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First day at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Man’s Land</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The trenches</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing a script

Example script adapted from page 62 of private peaceful

[Charlie's mother answers the door. The Colonel is standing there, scowling.]

COLONEL: That boy of yours is a despicable thief, Mrs. Peaceful!

[A panel shows Charlie in the hallway, nervous but defensive.]

CHARLIE: He was going to shoot her, mother. I had to do it.

Script

It is useful and important to write a script for your comic. Writing the script helps with planning and laying out the story visually.

Even though you’re working with an existing book, you still have to write a script and decide what to include, what text to leave out, and what language style and tone to use. To keep the feel of the original, you can use the same writing style in the comic but you’ll still need to shorten sentences or scenes for concision.

Scenes or text have to be condensed and reduced to what is strictly necessary, and the visuals can be used to replace parts of the original text: For example, descriptions of a place or person in the original text can be replaced in the comic by using the drawings instead.

In your script you should definitely include dialogue and what the characters are doing, as you’ll see in the script below. If you’re doing the script and someone else is doing the drawing, it’s up to you to decide how much to tell them about what the characters and settings should look like – you can give them lots of freedom to decide for themselves, or give them detailed instructions for what you think things should look like.

Activity

Eng 4-31a

It’s time to write your script! But first, go through a printed or photocopied version of your scene from the book. Highlight all of the narration and dialogue that you want to include in your comic adaptation.

After this, have a go at writing your script. As with any writing process, feedback is essential and you might need to do several drafts before your script is ready. Swap your script with another person and ask them to suggest any revisions, based on the following questions:
Has anything been included in the script which could be shown in an illustration instead (for instance, descriptions of setting)?

Is everything in the script important to help the reader understand things about the characters and plot?

Are any of the sentences overly long, perhaps too long to fit inside a comic panel while leaving plenty room for illustrations?

Planning the layout and writing your comic

Once you’ve got the script, it’s a good idea to do a first draft of the actual comic.

There is, of course, no recipe or right way to be creative, but the more carefully a story has been planned and thought through the stronger and more appealing it will be.

You have a choice of different shots: general views, middle shots and close-ups.

Activity
Exa 4-07a

Have a look at each type of shot in Figure 24, above, and discuss what effect the artist is trying to achieve. When do you get closest to the character’s feelings?

You can do panels in different ways: they can contain action; they can feature less action and more narration, or even silent panels; with only talking heads for dialogue scenes for example. Big panels can be used for scene setting (as you’ll learn in the next section); for effect and emphasis (e.g. splash page). Panels can be cut off at angles to make the action more dynamic, as you saw back in Figure 1.
How to start off: some final tips

In any story, the structure usually works as follows: the beginning introduces us to the setting and characters and lets us get a feeling for the type of story we are getting involved in. The middle of the story usually addresses the main problem or conflict of the story, and the ending shows us what the characters do and how they feel after the problem or conflict has been addressed.

Scenes work like this too: there’s always a beginning, middle and end of each scene.

For the beginning, when you’re trying to introduce your reader to your setting, one great technique you can use is ‘visual shorthand’. Film makers, like Alfred Hitchcock, often speak of using visual shorthand: for example, starting a story with a landmark such as the Eiffel Tower lets the reader know that the story takes place in France.

Comics often start with a general, wide view and then move in on the characters while also introducing the plot, like in the page opposite by Jacques Tardi from *The Bloody Streets of Paris*.

Alternatively, the comic can start from a close-up and zoom out to set the scene (Figure 26).

And indeed comics may even start directly with action panels (Figure 27).

In *Private Peaceful* each chapter begins with a time and then a progressively longer narration before a flashback.

Where do you think Tommo is seeing the time? What makes it so important to the story? What might be the best way to show this to a reader, visually? Try writing a double-spaced comic book script for this scene and let your partner(s) try working from it.

**Activity**

Eng 4-31a, Exa 4-03a

It’s time to write and draw your comic. Read your script through to get a feeling for the rhythm and pacing of the scene, then draw some
rough panels and sketches to see if they work. The drawings do not need to be refined or finished in the first draft but the shapes of the main elements in the panels and on the pages should be clear enough to be readable and recognisable. Work through several drafts till you’re happy with your finished product! Remember, here are the topics you’ve covered: use your knowledge of all of them to produce the best possible comic:

- How faithfully should you stick to the source material?
- The techniques of comic writing – panels, closure, narrative boxes, lettering, visual metaphors, onomatopoeia and emanata;
- Bringing characters to life;
- Bringing the setting to life;
- Panel sizes and layout.

Final Artwork

Finished comics can be created using pencils, pens and ink, brushes with ink, crayons, collage, glitter and gum. Indeed they can be made in an infinite number of ways. Combining words and pictures: the only limit is your own imagination.

Conclusion: a small insight into comic creators’ process

There isn’t a right or wrong way to appreciate a comic. Whatever you take from it is valuable. But it can be interesting to know what writers and artists were trying to achieve, so we thought we’d give you a little insight into our thought process for Figure 4, a page from our book *Louis: Night Salad*.

As comic creators, we are always trying to improve, and get better at writing and drawing. We spent five years creating *Louis: Night Salad* and were delighted when the book received award nominations and commendations. The book is about the power books have to transport or even transform the reader and the story opens our minds to a world of stories including the idea of a quest. Louis’ friend FC, or Formulaic Companion, is unwell and Louis dreams of finding a cure.

On his dream journey Louis has a guide and even with this guiding helper Louis encounters danger. With the page on the cliffs, Figure 1, in the introduction to this resource, we really wanted the reader to feel for Louis: to feel what Louis is feeling. Frightened, excited, a little dizzy, vertigo: unsure where to put his feet. Because the Louis books are small square books it was, at first, difficult to imagine creating the sense of height for the high cliffs but Sandra bookended the page with two tall panels to do this. In between, we used fast cutting and different points of view as well as unusual panel shapes to create a sense of imbalance and of the danger Louis faced.