

A [Graphic] Novel Way of Teaching

How to Teach Children How to Write and Draw a Graphic Novel through Zoom

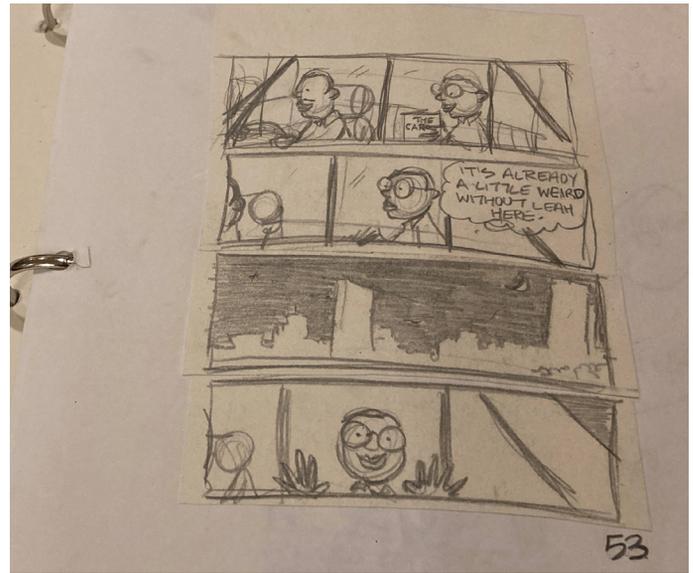
JONATHAN TODD

During the early months of the pandemic, libraries in Massachusetts canceled in-person events, including workshops I had scheduled at their children's departments. Some of the librarians asked if I could teach my course on how to create a graphic novel page virtually, so here is what we did.

Getting Kids Comics-Making Supplies

In this time of COVID-19, caregivers appreciate when programmers make it easy for families to complete projects without needing to find required supplies. So, I packaged everything children needed to complete a graphic novel page in 14-by-18-inch manilla envelopes; total cost was about \$157 at Staples. Supplies included:

- 11-by-17-inch piece of 100 lb-smooth surface Bristol Board. I drew a rectangle on the paper that was 10- $\frac{1}{4}$ -by-15- $\frac{1}{2}$.
- Sharpened pencil
- Index card-size paper with $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch guidelines for lettering



This sketch is an example of a thumbnail drawing, which I tell children to draw before drawing their finished page on Bristol board.

- Glue stick
- Two or three sheets of copy paper
- Thin felt-tip pen
- Twelve-inch ruler
- Small square of kneaded eraser

I mailed or dropped off twenty art kits to the librarians to distribute to the patrons who registered.

Tech Setup

To prepare to teach online, I used a laptop and smartphone (with cameras) that could run Zoom and a smartphone tripod (Joby flexible smartphone stand, \$30.) The tripod enabled me to log on from Zoom with my iPhone and point the camera at my drawing board so patrons could see a closeup of what I was drawing. Meanwhile, I spoke to patrons using Zoom and the camera on my laptop.



Jonathan Todd is a graphic novelist who strives to share emotional experiences of childhood through comics. He pens *5 A.M.*, an autobiographical comic strip for CAL about his life as a cartoonist and family man. Todd also teaches children how to write and draw comics in-person and virtually. His debut graphic novel, *Timid* (Scholastic/Graphix) will be published in Spring 2023. For more information about Todd's work and workshops, visit <https://cecilhall.tumblr.com>.

Zoom Application

I'm sure you could use various video-conferencing apps to teach such a workshop, but the librarians and I were most comfortable with Zoom. The hosting libraries marketed and registered the children and sent out the Zoom link a few days before the program. This controlled who could gain access to the workshop. I logged onto Zoom with the librarian about twenty minutes before the workshop to make sure the cameras, the app, and the volumes were working well. *TIP: Make sure you have enough Internet bandwidth to prevent the video images from freezing.*

Introduction

To break the ice, I ask patrons what kind of comics/graphic novels they enjoy and also ask if they have written and drawn comics before.

Creating Characters

I tell children to create their protagonist; it can be anything: a person, girl, boy, animal, alien, an object. But the key is that their main character must want something. I stole this method of leading children in the character-building process from one of my writing teachers, children's book author Kashmira Sheth (*Boys without Names* and *Nina Soni, Former Best Friend*). After I draw an example—a boy who wants a dog—I give the students about ten minutes to create their protagonists.

Plot

In the next stage, I draw an arc and ask students whether they've seen this shape in their language arts classes. I tell them that to have a story, there must be things in the way of their character getting what he or she wants. To illustrate the point, I place three Xs along the slope of the arc. We discuss what could be in the way of the boy getting a dog. They suggest parents, responsibility, or money, and I label the Xs with the suggestions we agree would make a great story. Then, I explain that the story is formed by showing how the protagonist gets around the obstacles and comes to learn something during his journey. I suggest that one idea the protagonist has for getting around the obstacle of money is performing as a street musician. I then tell the children to use one of the pieces of copy paper in the manilla envelope to think of obstacles and show how their character will get around them.

Thumbnailing

In this stage, I ask students if they've seen movie storyboards and can describe them. I share that comics have a similar stage called thumbnails, which make up a miniature version of the whole graphic novel. I show them the binder of the

thumbnailing pages of my forthcoming graphic novel *Timid*. Then, I talk them through imagining a scene in their story as a scene in a movie.

In my example of the boy who wants a dog, I demonstrate by drawing quick sketches of the protagonist being told—in six panels—that he couldn't have a dog due to its expense; the scene would end with him getting the idea to borrow his father's guitar to start busking. I then give the students ten minutes to use another piece of copy paper to thumbnail a page in their story, encouraging them to use the number, size, and shape of panels that work for the part of the story they're illustrating.

Panels, Guidelines, and Lettering

I then tell the students to take out the Bristol Board and draw a big version of the panel boxes they used in their thumbnail sketches. If they used a traditional six-panel comic page, the measurements would be 5-inch-square panels leaving a ¼-inch between each panel.

After they have drawn their panels, I give attendees the option of drawing their letters freehand or creating them using guidelines. To create the guidelines, I teach them to hold the lettering guide flush against a panel on the left of the page and lined up to the line of the top panel. I show them how to place dots along the panel border for as many lines of letters they think they'll need based on their thumbnail sketch.

Then, I show them how to slide the lettering guide to the right side of the page, holding the guide flush to the top border and the side border; I tell them to make another set of dots parallel to the dots they made on the left side. Then, I tell them to use the ruler to connect the dots on the left side of the page to those on the right side; the result is ¼-inch guidelines the patrons could use to letter the top of their comic page. To create guidelines in the other panels they should repeat the process. After I teach them to letter their pages, I show them different styles to draw the speech balloons or thought bubbles.

Penciling

I demonstrate that the next step is to draw larger, more detailed versions of the sketches they made in their thumbnailing page. I encourage them to look up images on Google or study objects from life if they need to remember details for their comic page.

Inking

In in-person versions of my workshop, I demonstrate how students can use dip pens, drawing brushes, and India ink. In the virtual version, I show patrons how to simply trace their pencil drawings in felt-tip pens. After the ink is dry, I show

attendees how to erase the guidelines and other pencil lines using the kneaded eraser.

Edits

After the attendees have inked for ten minutes, I show them that one method to edit their works is to cut out a blank piece of paper that is slightly larger than the place of the error on the page. I show them that they can redraw what they need, trace it in ink, and use the glue stick to paste down the corrected image over the image with the error. I then explain that after the artwork is scanned, any lines that show the edge of the patch can be easily edited out.

Before I part ways with my students, I invite them to share their work by holding it up to the camera. I also encourage them to keep drawing comics because now they have the tools to create graphic novels in a systematic way.

Marketing and Assessment

The Wayland (MA) Free Library advertised my program through its e-newsletter to patrons. Head of Youth Services

Pam McCuen described the workshop as one of the highlights of the summer, adding, “Jonathan created a welcoming, relaxed, and respectful learning environment over Zoom with tweens he was meeting for the first time—no small feat. He was well organized; his examples for story building, panel creation, and character drawing were clear and well suited to the audience...Jonathan went seamlessly back and forth from talking to and fielding questions from the kids through the Zoom screen, to showing them his work through the cell phone camera aimed at his drawing board. He allowed students time to work on their projects by incorporating quiet time into the class. His workshop was well paced, informative, and engaging.”

The children’s librarian also said the prepared art kits helped with the success of the program. McCuen said, “These kits were an added incentive for tweens to join the workshop, and to attend. Many parents shared with me afterwards how much their tweens enjoyed Jonathan’s program.”

One parent wrote, “Thank you for offering this programming. [My son] was so proud to show me his completed comic strip and continued to refine it long after the Zoom had ended. The packet you provided with all the materials was very well organized too and got him excited for today.” &

5 A.M. BY JONATHAN TODD

