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Graphic Novels

### **Putting It Together: Layout Exercise**

**Abstract:** This hands-on short activity (~20 minutes, or longer with optional writing, reading, and discussion components) introduces students who are studying comics to layout, a key component of comics' graphic language. Students begin thinking about the arrangement of panels on a page or over the course of several pages in comics. Students reassemble a wordless page of comics that has been cut up into separate panels and then explain how their new page constitutes a coherent, meaningful page.

#### **Common Core Standards:**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1c](#) Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4](#) Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

#### **Procedure:**

Make enough photocopies of a selected comics page on cardstock so you have one for each student. Then you'll have to cut up these pages into separate panels, so get out your scissors! I use a wordless page from Jaime Hernandez's story "Flies on the Ceiling: The Story of Isabel in Mexico" from the 1980s and '90s *Love & Rockets* series (see Materials). The story is about a woman, Isabel (Izzy) Reubens, who tries to flee her guilt from an abortion, a divorce, and a failed suicide attempt (I only share this information with the class at the end of the activity). The selected page shows a woman at one end of a bridge who is holding a bundle while she walks toward a man in black at the other end. When the woman reaches him, he seems to have grown to gigantic proportions, and she turns and runs away. This page reveals Hernandez's deft use of silence, shifting visual perspectives, and the visual balancing of white and black space.

Before class, I place an envelope with the cut-up page (with the panels in no particular order) at each student's place. The sight of the envelopes inevitably creates speculation ("what's inside?"), anticipation ("what are we going to do?"), and excitement. I ask students to arrange their panels into a traditional three-by-three grid, the format of the original, to give them some broad parameters within which to work. I tell them that their arrangements should make sense—i.e., they should tell a story—and that they should be ready to justify their choices. I also ask students, as they decide upon their layout, to think critically about this complex series of images in terms of narrative, tone, and theme.

Give students 5-10 minutes to put their panels in order. Let them talk, share, and compare informally. Once everyone has put together a page, I ask for a volunteer to share his or her page with the class. If you want students to reflect more formally on their own layout work, you could have them write justifications for their pages before they share their layouts with the class.

An ELMO visual presenter works best for this part of the activity, as it allows us to project the sample page for the whole class. Ask the volunteer to tell the story of his or her page. Then ask what visual cues, in the absence of dialogue and narration, suggest that the panels should appear in a certain order. Students will come to see that the changing size of the two characters and Isabel's position on the bridge (and her proximity to the man) provide clues to the panels' sequence.

Have a couple more volunteers share and discuss their pages before challenging the class to guess the panels' original layout (keep an intact copy of the original for reference). I'll tell them they have, say, five of the nine panels in their original position, and then the class will suggest what needs to be moved. Each time I move panels for them, I'll let my students know if they're making progress. Once we have restored the original page, we take a final look back at it, focusing again on the narrative and how we know where each panel belongs. You might also encourage students to speculate (if they haven't done so already) about the relationship between the two characters (Hernandez's mystery man is later associated with voices Izzy hears and with the devil himself) and to identify what's in Izzy's bundle (it symbolizes the child she never had).

I use this activity with my students' (seniors') reading of Chapters 3-4 of Scott McCloud's indispensable *Understanding Comics*, a comic book about comics that serves as a primer for reading comics in my Graphic Novels elective. These chapters explain McCloud's concept of closure in comics, defined as "seeing the parts but perceiving the whole," and the representation of time in comics. Even my first-time comics readers have a working knowledge of how to read a page of comics at this point in the semester (week 2), thanks in part to their reading of Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik's "How to Read *Nancy*" (<http://www.laffpix.com/howtoreadnancy.pdf>) and Hollis Margaret Rudiger's "Reading Lessons: Graphic Novels 101" ([http://archive.hbook.com/pdf/articles/mar06\\_rudiger.pdf](http://archive.hbook.com/pdf/articles/mar06_rudiger.pdf)). The layout work can serve as a springboard into McCloud, or the class might go on to read and then discuss Hernandez's 13-page story in its entirety (see *Love & Rockets* #29 (March 1989)). Should you decide to do that, first read Robert Stanley Martin's "Rereading the *Locas* Stories" yourself (<http://hoodedutilitarian.com/2012/03/rereading-the-locas-stories/>). As you'll find, Hernandez's story offers many possibilities for exploring uses of both layout and McCloudian closure.

**Materials:** For each student, a cut-up page from a wordless comic (recommended: p. 7 of Jaime Hernandez's "Flies on the Ceiling") [see PDF].