## Guide to Creating Community Engaged Comics

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## **What are Community Engaged Comics?**

#### INTRODUCTION

This Guide was created by Jen Shannon to describe a process called Community Engaged Comics (CEC) by Jen Shannon and John Swogger, coproducers of NAGPRA Comics and the Kumeyaay Visual Storytelling Project. CEC are basically applied comics that were developed for heritage and community-based projects with Indigenous communities and museums. However, CEC can be developed with any community.

Community Engaged Comics are a form of collaboration where the result is a comic, and so much more. The comics are a means for community engagement – a form of "arts-based research" – for community members to discuss and build together what they want to communicate about their past, present, and future. Community partners direct the project from conception to implementation to evaluation, and they are in control of content and distribution. Community-based workshops, presentations, and public events are part of CEC as well.



NAGPRA Comics 1: Journeys to Complete the Work (2017)



# Community Engaged Comics support community members' cultural and educational goals

Community Engaged Comics are a creative approach to support intergenerational transfer of knowledge between youth and adults in Native communities, professional development for Native and non-Native artists, and Indigenous-centered education for tribal as well as mainstream schools and audiences.

Through engaging elders and youth, artists and scholars, CEC are a powerful form of visual storytelling. They are also an excellent means to engage with material culture, oral histories, archives and photographs, primary sources, and educational materials.

## **Some Examples to Think With**

Community-Directed + Artist Collaboration + Educational Materials
Build Capacity & Share Back with Community



Art by Tony Lone Fight (MHA Nation)

#### Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Language Comic (small grant)

This is a pilot to create an 8 page comic about what animals do in the winter to be translated into English, Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara languages. A partnership between Jen Shannon/John Swogger and the Director and members of the MHA Nation Culture and Language Department. MHA Nation scientists are providing the content, the Director is artist, Jen&John provide project management and guidance, and there will be a video to animate the comic so people can hear pronunciations.



Art by John Swogger.

#### **Kumeyaay Visual Storytelling Project (large grants)**

This will be a 44 page graphic novel about the Kumeyaay Nation. Project Director and content development group are Kumeyaay tribal historians, Jen&John provide project management and creative guidance. Includes traveling exhibit, community-based workshops and vetting sessions, local artist fees, Indigenous comics creator speaker event, and lesson plans.



Art by John Swogger.

#### **NAGPRA Comics (small grants)**

This is a series of 28 page comics; each issue's process is determined by the community who is telling the repatriation story. Sonya Atalay, Jen Shannon, and John Swogger co-produce. Most recent issue was based on months of ongoing zoom conversations, archival and photo research. John does the artwork, community members contribute content and review and edit the text and images in the comics. As for above examples, PDFs are free to download at <a href="website">website</a> and print copies are sold by a tribally owned press, Tribal Print Source, in California. A comics workshop facilitators guide was developed by Jen&John and distributed.

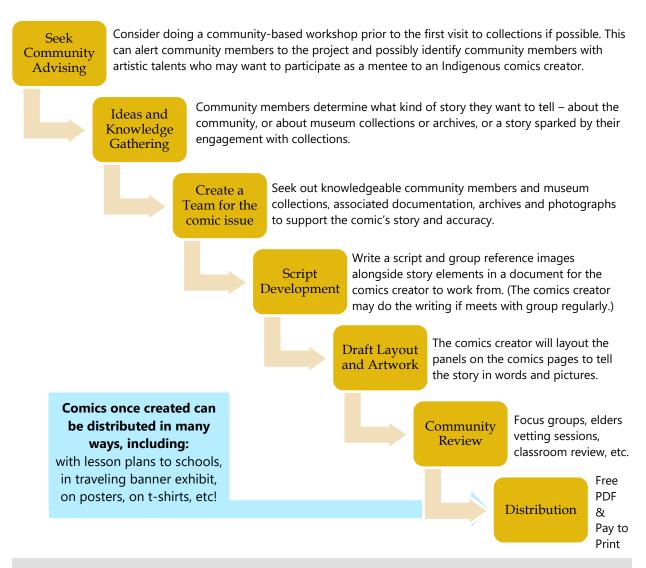


Art by Dimi Macheras (Ahtna Athabascan) and Casey Silver
Chickaloonies

This is a fictional series based on cultural knowledge that features two main characters and Alaska Native Ahtna communities members. Workshops and a workshop guide were created through a partnership of a scholar/project manager, cultural specialists, and a comics creator team with support from NMNH Recovering Voices & the Arctic Studies Center.

## **Sample Process Outline**

Below I provide an outline of what a Community Engaged Comics project might include along with some common questions answered. The following pages provide additional ideas to determine the best course of action for a partnership.



**Example:** Two elders who are language specialists, a middle age and young person visit NMNH basket collections with an established Indigenous comics creator from elsewhere and a young artist from the community. The artists sketch how a basket is started based on the discussion. They discuss a story associated with the reawakening of basket practices in their community. The comics tell the story of the woman who brought traditional basketmaking back to their community. There are several double-spread pages of a basket and the language associated with the parts of it, as well as a diagram of how to start a basket, and examples of symbols on baskets and what they mean. A second story in the comic is about a mom and her daughter gathering materials throughout the year to make baskets and talking about why they are important. The comics are distributed for free at the community cultural center during a demonstration/workshop about basket making. Posters made from comics page images about the baskets and their parts named in the local language are provided to schools.

**Who participates?** Cultural specialists, youth, and comics creators.

The comics creator can also take on a mentoring role. An established comics creator (Native or non-Native, depending on the project) can guide an artist who was identified in the community as promising through a workshop or perhaps by a teacher recommendation, or perhaps someone new to the field or just emerging in the field.

What is the role of museum collections? The museum collections, archives, and photographs can spark ideas for what kind of story you want to tell using comics. They can be the subject, or the starting point, of a story that gets told in comics. The collections can be what the story is about, perhaps how they came to the museum or how to make them, their history or relevance to the community, the times in which they were taken or returned. They can also be a catalyst for remembering stories, whether they are about origins or families or cultural practices, stories that are inspired through contact with collections but are about something else like language and heritage.

How do we develop the story we want to tell? This varies greatly from community to community and depending on the skills and interests of the participants in the project. Sometimes an advisor, like myself, will listen for weeks to community members discussing a topic and then organize the information into themes for discussion and eventually a storyline will emerge through conversation and then get vetted by the collaborating group. Other times, like in the Kumeyaay project, a community member will take on the role of writing the script on their own, with feedback and guidance from myself and John. And still, perhaps there is an existing account or testimony in the archives that can be translated into comics format. This process varies greatly.

Who lays it out in panels? Who draws, colors, does the text lettering? Sometimes these roles are all in one person and sometimes not. For example, my collaborator John does all of these things. For those who work in the comics industry at a place like Marvel, there are separate roles: writer (narrative story or description of what is on each page), layout (how many boxes per page, how big, and what is in each according to the story), pencil (draw the images in the boxes), ink (make lines permanent), color (color in the drawings), and lettering (writing in the bubbles of text). Figuring this out ahead of time is important for budgeting purposes, and to know who needs to be involved in the storytelling development process.

How do we get feedback on the draft comics? Community members will likely have suggestions for the appropriate way to get community feedback on the story, artwork, and text in the comics. It's important that the colors, symbols, and language are appropriate to them. Sometimes this is review by an advisory board made for the comics project, or an elders' society or youth group, perhaps it's a class at a tribal college or a focus group of multiple ages. Whatever process is appropriate, be sure the artist knows changes will be required of their work and that there is time to conduct

these reviews. In addition, share back the revised version to ensure that the changes adequately and accurately reflect the guidance provided.

What kinds of engagement opportunities are there for this kind of project? There are so many ways that *community engaged* comics provide opportunities to work with community members beyond the core team developing the comics. For example, creating lesson plans for use in tribal or mainstream schools, creating traveling banner exhibits or posters, gathering community members to review drafts or share out final copies of the comics, hosting a speaker series of Indigenous comics creators, conducting comics workshops (we have done this in k-12 classrooms, community centers where families attended, and in a tribal government department with adults only). The comics themselves can also foster engagement, for example in the case of the basket comic described as an example above, perhaps there is an invitation on the page with the basket and language names of its parts for the reader to draw a basket and label it.

How do we distribute what we have created together? We often use a website to distribute free PDFs of the comics. We have low cost print copies provided through a tribally owned printer, Tribal Print Source. And once the comics pages are created, they can be utilized in a number of media – on banners for a traveling exhibit, on t-shirts or posters, to inspire murals in community, or animated into a video using something like <a href="Adobe Character Animator">Adobe Character Animator</a> (for language learning, this may provide audio to help learners hear how the written word is pronounced).



Tony Lone Fight (MHA Nation), Director of Culture & Language Department, smiling as he watches people review each other's comics created in a workshop together in North Dakota, 2019.

## **Products of Community Engaged Comics Projects**

The beauty of community engaged comics is that far more is produced than a comic! Intergenerational learning occurs in developing content, community resources are identified and centralized in seeking out materials to contribute to accurate artwork and storytelling, new lesson plans can be created for schools or the comics can supplement existing ones, and there are opportunities to gather community members in events and programming throughout the process. Below is just a sample of the many possibilities.



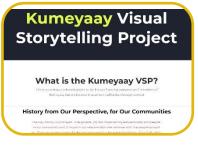




**Lesson plans** 



Workshops & Workshop Guides



Website



Museum or school exhibit based on comics or community artwork



Introduction to comics industry and network of artists



Intergeneratioal learning and collaboration



Coloring books or activity booklets

#### starter exercise

#### Self-Portrait

Set up:

Draw a circle. Under a rectangle. Sausage shapes sticking out.

5 min

What have you drawn? [A person!]

1 piece of blank letter paper

Above draw oval with tail – what is that? [A word bubble, speech bubble]



Take two minutes [U14 increase time to 5 or 10 minutes] on this person-like shape you've drawn to put details to make it look like yourself, and in the speech bubble write something you might say – about yourself, what your name is.

So if a friend of yours looked at it, they'd say—I know exactly who that is!

I'll do the same up here.

#### Discussion:

Does anyone want to share? I'll do mine first.

(Explain what you added to your blobs, and what your bubble says. For example: "My name is, I make comics.").

Hopefully if you look at that, you'd say yeah, that looks like me. The image alone, or the text alone, and you don't necessarily get that it's me. But together it couldn't be anyone else.

Does anyone else want to share?

[if not, turn to your neighbor and share, a way to introduce yourselves!]

Congrats, you just made a comic! Maybe first of the day, maybe the first ever.

Putting together words and pictures is what makes a comic work.







U14



## Sample Roles and Responsibilities in a Community Engaged Comics Project

Below is an infographic I created for our community partners to describe the project we were working on together. It's important to define roles and responsibilities early on to ensure expectations are clear. A quick reference like this can be helpful to return to throughout the duration of a project.

#### KUMEYAAY VISUALSTORYTELLING PROJECT TEAM DELIVERABLES Ethan Banegas (Luiseno-Kumeyaay); **Kumeyaay Comics Series** (44 pages) Project Director, coordinates collaboration with a team of Kumeyaay historians on the content. Jen Shannon (University of Colorado); Grade 6-12 Lesson Plans Project Coordinator, will manage the project, provide research and editorial assistance, and conduct assessment of the project. **Project Website** (free comics & lessons) John Swogger; Creative Director, will translate research into comics format, contribute artwork, **Research Archive** (oral histories, archives) and mentor local artists. Jewyl Alderson (SD County Office of Education); Educator Liaison, will facilitate connections with **Community-Based Comics Workshops** educators to develop lessons plans and teacher engagement activities. Comics Workshop Facilitator's Guide Content Development Team: Mike Connolly Miskwish (Campo Kumeyaay Nationa); Stan Rodriguez (Kumeyaay-lipay, Santa Ysabel); Lorraine **Traveling Banner Exhibit** (free to host) Orosco (Kumeyaay-Ipai). Elijah Benson (Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation); **Summary Report of Project Evaluation** Videographer, will create videos of the process for website and lesson plans. June 2021 April 2022 October 2022 December 2022 March 2023 May 2022 Planning Mtg. Draft Script Exhibit Dvpt. Content team review Draft Layout Lessons Complete EVALUATION SUPPORT Whiting Foundation Public Engagement Fellowship to Jen Shannon California Humanities for All Grant to Campo Kumeyaay Nation Knowledge 360°, SD Museum of Us, San Pasqual Cultural Center

## **Sample Budget Categories**

When planning for your community engaged project and its funding, think about the process from start to end to identify potential costs given the budget you have available. From grant writing to comics creation, to vetting sessions, to events or printing costs: who is involved, what materials are needed, and how best to engage with community? Below are examples of large and small budgets. Regardless of your budget, seek appropriate ways to acknowledge and credit community participation.

#### **Marvel Breakdown Example:**

Let's say you are paying \$360 per page to a single artist/writer. If you have those duties shared among multiple people, they would each get a percentage of the page cost. Here is how Marvel (and NAGPRA Comics) break down the division of payment:

Plot 18.75%

**Layout 24.4%** 

**Color 12.5%** 

**Script 18.75%** 

Pencil/Ink 25.6%

As an example, for one NAGPRA Comic issue, we are working with a writer from the Native community whose story is being featured, and an artist/comics creator from a different Native community. Their breakdown for the 28 page comic is this:

Writer/Plot - \$3,780, plot and script (37.5%)

Artwork - \$6,300, layout pencil/ink and coloring (62.5%)

## Large-scale funding example: Some categories to think with for your budget Total funds available: \$20,000-\$70,000

Comics Pages: \$361/page

Travel associated with project (if artists/comics creators do not live in community) Honoraria, ex.:

Elders' or community members honoraria for vetting comics drafts Youth or focus groups for vetting comics drafts

Printed copies for community members

Exhibit costs to print banners

Stipends for community project director and content producers

Stipends for Educators for providing guidance or writing lesson plans

Community event or workshops (featured speaker, workshop facilitator, etc)

Videographer if you want to document the project

Supplies & food for community events

## Small-scale funding example: Some categories to think with for your budget Total funds available: \$4000-\$9000

Comics creation \$4320 16 pages at \$270/page

Printing costs \$500

Evaluation or vetting by community members \$2400, \$50 gift cards each Honoraria or stipend support for contributors, meeting snacks/meals provided

#### **Publication and Exhibition of Comics**

**Be mindful about the companies you support.** Do some research when deciding who will publish your comics. Since we work with Indigenous communities, we found a tribally owned publishing company: <a href="https://tribalprintsource.com/">https://tribalprintsource.com/</a>.

## File needs for downloadable PDF to share or post online:

This file should not have crop or trim marks and will likely be shared digitally or printed on a desktop printer. The file size can be large and unable to be sent via email. Having a link to the document in an online shared drive or dropbox for download can be helpful.

"Crop" or "trim marks" will be on the file you send to a printer. You can see them in the corner of the page.



#### File needs for a printing company:

This kind of file will include crop or trim marks in the corners.

Some helpful quidance from comics creator John Swogger:

For anyone working with comics, a good print company is worth their weight in gold - develop a relationship with them and they'll be one of the best resources you can have.

Most digital printers (Tribal Print Source included) use Adobe InDesign as standard software, so anything that comes out of InDesign, or Microsoft Publisher and other publishing software such as Scribe, are standard for them to work with. InDesign has options in its .pdf and .jpg export menus for adding **trim marks** (where the actual piece of paper or display material ends), **bleed** (the bit of the image that extends out past the trim marks so that the color of that image/design goes all the way to the edge - as in the graphics at the top of the display banners in the 1619 banner exhibit example below), and **color bars** (which are reference swatches of colors to ensure standard color printing results). InDesign also has the capacity within its export options to produce images with **RGB color** (Red, Green, Blue - the way colors are produced on a digital screen) or **CMYK color** (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black, the way ink colors are mixed during printing). **Regardless of what format you use, always send files at the highest resolution possible, and at least 300dpi** (dots per inch). Anything at lower resolutions will come out pixelated and blurry.

Check with the printing company about what they would prefer in terms of files for your project. Some projects will be better printed from image files (.tiff or .jpg), others from .pdf files. Some projects might require trim and bleed, some might require CMYK instead of RGB. **Most comics can be sent as .pdfs using the "High Quality Print"** 

option on the .pdf export menu. Most standalone artwork for art cards or prints can be sent as 300dpi .jpgs with "No Compression." But check before you send.

If all of this sounds overwhelming you can instead simply send the printing company the .indd [or .pub] files directly. Check with them first, so they know what you're sending them. If you do this, it's a good idea to also include font files for unusual or custom fonts (including comics fonts from places like Blambot.com) and perhaps the image files separately if it turns out they need converting or tweaking in some way. Be prepared to use a file transfer service like WeTransfer, because the file(s) might be quite big. Label each file clearly and logically so that the printer can easily order and work on the files.

If in doubt, ask! Most print companies are used to the idea that not everyone knows their business as well as they do. They will be happy to advise you about things like banners, art cards and other specialty products. We have found Tribal Print Source to be very understanding of the tight timetables and deadlines that the comics community work with. The printer may even be able to help you out by delivering comics orders to a convention or event to save you hauling them across country yourself.

**What is a Banner Exhibit?** Each section of the exhibit is a banner – a stretched canvas like material that is extending from a cylindrical case up a pole.



NAGPRA Comics Team at indigenous Comic Con 2017, with a banner to promote the first issue.

Example from Hampton History Museum of a banner exhibit about The 1619 Arrival



## **APPENDIX I: Inspiration for True Story Comics**

**Welcome and Inspiration!, excerpt** - written by Jen Shannon, March 30 2022, available at <a href="https://kumeyaayvsp.weebly.com/project-updates/welcome-inspiration">https://kumeyaayvsp.weebly.com/project-updates/welcome-inspiration</a>

When we began the Kumeyaay Visual Storytelling Project, our team discussed various examples of work by Indigenous comics creators that represented true stories from Indigenous perspectives and/or included educational resources. Below we share some of those works and why we appreciate them. Thanks to John Swogger for his notes and insight on these comics!

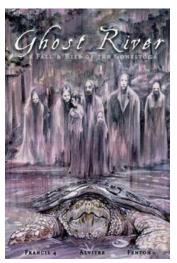


It's important that visual storytelling includes images that are appropriate and accurate, as determined by the storytellers. This is a sample of draft artwork that John created after listening to historian Mike Connolly Miskwish (Campo Kumeyaay Nation) talk about Kumeyaay people confronting and then trading with Cabrillo in San Diego harbor in 1542.

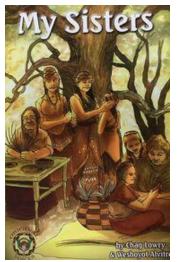


**NAGPRA Comics 1: Journeys to Complete the Work (2017)** is a comic about a true story of a repatriation of Native ancestors from two museums to the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan. It was written in collaboration between the NAGPRA Comics coproducers and Anishinaabe-Ojibwe community members. This is the comic that brought us all together! (See the <u>About Us page</u> for more about that).

Some of the comics and graphic novels we looked to were those that engaged with history and included additional education resources.



Ghost River: The Fall and Rise of the Conestoga (2019) is a graphic novel based on a true story about the Paxton massacres of 1763, a mob of white settlers who murdered 20 unarmed Conestoga People in a genocidal campaign that reshaped Pennsylvania settlement politics. This difficult history is presented in an educational graphic novel that is based on archival research and includes examples of primary source materials in the back. It was created by Lee Francis IV (Laguna Pueblo) and Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva). It also has associated lesson plans and website for free download of the book.



My Sisters (2020) is a 16-page story that honors the special relationship that Indigenous basket weavers have with their ancestral homelands in California. Chag Lowry (Yurok, Maidu, and Achumawi ancestry) and Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva) cowrote the comic. Weshoyot created the art and the cover and the comic is endorsed by the California Basketweavers' Association (CIBA). This is a story created by California Native community members with permission.

Graphic novels were also a source of inspiration to see what partnerships looked like to create longer treatments of Indigenous history.



**Redbone:** The True Story of a Native American Rock Band (2020) is a graphic novel that includes band members telling about their past through oral history and switches between the past and today. It is a great example of showing dialog and remembering the past while being situated in the present.



**This Place: 150 Years Retold (2019)** is an anthology – a group of short stories/comics - of historical and history-based stories told from Indigenous perspectives. They showcase a wide range of artistic and writing styles. This anthology was speaking back to Canada's celebration of the start of the country, adding in an Indigenous perspective that is more critical of the anniversary. It has been widely distributed to schools and an accompanying teacher's quide was developed.

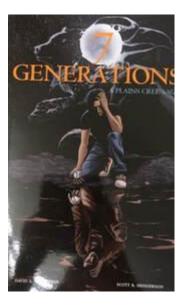


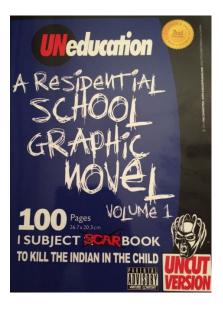
**Pemmican Wars (2017)** is a graphic novel about a young high school Métis girl learning about her people's history for the first time. It was written by Katherena Vermette, a Metis writer, and drawn by professional comics artist Scott Henderson. It is the first in a series about teens encountering their own Metis history and is an example of a successful collaboration between a Native writer and a non-Native professional artist.

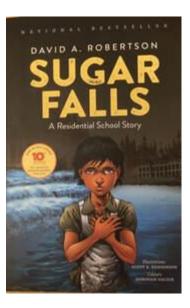


**Surviving the City (2018)** is a graphic novel about missing and murdered indigenous women told from the perspective of two friends, one Anishinaabe and one Inninew, living amongst the challenges of a city. It was written by Tasha Spillet, a Nehiyaw and Trinidadian writer at the University of Saskatchewan and illustrated by Natasha Donovan, a Métis artist children's book illustrator. The graphic novel uses contemporary expressions of Native culture to explore serious present-day social issues. An example of a collaboration between creators with different Native and Indigenous heritages.

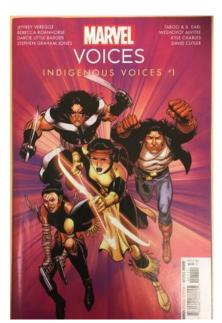
Sometimes people associate comics with funny or light subject matter. But what the authors above, and those below show -- it can be a respectful medium for serious subject matter, too.







Some even come with Teachers Guides, like <u>7 Generations</u>. But don't get the wrong impression, not all comics by Indigenous authors and artists are serious. They tell all kinds of stories, including Super Hero stories! And they are being told in independent imprints as well as Marvel Comics.





Marvel Voices: Indigenous Voices #1 (2020) includes a number of Indigenous authored stories; one is about Echo – a deaf superhero who is half Cheyenne, half Latina.

There are so many Indigenous comics creators out there, these are just some examples to think with and be inspired by.

## **APPENDIX II: Indigenous Comics Creators**

I interviewed a number of Indigenous Comics Creators and would be happy to serve as matchmaker for your community- or heritage-based comics project. Lee Francis IV is a great help in connecting to Indigenous Comics Creators as well – he started Native Realities Press. A great place to look for artists work or post a call for creators is via Facebook:

#### **Native Comic Book Society (public group)**

https://www.facebook.com/groups/nativecomicbooksociety

Native Realities Press <a href="https://www.facebook.com/nativerealitiespress/">https://www.facebook.com/nativerealitiespress/</a>

Consider seeking out comics creators from other groups as well. Do some research to find an online space where you might post a call for contributors...

#### Other Facebook Group ideas...

#### **Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers**

https://www.facebook.com/Wordcraft-Circle-of-NativeWriters-and-Storytellers-163093073723566/

We Need Diverse Comics https://www.facebook.com/WeNeedDiverseComics/

#### Comic Cons are a great way to connect with artists and writers, too!

Do some sleuthing to find regional comic cons, or thematic ones...for example:

**Indigenous PopX**: <a href="https://www.indigenouspopx.com/">https://www.indigenouspopx.com/</a>: Indigenous creators focus

San Diego Comic Con: <a href="https://www.comic-con.org/">https://www.comic-con.org/</a>: Huge and comprehensive!

## **APPENDIX III: Additional Reading**

McCloud, Scott (1993). <u>Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art</u>. <u>Also available as a PDF for free online</u>.

A 215-page comic book about comics that explains the inner workings of the medium and examines many aspects of visual communication. See also Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels (2006).

Brunnetti, Ivan (2019). <u>Comics: Easy as ABC: The Essential Guide to Comics for Kids</u>.

Filled with activities, Comics: Easy as ABC is a fun way for young readers to effortlessly and playfully start thinking like writers and artists. This simple guide is also aimed at parents, teachers, and librarians.

Brunetti, Ivan (2011). Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice.

The best cartooning is efficient visual storytelling—it is as much a matter of writing as it is of drawing. In this book, noted cartoonist and illustrator Ivan Brunetti presents fifteen distinct lessons on the art of cartooning, guiding his readers through wittily written passages on cartooning terminology, techniques, tools, and theory.

Barry, Lynda (2019). Making Comics.

Making Comics is the follow-up to Barry's bestselling Syllabus, and this time she shares all her comics-making exercises. In a new hand-drawn syllabus detailing her creative curriculum, Barry has students drawing themselves as monsters and superheroes, convincing students who think they can't draw that they can, and, most important, encouraging them to understand that a daily journal can be anything so long as it is hand drawn. See also Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor (2014).

Lee, Stan and John Buscema (1984). <u>How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way</u>. *For those who want to follow their model!* 

Shannon and Swogger (2017). <u>A Guide for Facilitating Comics Workshops</u>. Free online. *A guide for conducting comics making workshops for all ages*.

To learn about "applied" or "educational" comics, see John Swogger's website: <a href="https://johngswogger.wordpress.com/">https://johngswogger.wordpress.com/</a>

To access a booklet titled Applied Comics Collaborations: Ways for humanities and social science researchers to work together with comics creators and other resources go to <a href="https://appliedcomicsetc.com/projects/collaborations/">https://appliedcomicsetc.com/projects/collaborations/</a>

#### **Citation suggestion for this Guide:**

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