

Guide for Teachers and Parents

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Letter of Introduction to Teachers and Parents

Dear Teachers,

...that is to say...

Dear Fellow Educators, Art Specialists, Librarians, Parents, and other Lovely Involved Folks,

Hello from Ursula, the cartoonist who wrote and drew *A Cat Story*! This PDF for teachers¹ has notes and suggestions for you in **purple**. The PDF for students omits those notes... and this written letter of introduction!

Although this guide contains the standard discussion questions and suggestions for further reading that teacher's guides usually contain, it is primarily focused on introducing your learners to the visual vocabulary of comics and getting them drawing their own comics- whether they are in a classroom group, doing distance learning, or working individually!

This is because I love comics. I love how pictures and words fuse together in comics to form something that is simultaneously familiar and entirely new. I love how comics as a form of literature is a complement to plays, poetry and prose- both in adapting stories from other forms of literature and in creating stories that can be told only using the visual framework of comics. I also love how both reading and making comics can support other fields of study!²

If you already have comic artists among your students or are drawn to this guide because your at-home or distance learner is an aspiring comic artist, the activities in this guide were also written with the aim of adding new tools to their comics making workbenches and getting them to think differently about the tools they're already using.

I made this teaching guide myself because I am an educator. It has been my honor to teach comics courses at universities and graduate school seminars, high schools, middle schools, elementary reading circles, and all- ages library comics workshops. This guide has been written with middle-grade students in mind, but I have adapted the activities in this guide to all educational levels.

Thank you for letting *A Cat Story* and this guide tag along as a small part in your learning journeys. There's nothing better than the thrill of seeing a student *getting* something for the first time and I hope your learners uncover a few of those moments with the activities in this guide. I would love it if you would send me their comics and am sincerely looking forward to hearing your thoughts on how this guide might be improved to better to support your teaching.

All my best,
Ursula Murray Husted, MFA, PhD, Cartoonist

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¹ I hope it is acceptable for me to refer to all of you collectively as *Teachers* in this guide because, to my way of thinking, this is what you are! In these challenging times when so much is online or at a difficult but necessary distance, we are all engaged in teaching to learn and learning to teach in new ways.

² More on teaching comics and fitting comics into Common Core is in the Opportunities for Further Learning section!

Introduction Comic





³ List of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Malta: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/mt>

Plot Summary* for *A Cat Story*

*Don't worry, no spoilers here!

Cilla and Betto are two best friends who need a new place to call home.

 <p>Cilla is courageous, idealistic, and naive.</p>	 <p>Betto is cynical, thoughtful, and loyal.</p>
---	---

They live on the fishing docks like many stray cats, but this can be a hard life. The Valletta streets are busy and the humans unreliable. Our heroes are usually hungry and the boat they sleep under leaks when it rains.

But, what about the quiet garden from old kitten tales—a place where all cats are welcome, and the humans are always kind? Could the stories really be true?

As Cilla and Betto embark on a grand adventure to find out, they begin to craft a tale of their own—one that will take them through the art and stories of many journeyers who came before, and that will bring them to a surprising destination.

Geographical Note

A Cat Story takes place in Malta. But... where is Malta?

Malta is an archipelago, or island chain, found south of Italy in the Mediterranean Sea. It is one of the world's smallest countries! The cities and countryside of Malta are full of stray cats who inspired *A Cat Story*.



(Images from Google Maps: <https://www.google.com/mt/maps/@35.9006349,14.4360406,12z>)

The beginning of the book is set in Malta's beautiful capital city of Valletta, which is found on the main island of Malta. Valletta is famous for its city festivals, renowned theaters, museums, and 16th century architecture. Look for the famous Valletta landmarks of St John's Co-Cathedral and Tritons' Fountain in the backgrounds.

The end of the book is set in Gozo, the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago. It is one of my favorite places on the planet Earth. In addition to having a tasty native cheese, wonderful beaches, and sandy rolling hills dotted with flowers, Gozo is thought to be the island described in the *Odyssey* as Ogygia- home of the nymph Calypso! What's not to like? Look for the Gozo landmarks of the Gran Castello Historic House, the Gozo Cittadella, and mysterious Ġgantija! If you look carefully, you'll also spot our heroes visiting the Azure Window of western Gozo's Dwejra Point.

Read more:

- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Valletta>
- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gozo>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Odyssey-epic-by-Homer>

Discussion Questions* for *A Cat Story*

*Heads up! Here are spoilers!

1. **Which main character do you relate to the most: Cilla or Betto?**
 - I. Why?
2. **Which storyteller do you relate to the most: Alaya, Paolo, Radegunde, or Dolce?**
 - I. Why?
 - II. Who was the most helpful? Who was the least helpful? Why?
3. **There are many stories in *A Cat Story*.**
 - I. Do you think any of the stories in the book are really true? Why or why not?
 - II. Why do you think Cilla believes in the story of the quiet garden and Betto doesn't?
 - III. What do you believe makes a story true or not true?
4. **Alaya tells Cilla that she and Betto are welcome to live in the flower market.**
 - I. Do you think the book would have had a different ending if they had moved to the flower market?
 - II. How would the book be different if Cilla had decided not to look for the garden?
5. **Paolo tells Cilla that there is truth to all good stories.**
 - I. What do you feel that he means by that?
 - II. Do you think Paolo really believes in the quiet garden? Why or why not?
6. **Radegunde tells a very confusing story!**
 - I. How is the poodle's story different from the stories Alaya, Paolo, and Dolce tell Cilla and Betto? Why do you think that might be?
 - II. What do you think Radegunde is trying to teach Cilla and Betto with her story?
 - III. Do you believe Cilla and Betto learned anything from her story by the end of the book? If so, what?
7. **Dolce's story frightens Betto, but he never shares that story with Cilla.**
 - I. Why do you think he kept Dolce's story to himself?
8. **Cilla and Betto are able to use their own story to magically travel home.**
 - I. If you were to magically travel, where would you like to go?
 - II. Which pieces of art from history might take you there?⁴

⁴ Here are a few great places to start finding art online!

<https://econtent.unm.edu/digital/collection/mcna>

<https://africa.si.edu/collections/collections/22986/visionary-viewpoints-on-africas-arts/objects>

<https://nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org/the-collection>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

<https://new.artsmia.org/art-artists/explore/>

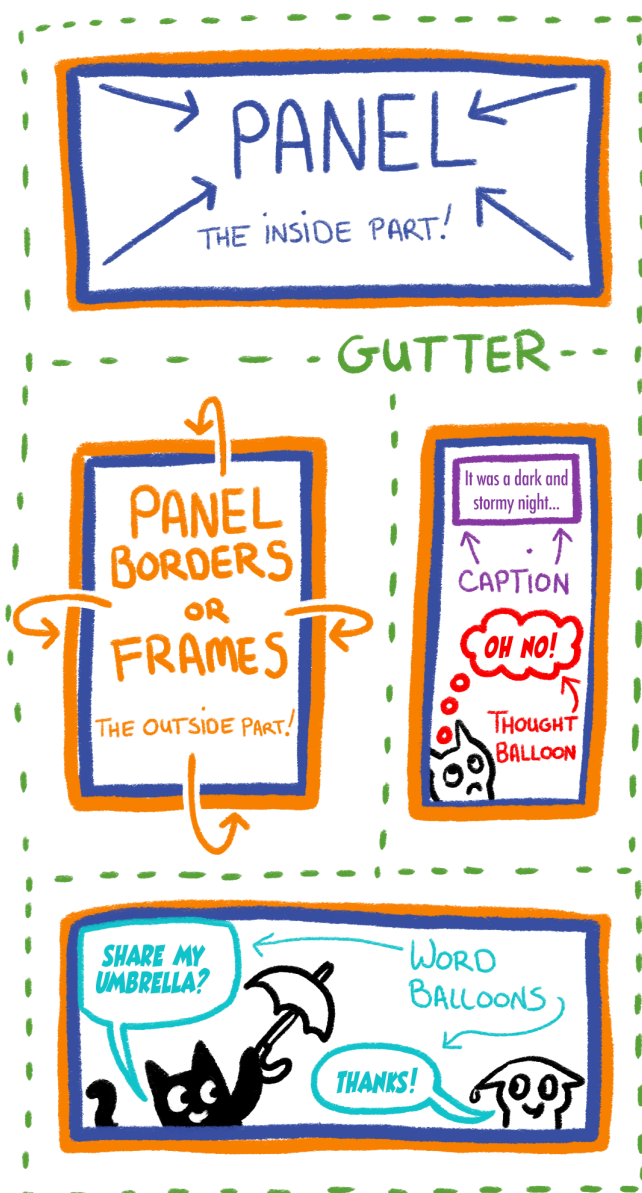
Comics Vocabulary

Comics- Images and text that combine together to express a story or an idea.

Book-length fiction comics like *A Cat Story* are called **graphic novels**, but **graphic novels** are only one form of comics! **Comics** can take many different forms and *all* of them combine art and text to share information, whether that information is jokes, fiction, non fiction, memoir, biography, school subjects like arithmetic and biology, and even poetry!

Remember that while all **graphic novels** are **comics**, not all **comics** are **graphic novels**! You can get your brain around this by remembering the rule of squares and rectangles. All **squares** are **rectangles**, but not all **rectangles** are **squares**.

If you want to describe a comic you've read in a book report or start drawing your own, it will help to know the names for the building blocks you'll find in nearly all comics!



Panel- An enclosed space on the page showing a single moment in the story.

Panel Borders- The edge or outline surrounding an individual panel. Also called **Frames**.

Gutter- The space between and surrounding the panels on a comic page. Gutters allow the reader to imagine the actions, time changes, and location changes between the moments shown in the panels.

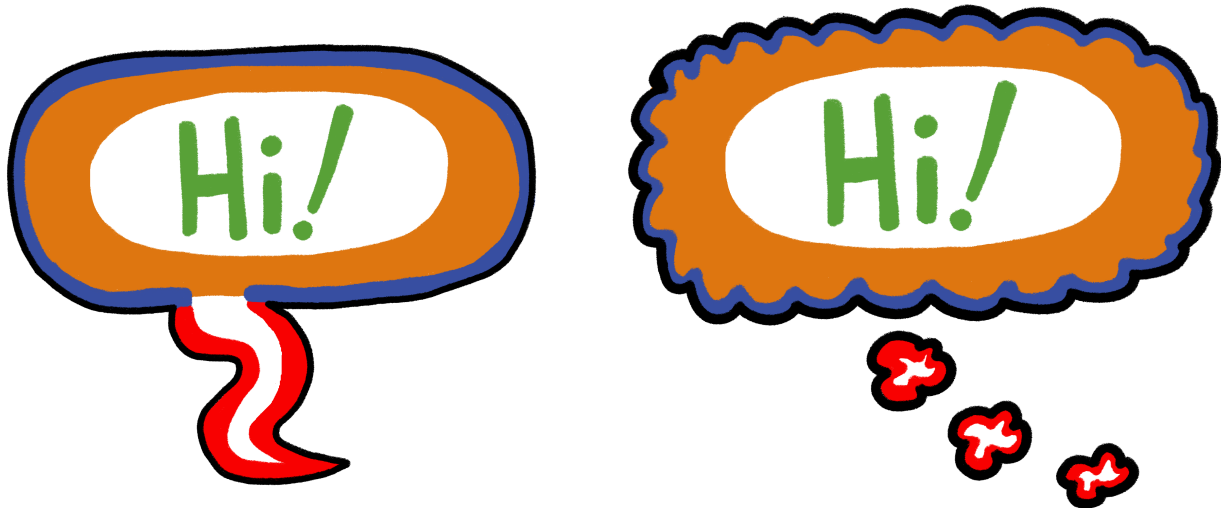
Caption- Contains narration or other information the reader needs to understand the story.

Thought Balloon- Contains a character's thoughts. *Can't* be heard by other characters.

Word Balloon- Contains a character's spoken words. *Can* be heard by other characters.

Balloon Vocabulary

Word Balloons and **Thought Balloons** use the same basic visual vocabulary.



Bubble- The outline around the lettering.

Lettering- The words inside the bubble.

Padding- The space between the lettering and the inside edge of the bubble.

Tail- The pointy or cloudy bit at the bottom of the balloon. These are surprisingly important!

A few quick (but important) words on **Word Balloons**:



More Thoughts on Thought Balloons:

Remember that **Thought Balloons**, unlike **Word Balloons**, can't be heard or understood by other characters in a comic. They are *only* meant to be read and understood by the reader.

The reader knowing what a character is thinking is not unique to comics. It is common in prose books for the author to tell readers what their characters are thinking.

For example, here is the opening paragraph from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*⁵ written by Lewis Carroll:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice "without pictures or conversations?"

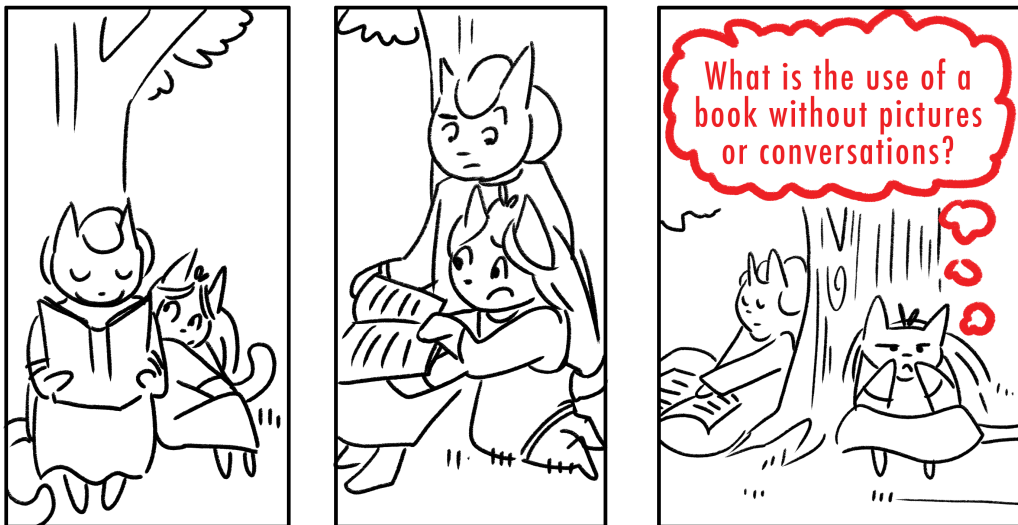
Although her sister doesn't know Alice's opinion of her book, we readers know that Alice considers it to be boring. This is because Carroll signals that thought to the reader by using the words ***thought Alice***. **Thought Balloons** do the same thing in comics, but visually!

⁵ Read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* free online!: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11/11-h/11-h.htm>

Here are two different ways to translate Carroll's opening paragraph into comics:



The first version has a **caption** with the original text from the story that describes Alice feeling bored by her sister's book.



The second version doesn't have a **caption**. Instead, it has two extra **panels** showing what that **caption** in the first example is describing. Alice looks over at her sister's book and finds it boring.

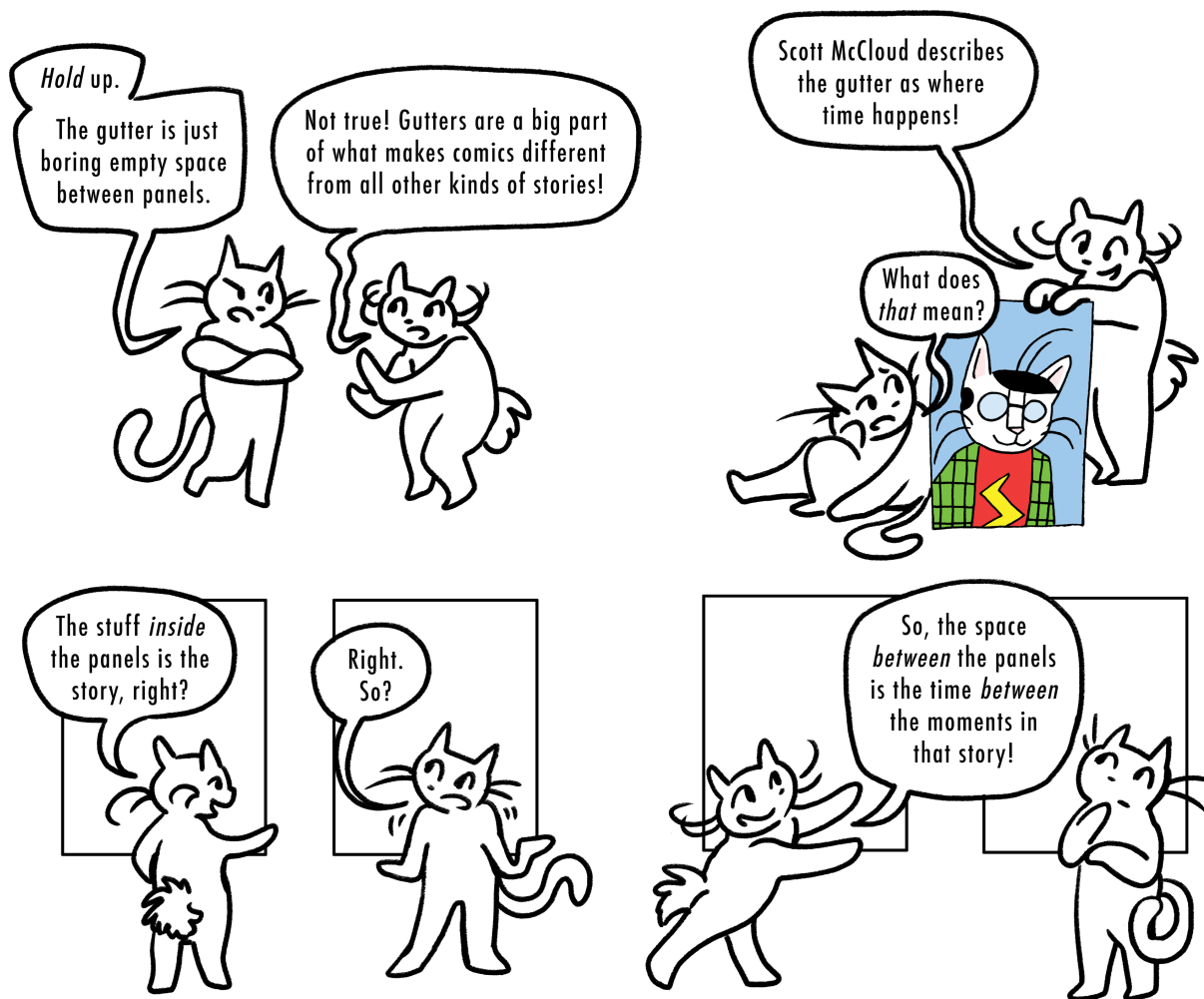
Both versions work as a comic, but the second one doesn't really *feel* like the first paragraph of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* while the first one still does. Why?

While the second is more interesting as a comic, it makes the mistake of removing the cleverly chosen words that make *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* special. Those clever words are very important to the unique flavor of Lewis Carroll's writing. Any adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the clever words removed will feel hollow and not quite right.

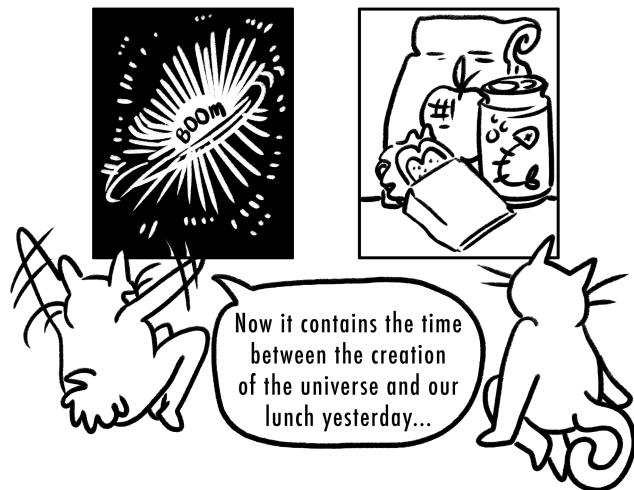
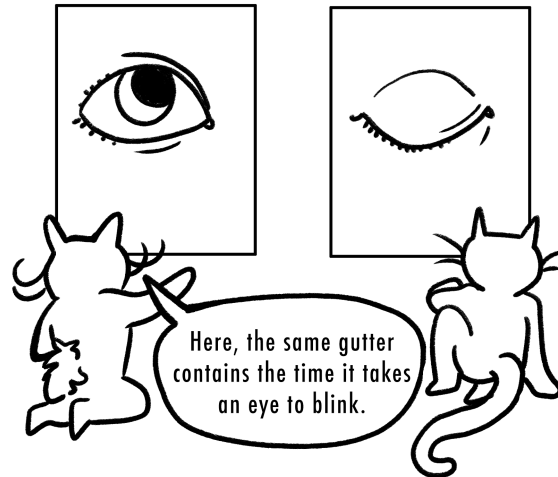
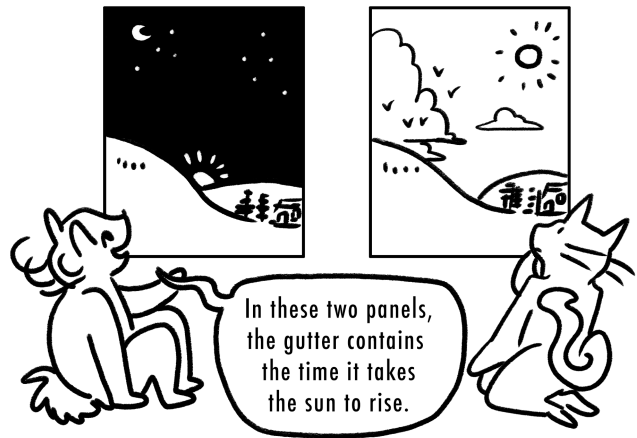
If clever words are the magic ingredient to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, **gutters** are the magic ingredient to comics! With that in mind, let us now...

Focus on the **Gutter**:

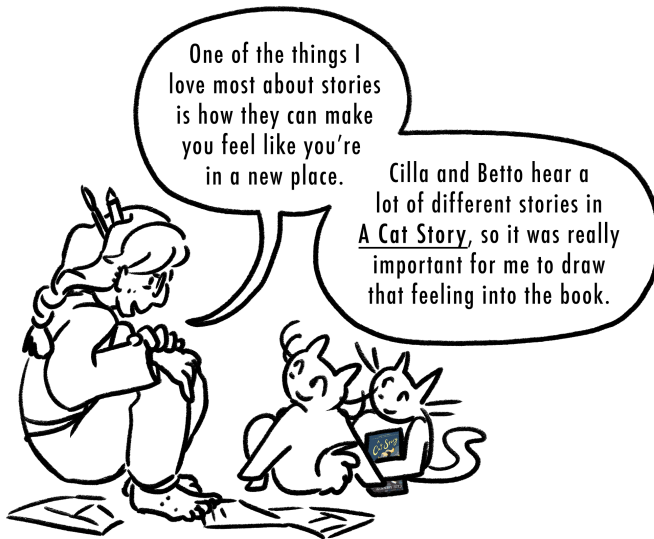
6



⁶ Explained first in McCloud's book, *Understanding Comics!* <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/understanding-comics-scott-mccloud> (portrait of "Spot McClawed" by Ursula, with affection.)



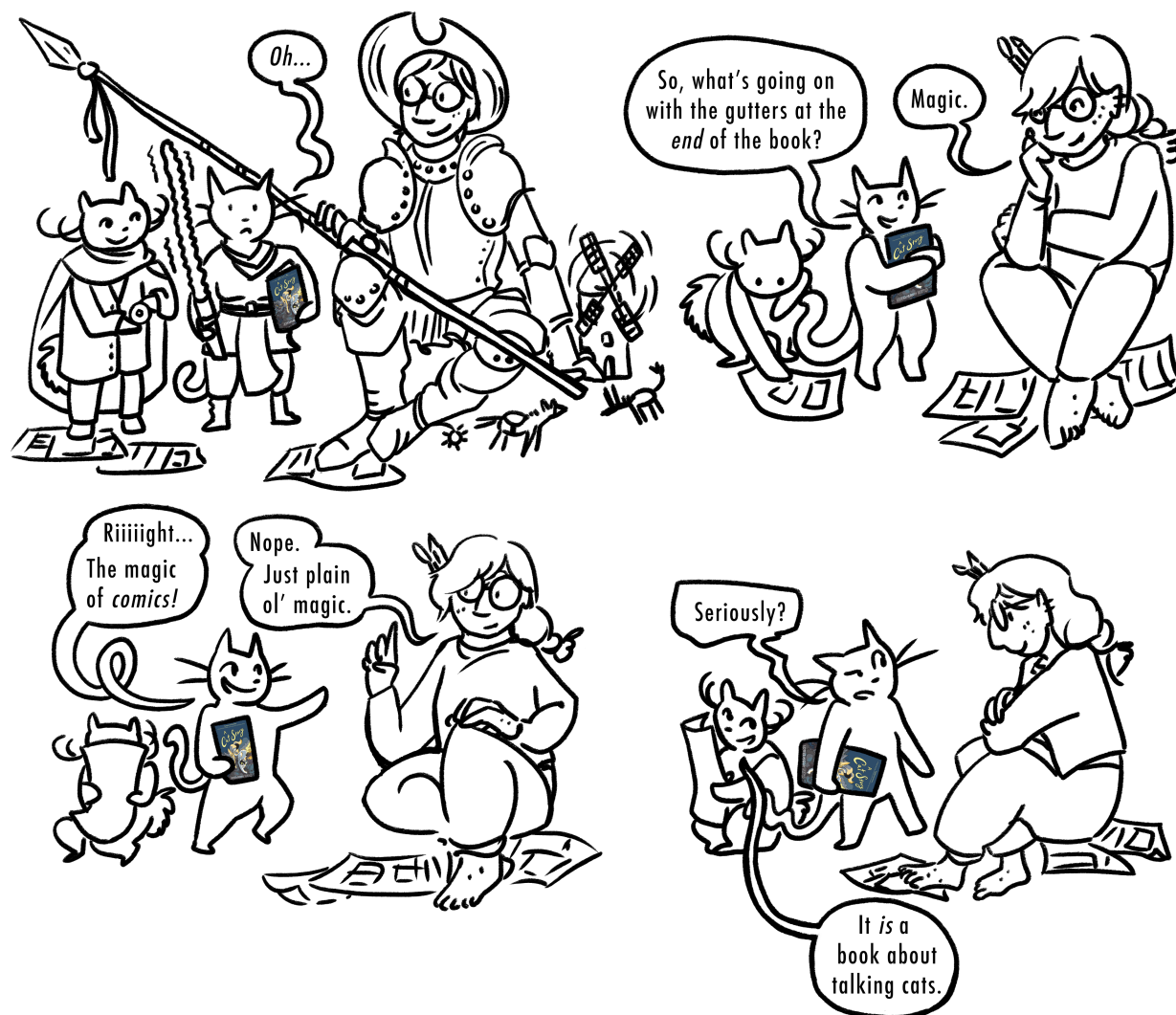




Because panel borders are sometimes called frames, museum walls filled with framed paintings have always reminded me of comic pages.



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⁷ More on those favorite stories:

The Lord of the Rings, written by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Read more about how Professor Tolkien wrote! <https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/tolkien.php>

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope, screenplay/direction by George Lucas.

Watch the cat version! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36V7J7F4TVM>

Don Quixote, written by Miguel de Cervantes.

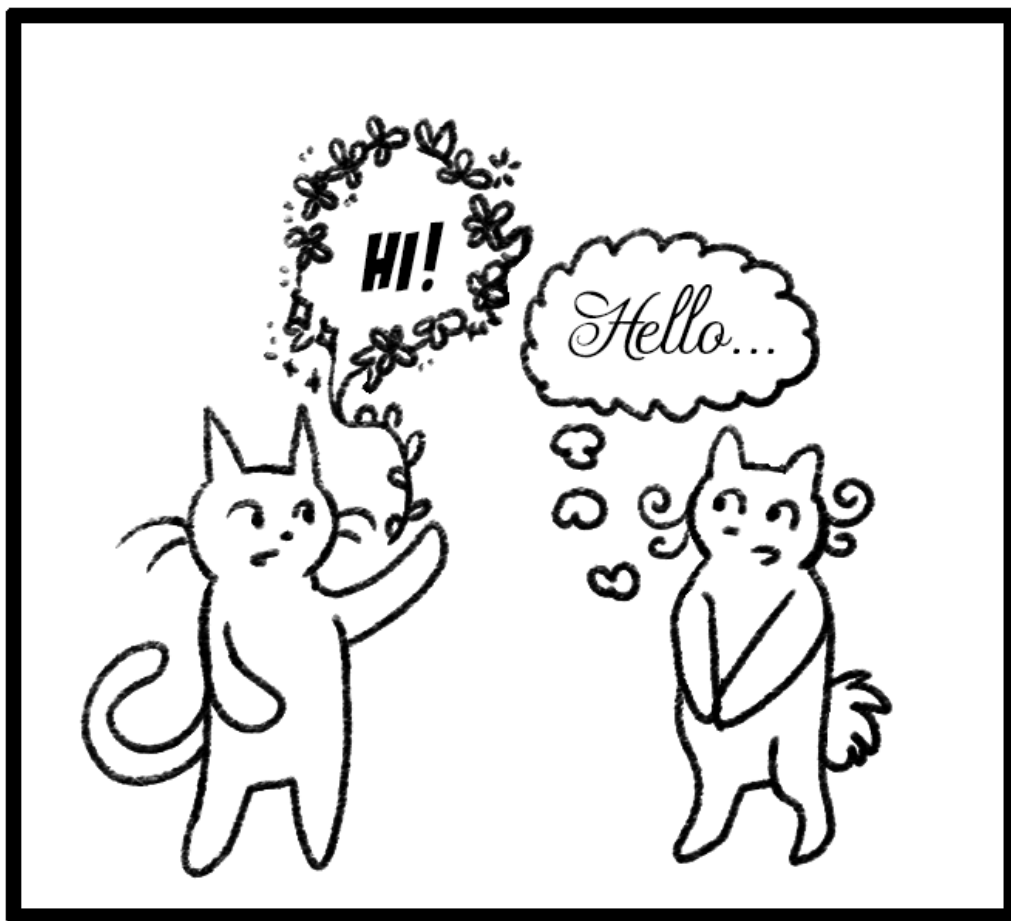
Read online for free! <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm>

Art Activity #1- Comics Framework

Introduction

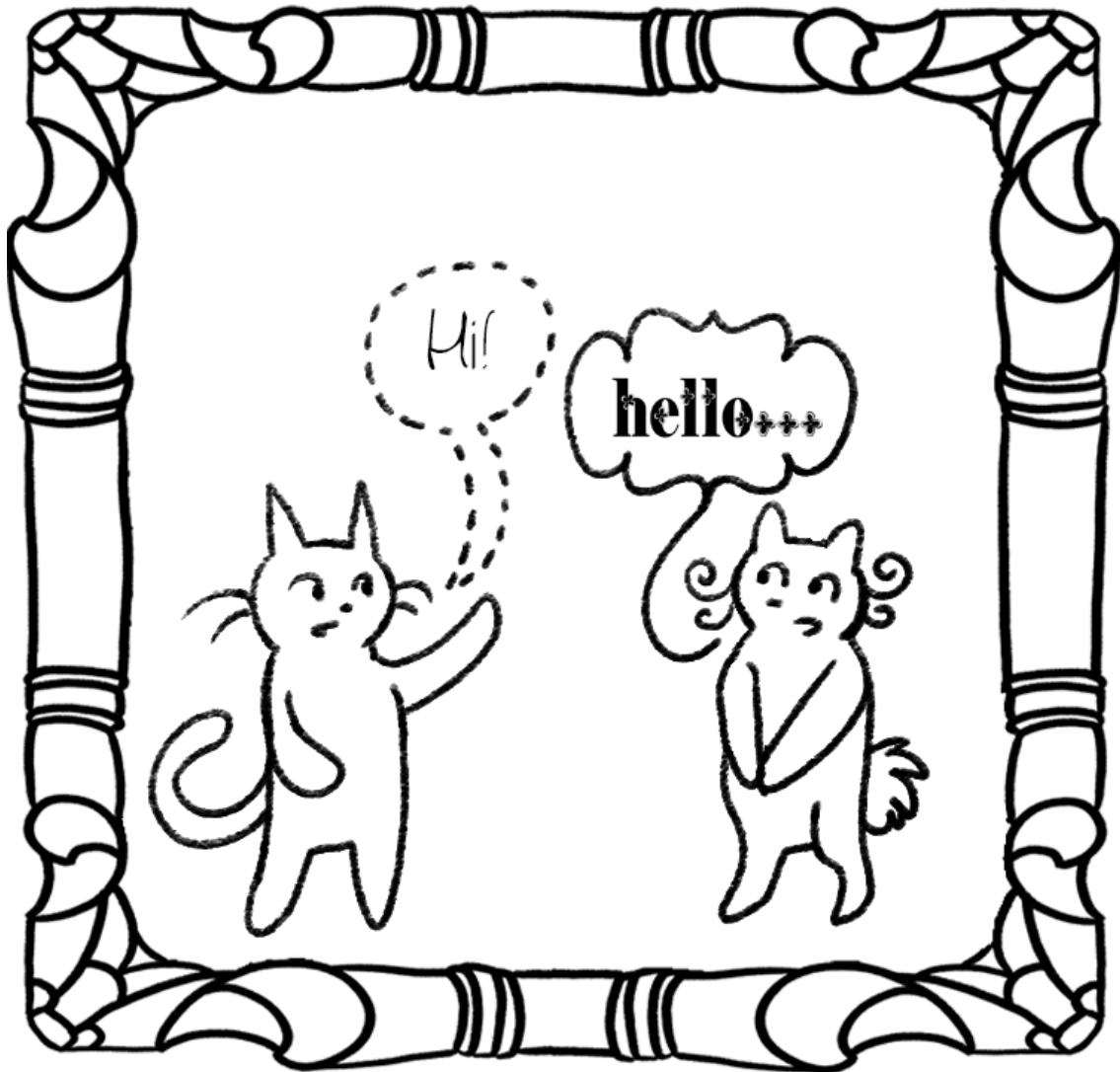
Comics use a unique visual framework to communicate stories. Every thing you can see on the comics page gives clues to the reader how a story might be understood and interpreted.

By changing the style of the lettering, thought and word balloons, and panel borders, comic artists can tell completely different stories using the same characters and dialog.



For example, put on your most dramatic acting hat and read this panel out loud:

- What voices did you use for the two different characters?
- How do you think they feel about each other?
- What do you think will happen in the next panel?



Now, read *this* short panel out loud:

- What voices did you use for the two different characters?
- How do you think they feel about each other?
- What do you think will happen in the next panel?

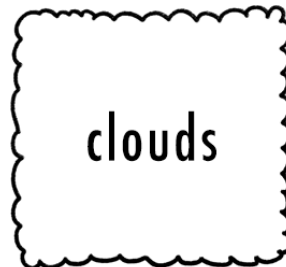
These are the same characters with the same dialog and punctuation, but the panel feels different somehow.

How did your dramatic reading of the panel change when the comics framework changed?

Although there are potentially as many different styles of comics framework elements as there are comic artists to draw them, here are examples of five basic styles to use in this activity: Plain, Dots, Clouds, Fancy, and Flowers.

If you have a better idea for a framework style, by all means use it! You do not have to stick to these examples when drawing your panels.

Examples of Panel Border Styles



Examples of Lettering Styles

HI!

HELLO...

plain

HI!

HELLO...

dots

Hi!

Hello...

clouds

Hi!

Hello...

fancy

hi!

hello...

flowers

CHANGING THE
SIZE OF THE LETTERING
ALSO AFFECTS HOW
IT IS READ!



Examples of Balloon Styles



plain



dots



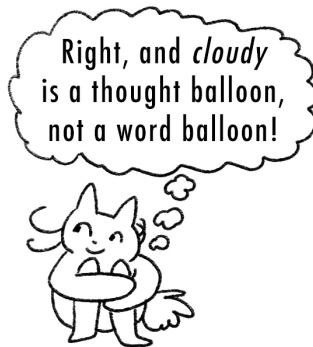
clouds



fancy



flowers



Materials

- One 8.5 by 11in sheet of plain paper
- A pen, pencil, or other drawing tool of your choice

Instructions

Step one

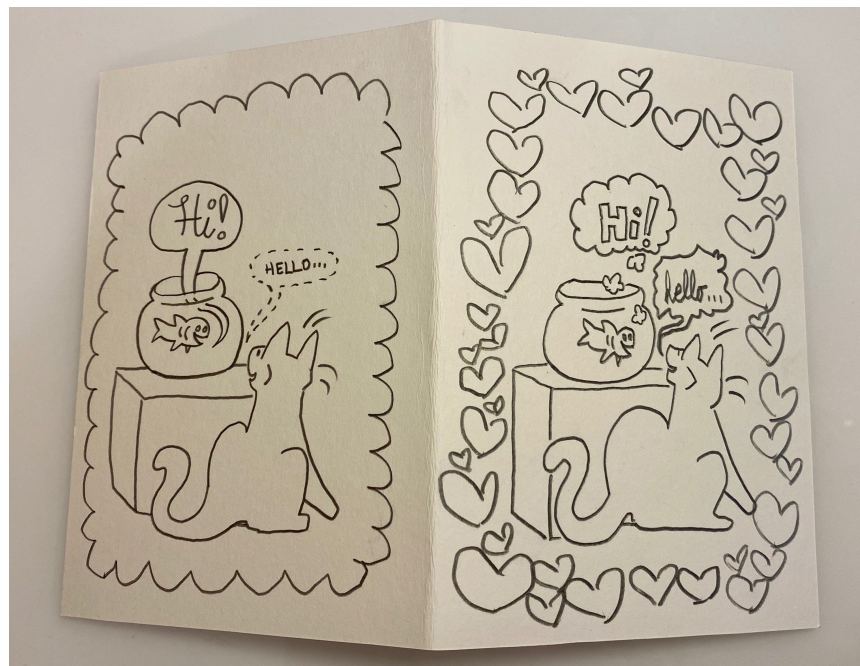
Fold your paper in half.

Step two

On the first half of the paper, draw a single panel with two characters saying hello to each other that mixes up different panel borders, balloons, and lettering from either your own imagination or the five different styles in the examples above (Plain, Dots, Clouds, Fancy, Flowers).

Step three

Now draw the same characters with the same dialog on the other half of the paper, but make different choices for each of the comics framework elements. See how different you can make the two panels by changing only the comics framework elements!



After Activity Discussion

- Compare the two panels by doing a dramatic reading of each!
- How did the comic story change when different combinations were used?
- What elements changed your panel the most?
- Were there any that didn't matter as much?

Art Activity #2- Three Panel Comic Strips

Materials

- One plain 8.5 by 11in sheet of plain paper
 ➡or one sheet printed with Template A from the Printable Panel Pages
- Three small slips of paper
- A pen, pencil, or other drawing tool of your choice

Note

This can be both a solo or group activity! If the activity is being completed by one learner, they should complete three sets of story seeds (three unusual animals, three motivations, and three places) and then follow the instructions in **Step Two** to assemble a random set of story seeds!

Note to teachers- This first step is the idea generation phase of the assignment. The outcome will be ‘seeds’: small pieces of paper with story generating ideas!

If this is a class or workshop with multiple students, each student contributes **one** set of seeds (one unusual animal, one motivation, and one place).

If you have one student working alone, they should write **three** sets of seeds (three unusual animals, three motivations, and three places) so that they can still do the activity with a randomly generated story. Random generation of story is very important to the success of this activity as it keeps students from simply drawing something they’ve drawn before.

In my experience, students who get stuck in a rut drawing the same thing over and over again are doing so because they’re worried about drawing something ‘wrong’. This can be a deep seated and understandable fear! Beginning an art activity by relinquishing control over minor particulars often helps to relieve the looming dread of perfectionism and classroom-based performance anxiety. I love this kind of randomization activity because it gently nudges students into caring more about the *process* of drawing than the end result.

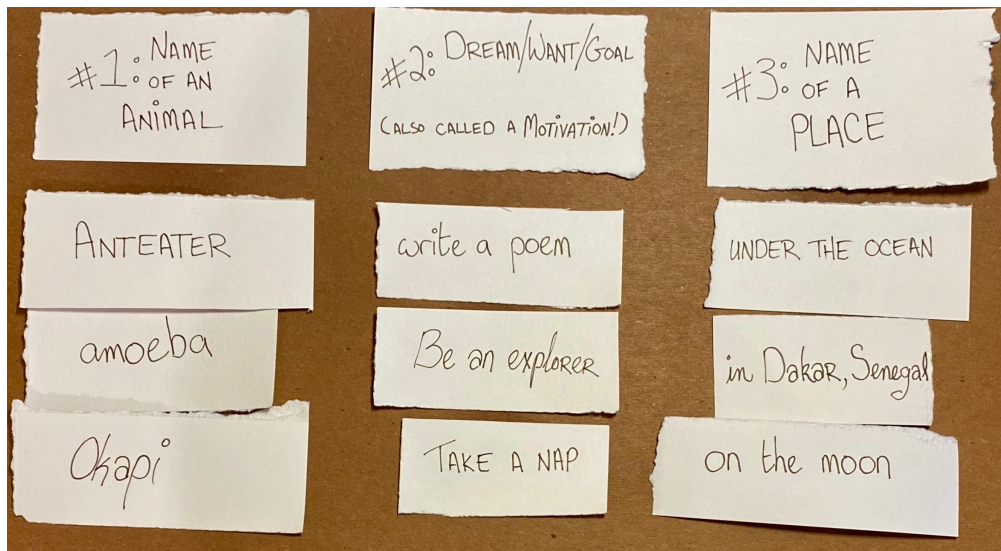
A student may not know how to draw a pangolin, but why should this bother them if they’ve never drawn one before? You can help them look up pictures and simplify the pangolin down to basic shapes. So it didn’t come out the way the student wanted? Remind them that it is not their fault. After all, they didn’t come up with the story! If they get really stuck and anxious, have them write me a letter about their experience. I’ll write them back. I promise.

Instructions

Step One: Story Seeding

Assemble three small pieces of paper and the drawing tool of your choice.

- On the 1st, write the name of an unusual species of **animal** (no house pets or livestock!)
- On the 2nd, write a **motivation** (a dream/want/goal)
- On the 3rd, write the name of a **place**



Fold your papers into squares. Write #1 on the outside of the folded animal squares, #2 on the outside of the folded motivation squares, and 3 on the outside of the folded place squares so they don't get mixed up!



Step Two: Random Story Generation

If this activity is being done in an in-person group, identify a very organized human to collect the folded squares from everyone. That brave and worthy individual will put all the 1s/animals in a bag together, shake to mix, and then randomly assign a folded paper square to each student. They do the same for the 2s/motivations, and the 3s/places until everyone has three different squares- one from each category.

If this is a distance learning classroom or another situation in which everyone touching the same little pieces of paper isn't feasible or a good idea, the ideas on the folded squares can be randomized using a computer.⁸

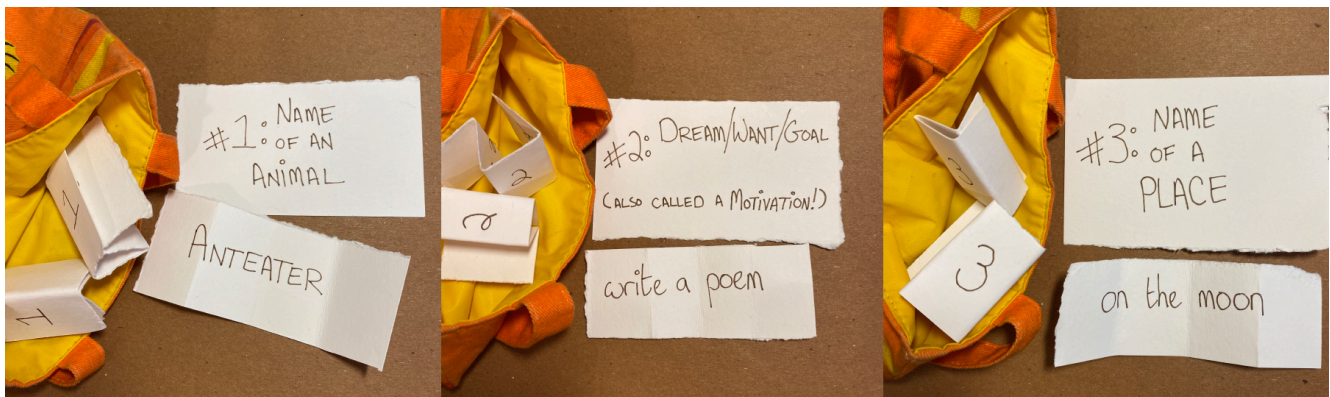
Random is the key word for this step, because these random choices (animal, motivation, and place) will combine to form the story of your three panel comic!

Note to teachers: If you have a sarcastic, rowdy, or ever so occasionally salty group of folks, you're already mentally adding in the step of checking the slips of paper before mixing them together. This isn't a bad idea for any group. Motivations can be particularly tricky to define for younger students and become downright existential for older ones. Not that existential motivations are necessarily a bad thing, but they can be awfully difficult to draw in three panels.

Step Three: Growing the Starter Story

Look at your story seeds together and grow them into an idea for a story.

For example, the seeds:



Grow into this story: *An Anteater, living on the moon, wants to write a poem.*

⁸Random list generation tutorial for Excel: <https://www.ablebits.com/office-addins-blog/2018/01/31/excel-random-selection-random-sample/#random-selection-formulas>

Online Random list generator: <https://www.random.org/lists/>

Step Four: Writing the Script

To write a script for your comic, begin by answering these questions about your basic story:

1. What does your character want and what is the obstacle stopping them from this goal?
2. What action does your character take to overcome this obstacle?
3. Do they get the outcome they want- yes or no? Why?

Example:

1. Anteater wants to write a poem, but doesn't feel inspired.
2. Anteater looks up to see the Earth out in space.
3. Anteater succeeds in writing a poem because the Earth is beautiful.

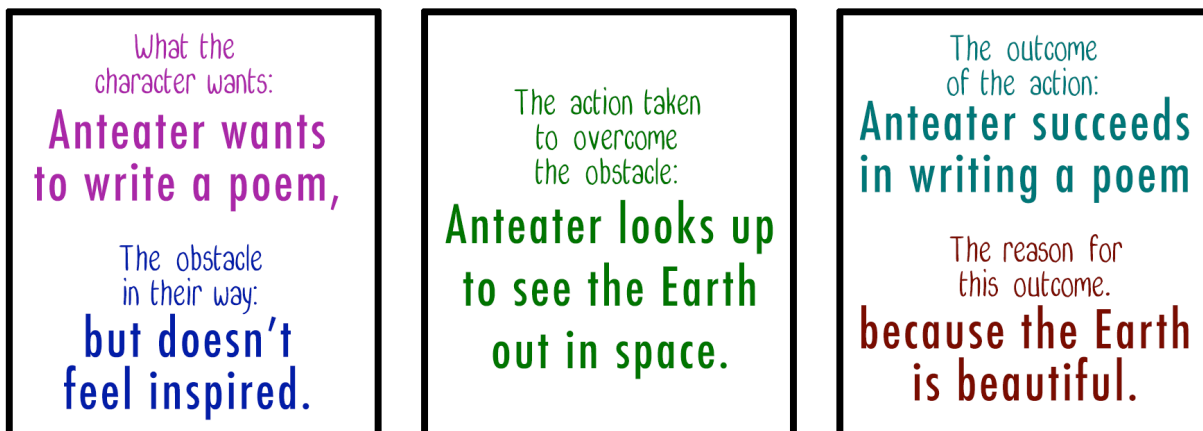
Then, you write your script. Oh wait, you already have!

As you may have guessed:

Question 1 tells you what to draw in panel 1

Question 2 tells you what to draw in panel 2

Question 3 tells you what to draw in panel 3



Step Five: Drawing the Comic (FINALLY!)

Now you have a story and a script so you're ready to draw your three panel comic!

You can draw your own panel borders, or use **3 panel comic strip** page from the Printable Panel Pages.

Remember to use what you've learned about Comics Framework Styles from Activity #1!



After Activity Discussion

The three step story can be used to explain many of our favorite stories from movies, books, and television:

- Character Wants
- Character tries
- Character Succeeds/Fails

Apply the three panel format to one of your favorite stories.

- Does it work?
- Why or why not?

Activity #3- Telling the same story differently

Materials

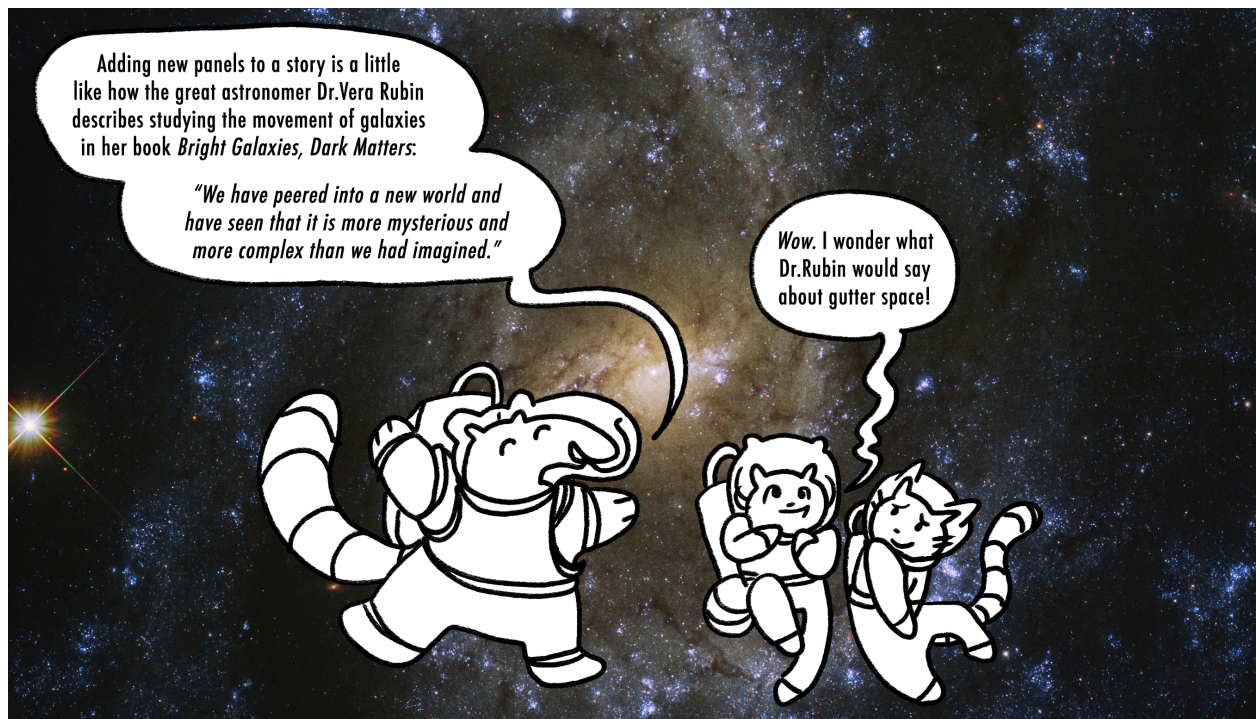
- Your 3 panel comic from Activity #2
- Printed templates from the Printable Panel Pages
- The drawing tool or tools of your choice

The three panel format is a classic because it is very easy to both write and understand, but what happens to your story when you add panels?

Step One: Going from Comic Strip to Comic Page

Begin by rereading your three panel comic strip.

Then, redraw your three panel comic strip into the 3 **Panel Comic Page** from the Printable Comics Pages. You are going from squares to rectangles, so your panels will change slightly. You may need to zoom in or zoom out and you will likely need to add more background details in all of the new space.



(Background image, Hubble Telescope photograph of barred spiral galaxy NGC 2835:
https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/multimedia/index.html)

When finished, look at the two together and compare your stories. How are they similar or different? How did having the panels stacked on top of each other change the way your comic reads? How does adding more space change the feeling of your comic?

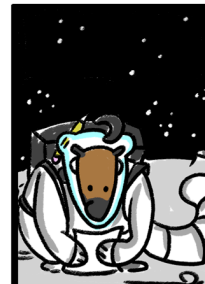
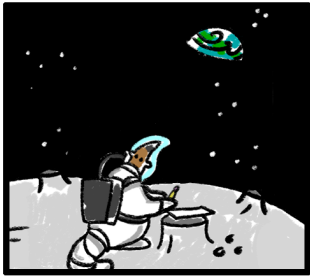


Step Two: More panels!

Now, adapt your original story to the rest of the comic pages in Template B.

With each new panel, you are adding another moment in the story. You can figure out what these moments are by thinking about the steps your character completes in trying to overcome the obstacle and what happens to them after they achieve/or fail to achieve their goal.





After Activity #3 Discussion

How did changing the way your story was drawn change its meaning?

- How did your story change with more panels?
- How did your story change with more space?
- Did it become clearer or more confusing?
- Which was more fun for you to draw- a page with only a few panels or a page with many panels? Why?

Note to teachers: If you're looking at this activity and thinking, "Gee, that's a lot of drawing", you're right! But, it doesn't have to be heavy work. With a single student or a class of distance learners this activity works just as well if you spread out the pages as homework over a week or two.

If you have a group of students and only want to dedicate a single class period to this activity, you can do this activity as a round-robin comics jam!⁹

Here's how that works with activity #3:

Encourage the students to draw simply- stick figures are fine!- and start with the three panel page adaptation. Set a five-ten minute timer and instruct your students to redraw their own story into the three panel page template. Then, everyone picks up their pencil and moves to spot on their left, leaving the comic behind. When they are settled, you restart the timer and everyone draws the four panel version of their *neighbor's* story. After this, everyone moves to the left again. You restart the timer and everyone and draws the five panel version of that story- continuing on until everyone has all seven versions of their story drawn. Dramatic readings of these crowd sourced comics are usually a highlight of the class experience- students are hilarious!

A non-timed round-robin could also be achieved by a group of distance learning students and would be a great way for them to collaborate digitally!

⁹ Comics jams are a fun version of the classic Exquisite Corpse drawing game where one person draws a panel, then the next person draws what happens next. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exquisite_corpse)

Opportunities for Further Learning

Books about teaching and making comics:

Worth A Thousand Words- Using graphic novels to teach visual and verbal literacy

Meryl Jaffe, PhD (visit her page for more resources and other teaching guides!)
and Talia Hurwich

There are a lot of great *how-to-draw* comics books, but this is the best *how-to-teach* comics book I've ever read. It combines classroom exercises with language describing teaching comics using common-core standards, how to get approval for using graphic novels in your school districts/library systems, reasons for introducing comics in classes *outside* of art, and so much more. If you want to teach with comics and feel affirmed and supported as an educator, read this smart and compassionate book.

Making Comics & Understanding Comics

Scott McCloud

Understanding Comics is the classic text where McCloud lays out his theories of temporal space in comics. It's great! Making Comics restates those theories and adds in how-to-make comics elements. Both are fabulous books, though Making Comics is more useful in an applied classroom setting with younger students.

Drawing Words and Writing Pictures

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden

A year's worth of comics lessons in a single book! Geared to slightly older students.

Comics and Sequential Art

Will Eisner

An approachable and easy to read guide to drawing comics by the creator of *The Spirit* and *A Contract With God*. A classic.

Great pairings to read with *A Cat Story*

(a too-short list of more books with animals, magic, and young folks telling their own stories)

A Nest for Celeste by Henry Cole

How Mirka Got Her Sword by Barry Deutsch

Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones

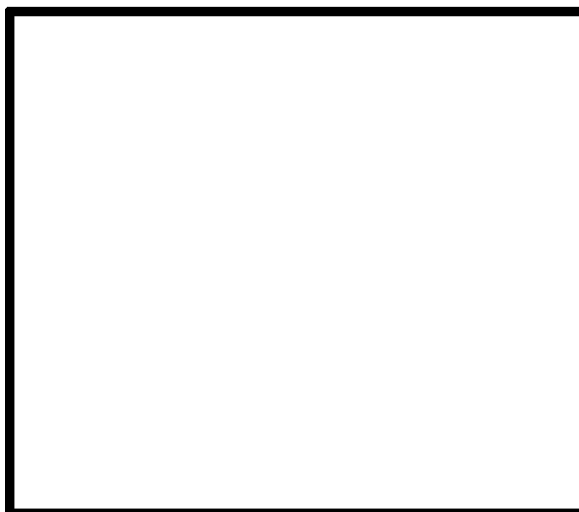
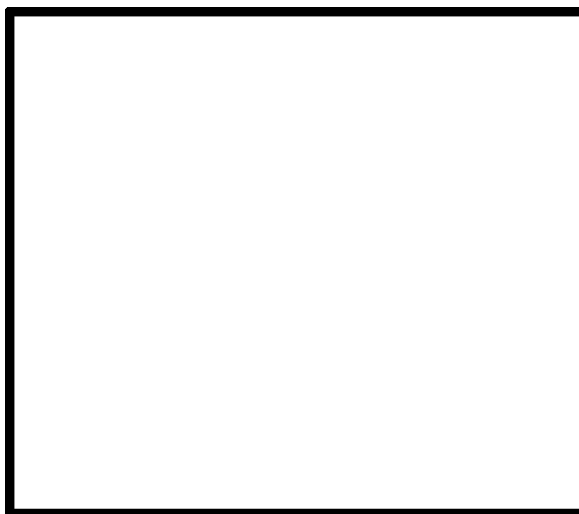
Nightlights by Lorena Alvarez

The Girl Who Drank The Moon by Kelly Barnhill

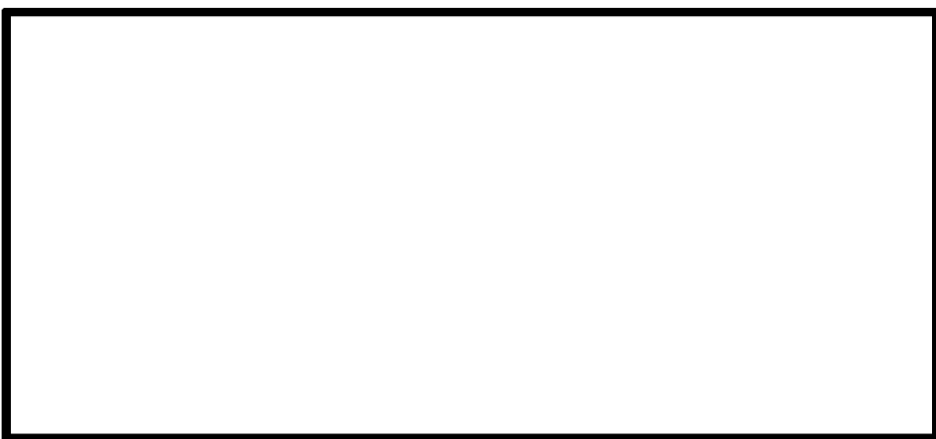
The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, The Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog written by Adam Gidwitz and illuminated by Hatem Aly

Printable Panel Pages:

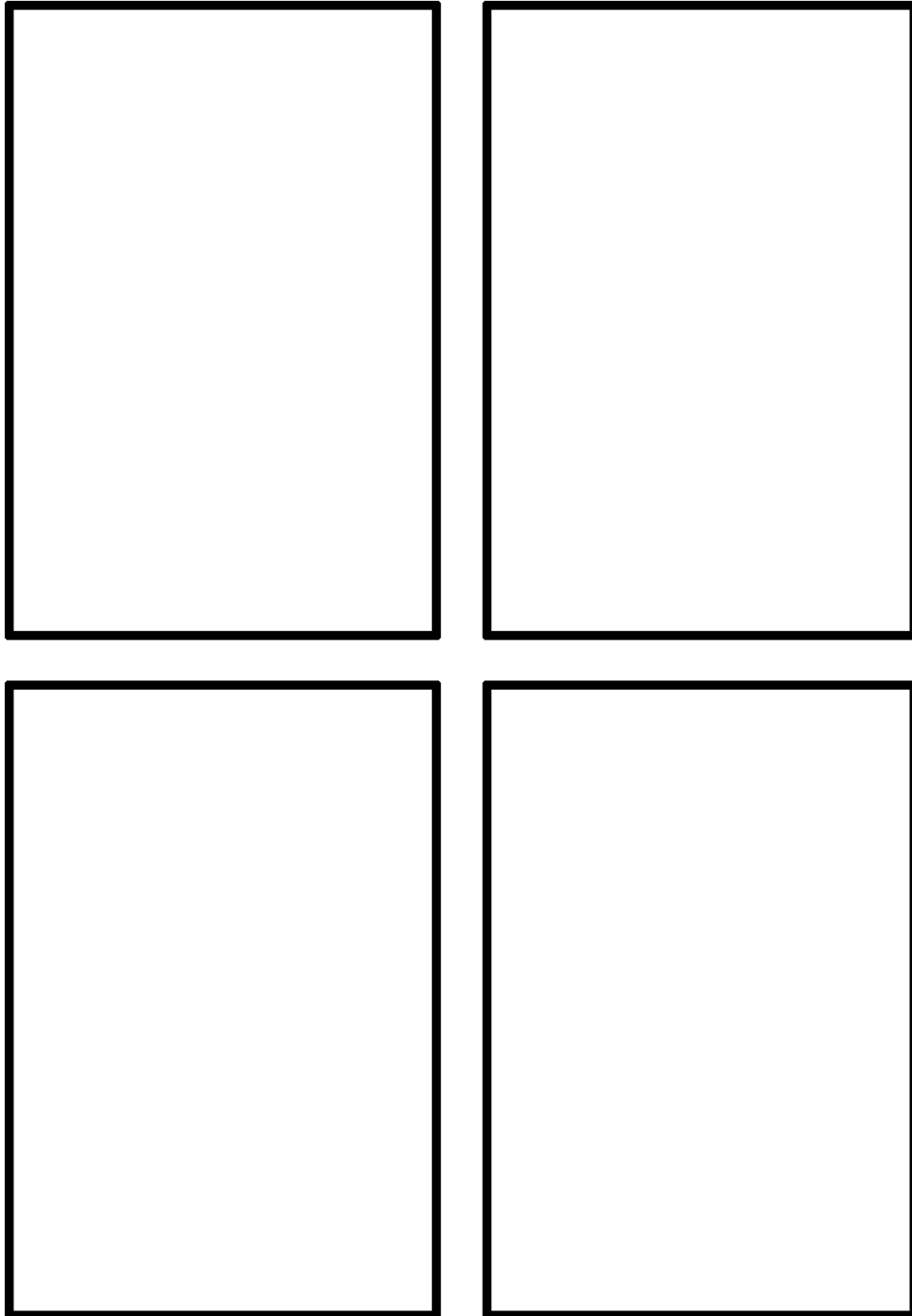
(3 panel comic strip)



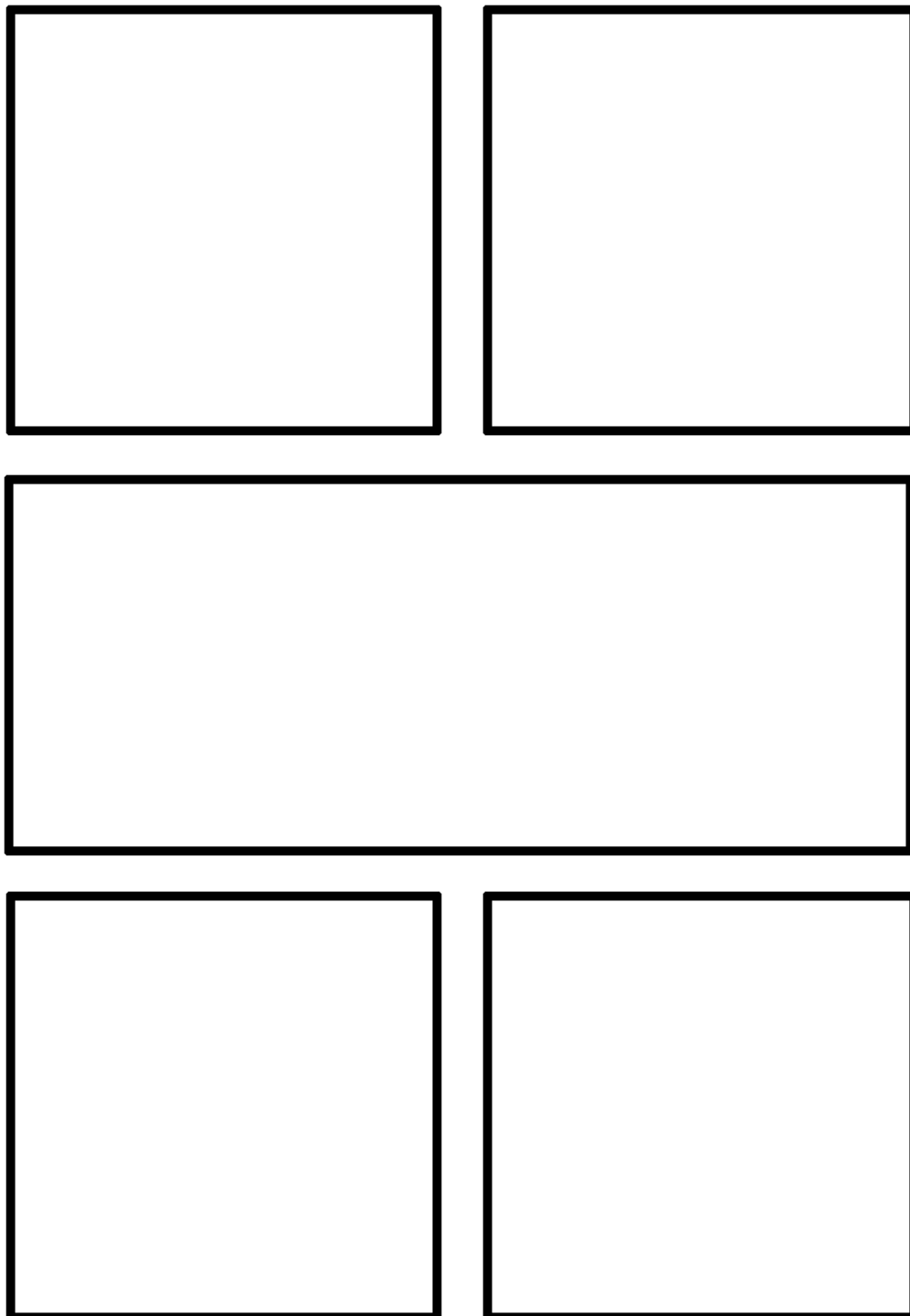
(3 panel comic page)



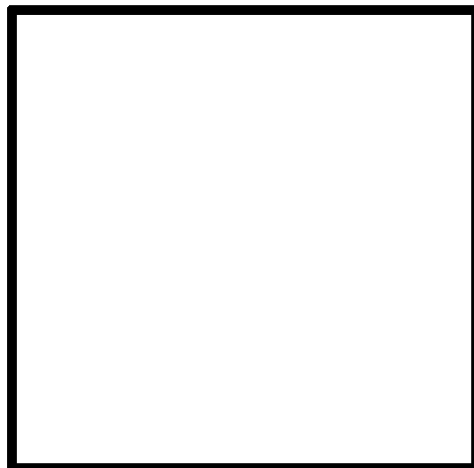
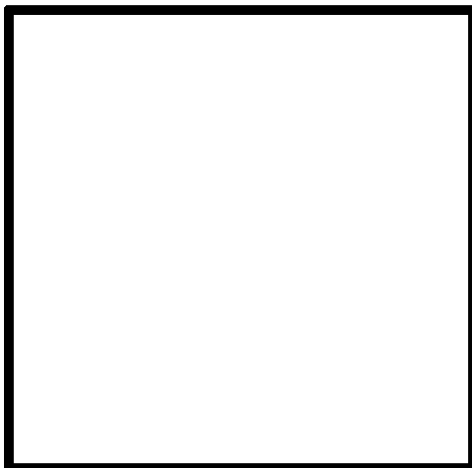
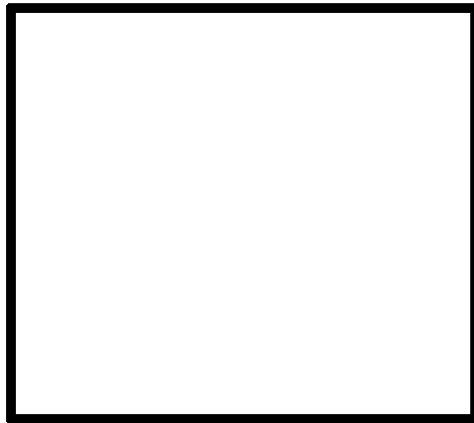
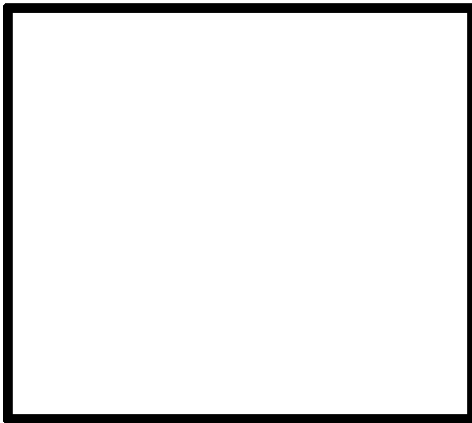
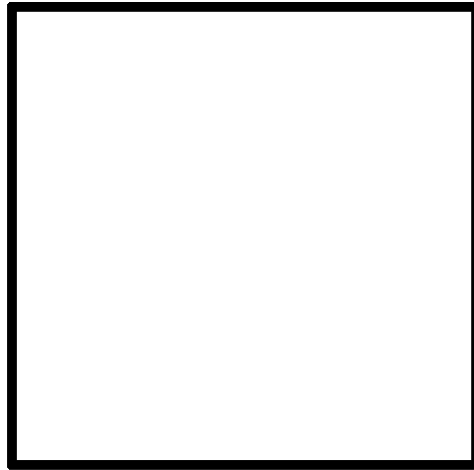
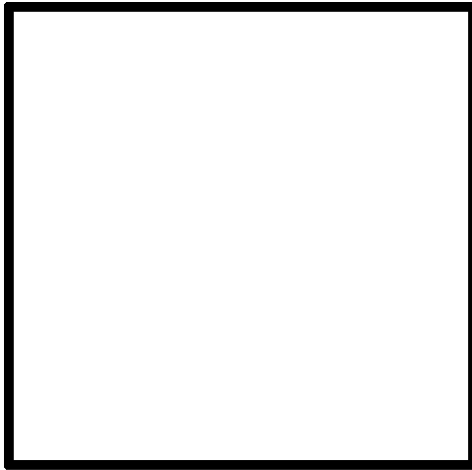
(4 panel comic page)



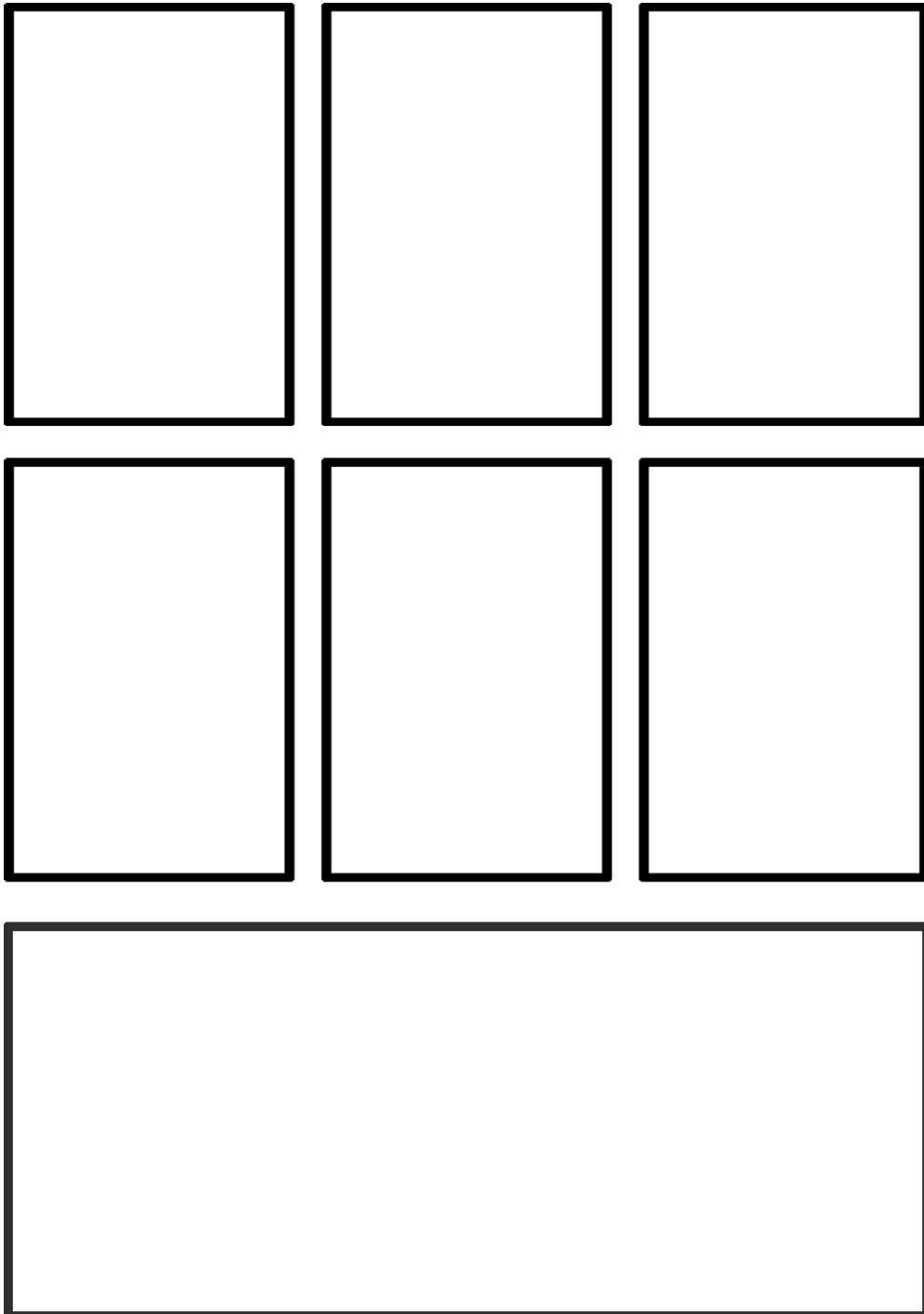
(5 panel comic page)



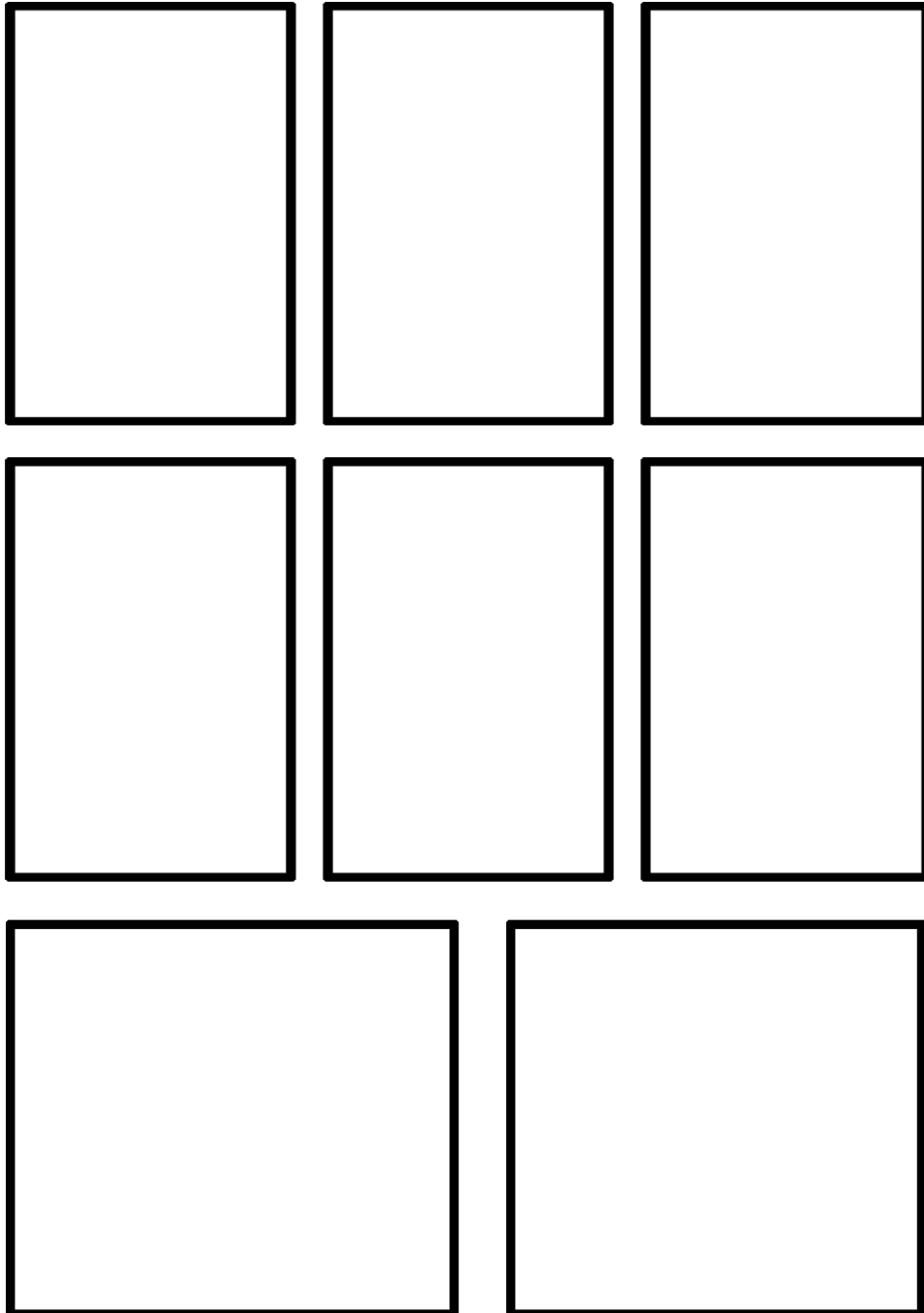
(6 panel comic page)



(7 panel comic page)



(8 panel comic page)



(9 panel comic page)

