

LESSON PLAN

MAKING COMICS

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grade 4 to 6

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MediaSmarts

Overview

In this lesson, students learn how the comics medium works and try their hand at making simple comics.

Learning Outcomes

Big ideas/key concepts: Students will understand that...

Media are constructions

- Media makers make intentional and unintentional choices when making a media work

Each medium has a unique aesthetic form

- Comics share storytelling tools with other media types such as film
- Comics have unique storytelling devices

Key questions:

- What are the rules of notice of the comics medium?
- How do comics makers use those to draw and direct readers' attention?

Frequent student misconceptions: You have to be able to draw to make good comics

Essential knowledge: Students will know...

- Reading media: How comics creators use the medium's storytelling devices

- Making & remixing: How students can use the medium's devices to tell a story

Key vocabulary:

- Close-up: When the subject is shown very large, it lets the viewer see detail and may show that something is important.
- Gutter: In comics, the gutter is the space separating panels.
- Long shot: When the viewer's "eye" is a long way from the subject. It's usually used to give context or situate the subject in their environment.
- Low angle: When the viewer is looking up at the subject. Usually used to make a character seem powerful or impressive.
- Open panel: A panel without any lines around it.
- Overlap: When part of one shape or image covers part of another shape or image.
- Panel: A single drawing in a comic.

Performance tasks: Students will be able to...

- Use: Make clear and compelling comics
- Understand: Identify and analyze ways in which comics makers use the medium's rules of notice to draw and direct attention
- Engage: Consider the role of Indigenous cultural artistic traditions in comics made by Indigenous artists

Student-friendly outcomes:

- We will learn what these words mean when it comes to creating comics: close-up, gutter, long shot, low angle, open panel, overlap, and panel
- We will learn the special rules that make comics work in a way to tell stories
- We will learn how to use the special rules that make comics work to tell our own stories

Preparation and Materials

- Watch the [Comics Instant Expert Video](#)

- Prepare to show the slideshows [Reading Comics](#), [Panel Layouts](#) and [Making Comics](#)
- Download and photocopy the *Panel Layouts Questions*, *Round Robin comics*, *Sample Panels*, *Movies vs. Comics*, and *Making Comics* activities.
- All the comics making activities in this lesson can be done with nothing more than pencil and paper. If you or your students would like to explore digital tools for making comics, you can investigate the options at [AlternativeTo.net](#). Templates for making comics in that app are available on [Canva](#).
- If you would like to supplement the printable page layout templates, additional ones are available on [Picklebums](#) and this [Comic Strips](#) PDF.
- One area where it may be valuable to use digital tools is the lettering of word and thought balloons. Many of BlamBot's professional lettering fonts are available for free for non-commercial use (such as in a classroom.) You can see the list of available fonts sorted by price on [BlamBot](#) and view the “non-profit/indie comics use” [license](#). We recommend you install any of these you intend to use on school-owned devices before beginning the lesson. Make sure you are familiar with your school or board's policy on installing new programs and fonts.

Procedure

INTRODUCING COMICS

Start by explaining to students that different ways of communicating or telling stories — like movies, video games, books, comics, and so on — are called media. Each different one is called a medium.

- A medium is the channel or system through which a text is conveyed, determined by the text's mode(s), purpose, and audience, and including print, audio, visual, audio-visual, and digital means. For example, the medium for a written text might be a handwritten letter or book; the medium for an oral text might be a podcast or video clip. The plural is media. Media for reaching mass audiences include print, radio, television, artifacts, and the internet.

Now ask students: Have you ever seen the same story told in two different forms of media?

- A movie based on a comic, for example, or a cartoon based on a myth or a fairy tale? How were the stories different when they were told in different media forms?

Explain that different media have different tools and techniques that media makers can use to send a message or tell a story. They use these to get your attention, to tell you what to pay attention to, and to get ideas across.

Project the presentation [Making Comics](#) on a screen or digital whiteboard.

Show the **second and third slides**. Tell students that some techniques are used in many different media. Here, for instance, the same technique — called a low angle — is used in photography and film, in video games, and in comics.

Ask students: When we look up at a character like this, what does it tell us about them?

- It usually means that they are strong or powerful. It's like we're a child looking up at an adult.

Move forward to **slide four**. Explain to students that the first image is the scene told as “neutrally” as possible — without using any tools or techniques to help tell the story, show you what's important or make you feel a certain way about the story or characters.

Have students try to spot all of the techniques used in the second image that are not in the first one. Make sure the following techniques are identified:

- Distance: How far is the “camera” from the action?
- Angle: Is the “camera” looking up or down at the action?
- Panel composition: How big is each panel? What is included in it?
- Page composition: How many panels are there? How are they arranged?
 - Explain to students that just like using a mix of longer and shorter words affects the rhythm of a poem or another piece of writing, mixing panel shape and size changes the “rhythm” of a comic.

Next, show **slides five, six and seven**. Have students see if they can correctly identify a **close-up** panel, a **low angle** panel, and a **low angle medium shot** panel.

- **Slide five:** the close-up panel is the one of the note (on the left).
- **Slide six:** the low angle panel is the one with the text “This is your pistol... I hope it’s loaded!” (in the middle).
- **Slide seven:** the low angle medium shot panel is the one with the text “I’d better show the police this telegram!” (the one to the middle left).

COMPARING MEDIA

Now explain that while some techniques are used in more than one medium, in other cases different media use different techniques.

Ask: If we wanted to show that someone was strong or powerful in writing, how might we do it?

- Having them do something that showed their strength, or using adjectives like burly or mighty.

What techniques could we use in comics to show that someone was strong that wouldn’t work, or would be more difficult, in a live-action video?

- We could draw them in an exaggerated way or have them do impossible feats of strength.

What could we do in a film that we couldn’t do in comics?

- We could use “heroic” music or cast an actor who’s known for their strength, like a bodybuilder or a professional wrestler.

Now ask students if they have ever seen a movie or TV show that was based on a comic book such as Marvel movies, Batman or Superman movies, etc.

- How were the movie and the comic similar?
- How were they different?

Let students discuss for a few minutes

Next, display **slide eight** of the *Making Comics* presentation from earlier and distribute the *Comparing Media: Movies vs. Comics* handout.

Explain that the top circle is live-action movies and the bottom is comics, and go through it with the class. Have students write in which media uses each technique:

- things that are just in one circle are techniques that one medium but not the other uses to tell stories, and to tell you what to pay attention to.
 - Movies: Live actors, cuts between shots, speech and music, pictures can move
 - Comics: Drawn pictures, word balloons, page design
- things in the middle section are techniques that both media use to tell stories or tell you what to pay attention to.
 - Both: Tells a story with pictures, angle distance and composition, sound effects

Now ask: What would be some challenges of adapting something from one medium to the other?

- Are there kinds of movies or kinds of comics where the overlap is bigger?
 - For example, animated movies or photo-comics.

READING COMICS: MOVING BETWEEN PANELS

Project the [Reading Comics](#) presentation onto a screen or digital whiteboard.

Have students look at the sample comics page from *Daredevil #158* on the **first slide**.

- (This issue was written by Roger McKenzie and drawn by Frank Miller with inks by Klaus Janson. Since we are focusing on the visual storytelling, we will treat Miller as the main author.)

To begin with, ask if they can spot:

- A low angle panel?
 - The first one.
- A high angle panel?
 - The second, third and fourth panels are all high angles.
- A close-up panel?
 - The second panel is a close-up of the shovel, with the man in the hat smaller in the background.
- A long shot panel?

- The fourth panel is a wide or long shot.

Next, ask them to try to “read” the action of whole the page without looking at the thought balloons.

Ask:

- What do you see?
- What do you notice?

Have students share their initial impressions, then move to the **second slide**.

- Explain that people who make comics think carefully about how to guide the reader’s eyes from one panel to the next. If it’s not clear which panel we should read next, the comic is less fun to read. A clear flow can also make a comic more absorbing or interesting, and make sure you notice important details.

Ask students if they can think of any ways that people who make comics do this.

After they have shared any thoughts, move on to the **third slide**.

Explain that when we’re reading any visual text, our eyes follow predictable paths:

- First, they **start at the top left corner**, then move **down and to the right**.
- Next, they tend to **follow the outlines of shapes** and the **direction of lines**. They also connect repeated shapes and colours.
- Finally, in a realistic image, our eyes will **follow** any prominent **hands** and characters’ **eyelines**.

Ask students if they can think of any of those that might not be true in different parts of the world.

- If no students mention it, point out that the first rule comes from how we read print. In places where print is written in a different order, the pattern is different: in Japanese comics, for instance, the top right panel is read first.

Advance to the **fourth slide** and point out the arrows that the author, Kate Phillips, has used to highlight the ways she used those tools to guide the eye. (This and the image on the previous slide are from Phillips' comic [The Usual](#). Used with permission.)

- Where are lines and shapes used to guide the eye? (The first and third panels of the left-hand page.)
- Where are eyelines used to guide the eye? (The second and fourth panels of the left-hand page, and both panels of the right-hand page.)

Advance to the fifth slide and ask students: Keeping those rules in mind, what do you see now? What do you notice that you didn't before?

After they have had a chance to share their impressions, advance to the **sixth slide** and ask how Miller is guiding our eyes in these three panels.

Go to the **seventh slide** and explain that we tend to read wordless panels quickly, so Miller uses a line pointing against the left-to-right flow to slow us down, making us notice Daredevil falling into the pit.

Next, Daredevil's leg makes a line that leads us to the main action of the second panel.

Move to the **eighth slide** and highlight how the tip of the shovel speeds up the pace by leading down through the third panel and into the fourth.

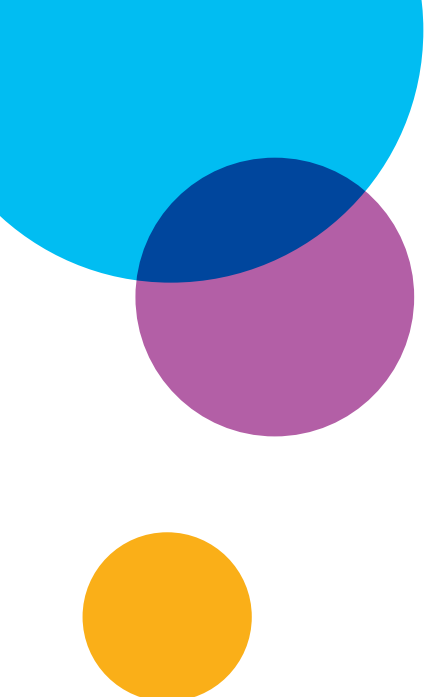
Now go to the **ninth slide** and ask how our eyes are guided in these two panels.

Advance to the **tenth slide** and point out how Daredevil's stretched-out body moves us right as he passes through the villain, then follow his eyeline back to the left of the same panel and the second of three images of him, showing us how quickly everything is happening.

Go the **eleventh slide** and show how the second and third images of Daredevil guide us straight to the villain's dangerous hand about to touch him, while the "echoing" line of his other hand emphasizes the danger.

Move to the **twelfth slide** and point out how Daredevil's hand literally points us to the bottom right, urging us to turn the page.

Go to the **thirteenth slide** and tell students that this was actually one of Miller's first published comics, and while he's already a very effective visual storyteller, one part of the composition doesn't make sense.



Can they spot it?

Go to the **fourteenth slide** and demonstrate that this is the order of events in the story: Daredevil is supposed to be jumping out of the pit, bouncing off the tombstone and then passing through the villain.

Now go to the **fifteenth slide** show that because of the way Miller composed the page, but we read it in the opposite order.

Next, to go to the **sixteenth slide** and tell students that you don't have to be able to draw well to be able to make comics: you just need to know how comics tell stories.

Ask students to look at the stick figures and identify what they are feeling or what they are doing.

- The specific answers aren't important; what matters is that students recognize that even very simple drawings can show action and emotion.

Go to the **seventeenth slide** and again ask students to identify what the stick figures are feeling or doing.

Point out that because comics are a visual language, you also have tools like motion lines and symbols like tears or hearts to show what characters are feeling or doing.

READING COMICS: PANEL LAYOUTS

Now tell students that as well as guiding the reader's eye through the page, how the panels in a page are arranged can affect how quickly or slowly we read and what we notice, and can even be part of the story themselves.

Display the [*Panel Layouts*](#) presentation on a screen or digital whiteboard.

Explain that the panel arrangement on the **first slide** – a grid with all panels the same size – is often the default choice if you don't have any particular effect in mind.

- In some cases, the grid may be the **best** choice because of how the comic will be shown. For example, most webcomics use a four-panel grid so that the whole comic can be read on a phone screen.

Go to the **second slide** and show the first variation, where one panel is wider than another. Explain that in general, the bigger a panel is, the more we pay attention to it and the more time it seems to take.

Next, go to the **third slide** and explain that we can also vary the vertical size of the panels.

- Ask students: Why might we choose a panel that stretched across the width of the page? Why might we choose one that stretched from top to bottom?

Explain that as with the *Daredevil* page they studied earlier, most pages will contain a mix of larger and smaller panels. Panels that stretch the width of the page are fairly common, while ones that stretch the full length from top to bottom are less so because they make it harder to read the flow of time on the page.

Go to the **fourth slide** and point out that there are also some less common arrangements like overlapping panels.

Go to the **fifth slide** and say that sometimes one panel will be fully inset into another.

Advance to the **sixth** slide and explain that one fairly common technique is a bleed, where the panel has no lines around it.

- If you want, you can have students complete the *Panel Layouts Questions* handout before taking them up in class.

Go to the **seventh slide** and ask:

How are the panels arranged on this page?

- They are almost (but not quite) a perfect grid – the third panel is slightly wider and the fourth slightly narrower.

How does it affect how you read this page?

- The repetition makes the joke work because the “camera” stands still while Nancy walks up the wall and onto the ceiling. But the panel where she starts walking up the wall is slightly wider because that’s the one that “breaks” from what’s possible in the real world.

Go to the **eighth slide** and ask:

How are the panels arranged on this page?

- It's an unequal horizontal layout.

What is unusual about where the "gutter" is placed? (Remember, in comics, the gutter is the space separating panels.)

- Instead of separating two images, the gutter separates two parts of the same image.

How does it affect how you read this page?

- It slows down our sense of time as we watch the toy walk in front of the man and into the bag. (Point out that this is a useful panel layout for showing steps in a process.)

Sometimes this is done just for variety or to "lighten" the page (as in the third panel of the *Daredevil* page studied earlier) but it can also give a panel a timeless or dreamlike quality.

Advance to the **ninth slide** and ask:

How are the panels arranged on this page?

- The first panel is a square inset in the larger rectangular panel.

How does it affect how you read this page?

- It makes it feel like everything is happening very quickly because all the horizontal lines flow together.

What other ways can you think of that this panel layout might be used?

- Obviously there is no right or wrong answer here, but you can point out this layout could be used to show that two things are happening at the same time or to highlight something important (for instance, a close-up inset into a medium shot or a wide shot).

Go to the **tenth slide** and ask:

What is unusual about the panels on this page?

- They are all borderless panels.

How does it affect how you read the page?

- It gives it a timeless, dreamlike quality. It's like you're seeing different images all at the same time instead of events in time.

Advance to the **eleventh** slide. Explain to students that the page is from a comic about a European man who took a totem pole away from a Haida community and that the artist is a Haida artist from British Columbia.

Ask:

How are the panels arranged on this page?

- It's two pairs of unequal vertical panels. The eye in the middle means the top left or right corner of each panel is sloped.

The artist, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, has said that "If you look at Haida art... you'll see a centre line, and a left side and a right side and they should mirror one another." How does this page reflect that?

- The layout of the page is mirrored, but the panels on the left are much fuller than the panels on the right. This makes the composition feel unbalanced.

How does it affect how you read the page?

- It makes you read the two left panels first, then the two on the right, following the curve of the "eye" in the middle. and then ending with the totem pole being taken away.

How does the page layout help tell the story?

- The page layout recalls the design of a Haida totem pole at the same time as it tells the story of a pole being taken from its community. It shows the importance of totem poles to Haida communities but also the resilience of Haida culture.

ROUND ROBIN COMICS

Distribute the *Round Robin Comics* handout.

Tell students that they are going to draw the **first** panel on their page, and then pass it on.

(You can have students do this in groups of three, or simply pass their pages to the right or left.)

- It doesn't matter what they draw, but their character should have a funny hat. (This is to make it easy for later students to draw the same character.)
- When they get handed a page, they have to draw the next panel.
- If they draw the same character, make sure to include the hat.
- If they add a new character, give them their own hat or something else that makes them easy to recognize.
- They should think about what happened in the first panel and about leading the reader's eye to the next panel.

When they are done, have them pass the page again.

The third panel should be **different** visually from the first two.

- Have students ask themselves:
 - What can I do with a bigger panel?
 - How can I end the story from the first two panels?

Now distribute the *Sample Panels* handouts so that each student gets **one** of the five sample pages.

Have them repeat the round robin process, drawing one panel and then handing the page to another student.

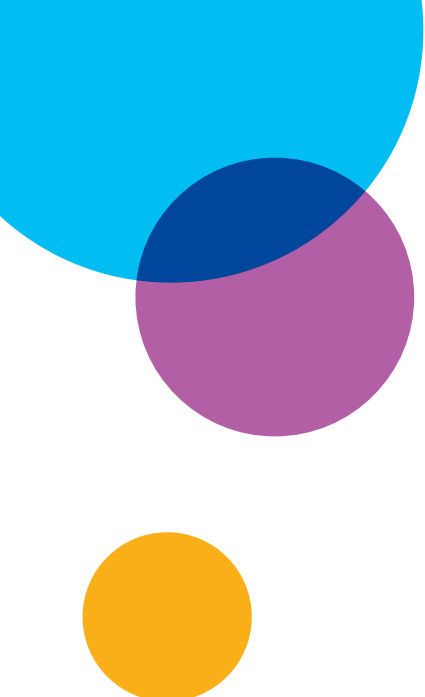
- Remind them to pay attention to the size and shape of the panel: don't try to squeeze something big into a little panel.
- If the panel is **different** from the previous panel, have them do something **different** with it:
 - What can I do with a wider panel? A taller one? An open panel?

MAKING COMICS

Now that students have had some practice making comics together, it's time for them to make one of their own.

Distribute the handout *Making Comics*. You may also display the handout on a screen or digital whiteboard.

Go through the assignment and the Story Starter with the class.



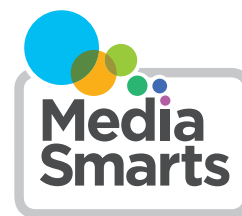
Ensure that students understand:

- They are **not** being marked on their art – but they are being marked on how well they understand and use the comics storytelling techniques you’ve covered in the lesson.
- They do **not** have to use the Story Starter (unless you want to require it). If they have their own idea, they can use that instead. The Story Starter is to help them think of story ideas and make sure their story has a clear beginning, middle and end.
- The story does not have to be about them. If they use the Story Starter to get an idea, the sentence starter “Every day...” can be followed with the name of a made-up character or even a job (e.g. “a fire fighter,” “a teacher,” etc.)
- They do **not** have to use any words that aren’t needed to get the story across. The comic can be totally silent if they want!

When they have finished their comic, have them use the Reflection to consider the choices they made.

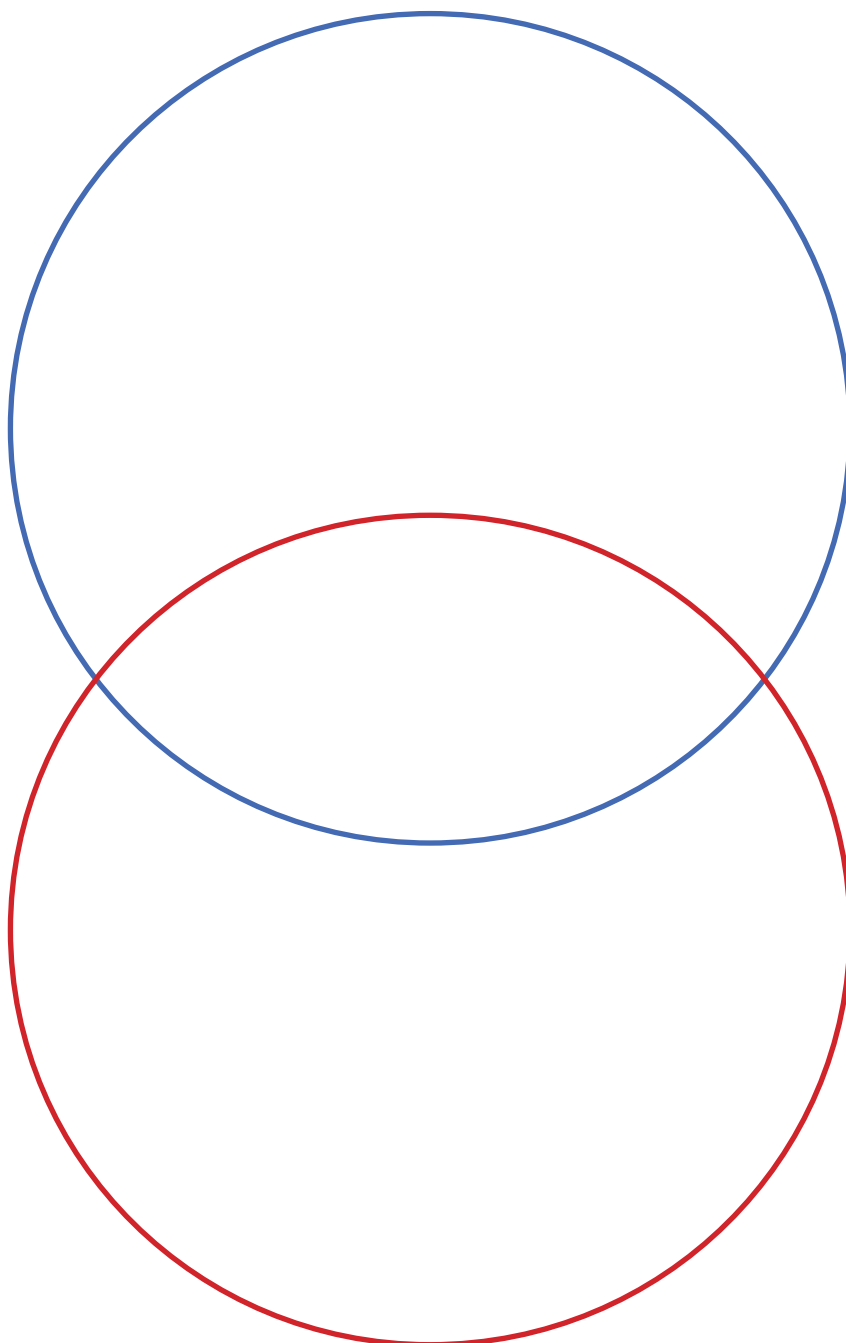
If you would like to integrate this assignment more closely into other parts of the course, you can have them choose a scene from a book or other text you have read and adapt it into a comic.

MAKING COMICS

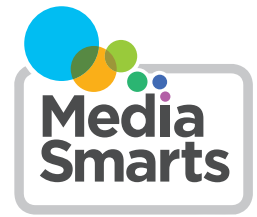


Comparing Media: Movies vs. Comics

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MAKING COMICS



Panel Layouts Questions

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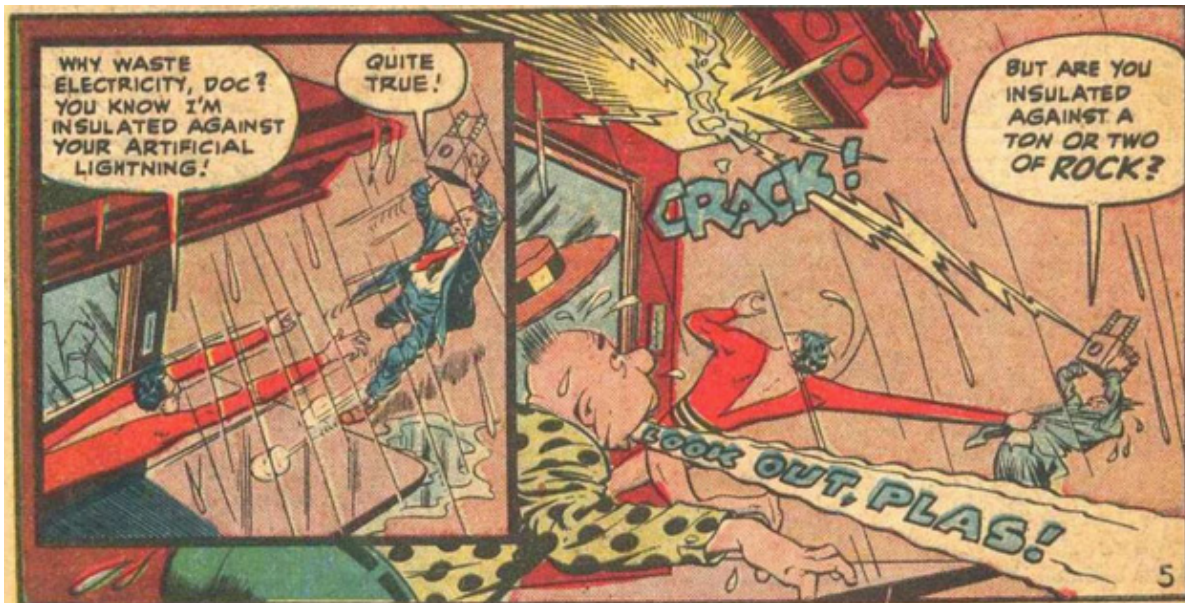
1. Take a look at each of the following comics pages. Then answer the questions.



- How are the panels arranged on this page?
- How does it affect how you read the page?



- How are the panels arranged on this page?
- What is unusual about where the "gutter" is?
- How does it affect how you read the page?



- How are the panels arranged on this page?
- How does it affect how you read the page?
- What other ways can you think of that this panel layout might be used?



- What is unusual about the panels on this page?
- How does it affect how you read the page?

MAKING COMICS

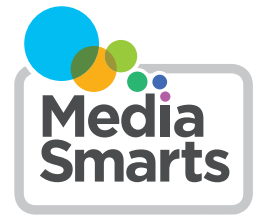
2. This page is from a comic about a European man who took a totem pole away from a Haida community. The artist is a Haida artist from British Columbia.

Take a look at this comics page. Then answer the questions.



- How does the page layout help tell the story?
- The artist has said that "If you look at Haida art... you'll see a centre line, and a left side and a right side and they should mirror one another." How does this page reflect that?
- How are the panels arranged on this page?
- How does it affect how you read the page?

MAKING COMICS



Round Robin Comics

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Let's draw comics together!

To start, turn the page over.

Draw anything you want in the first **panel**.

There's just **one rule**: whoever you draw has to have a **funny hat**.

Next, hand your page to someone. Take a page from someone else.

Draw what's in the **second panel**.

Think about what happened in the first panel.

Think about leading the reader's eye to the next panel.

If you draw the same person, give them the **same hat**.

If you add someone new, give them a hat.

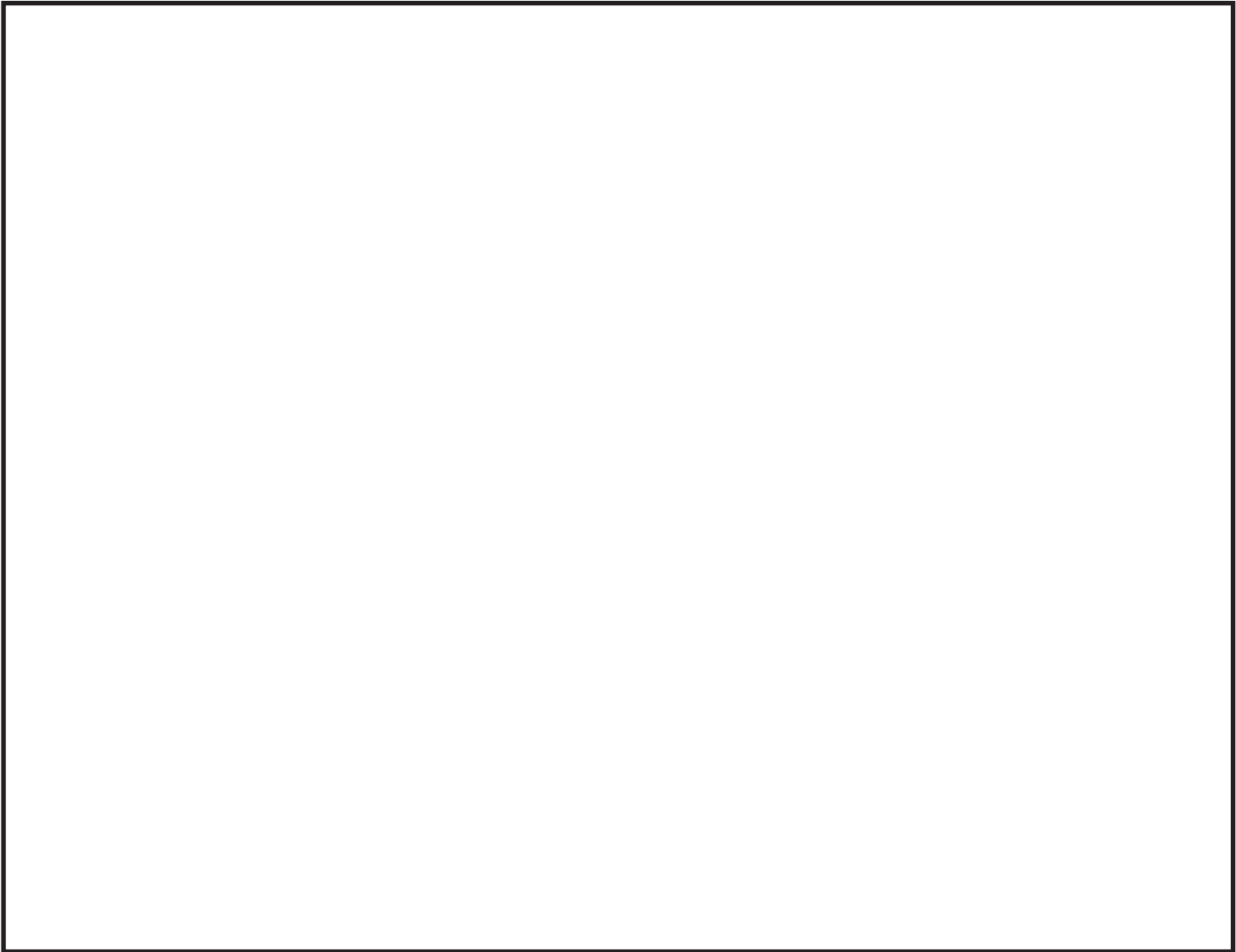
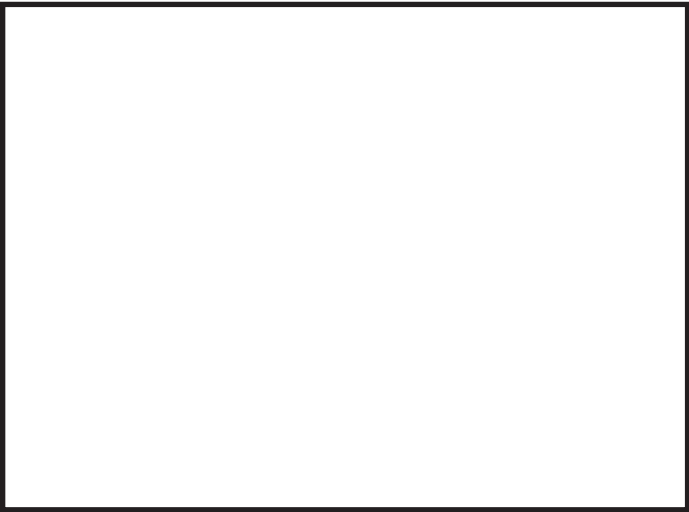
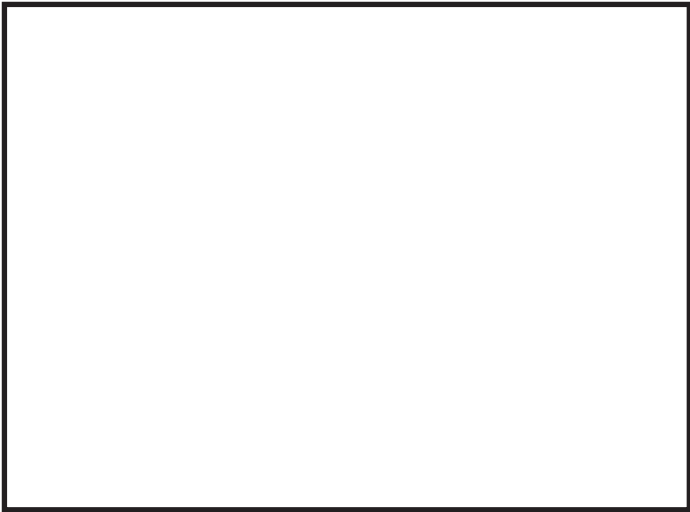
Hand your page to someone. Take a page from someone else.

Draw what's in the **third panel**.

This panel should be **different!**

What can you do with a bigger panel?

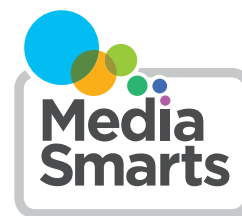
How can you end the story from the first two panels?

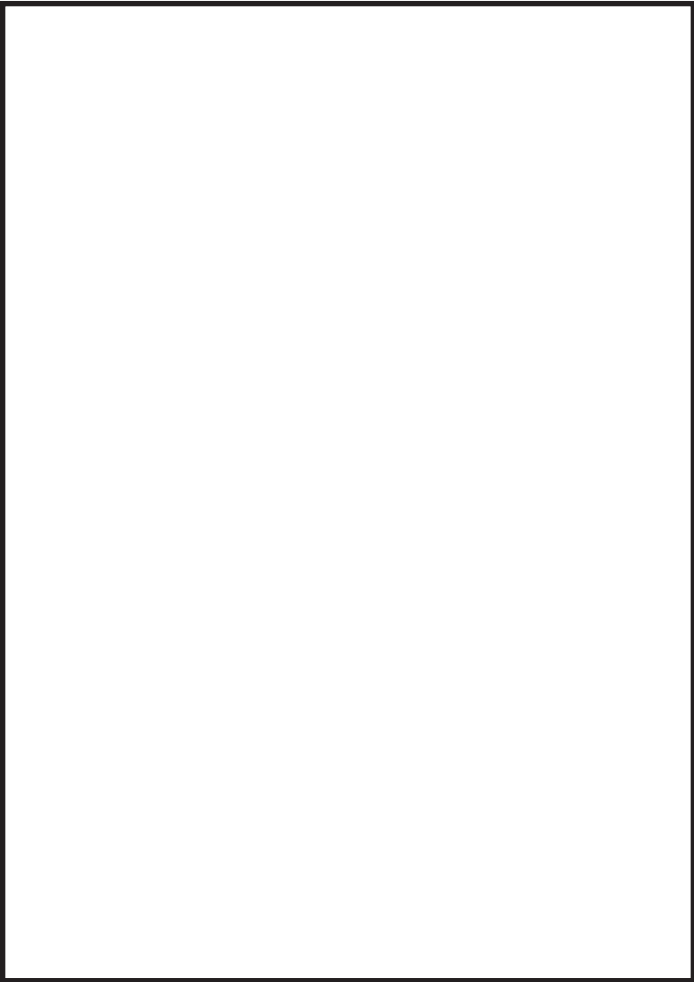
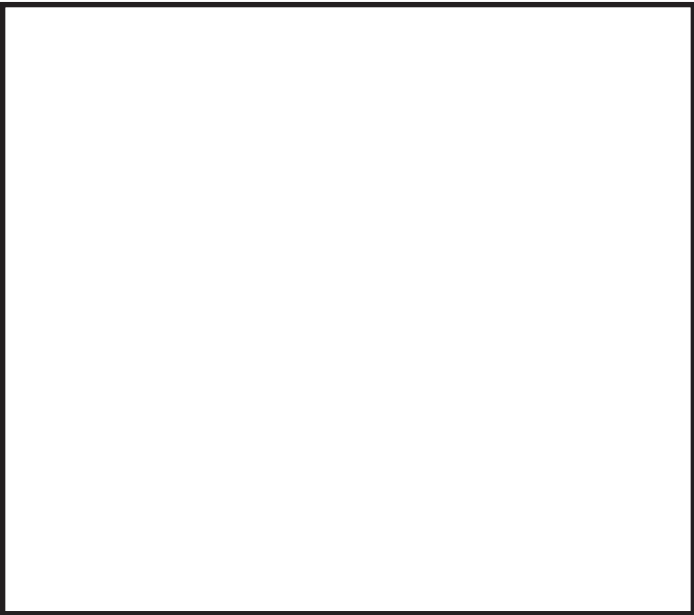
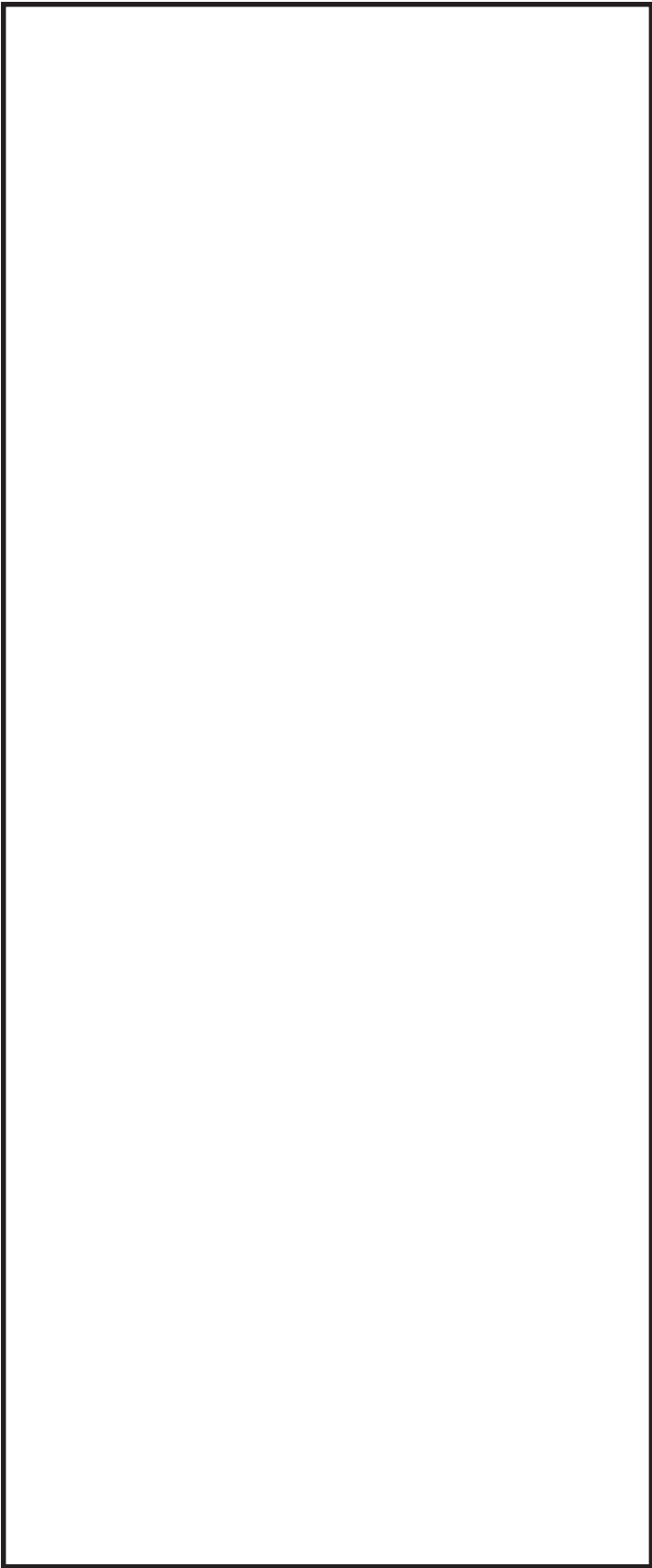


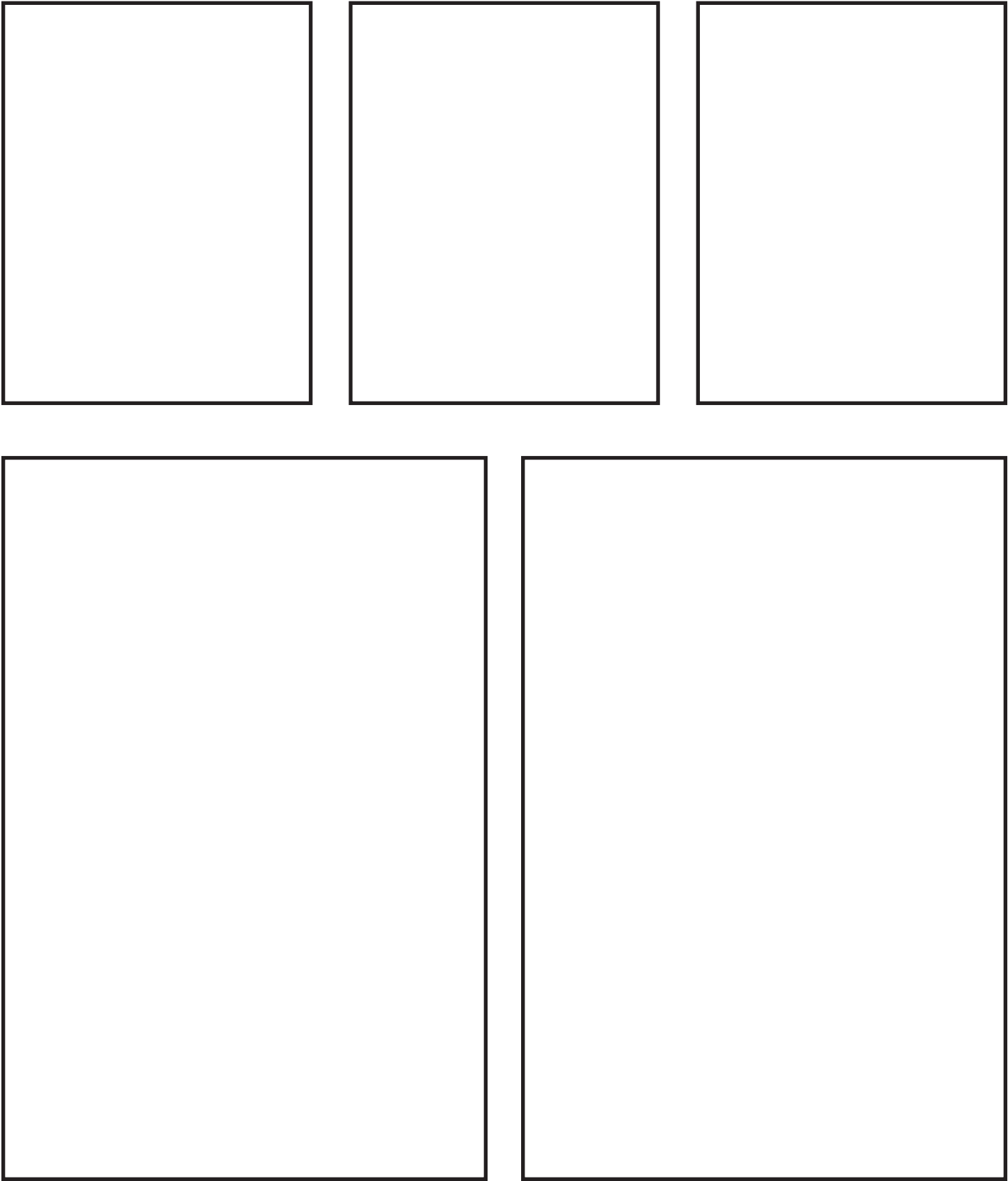
MAKING COMICS

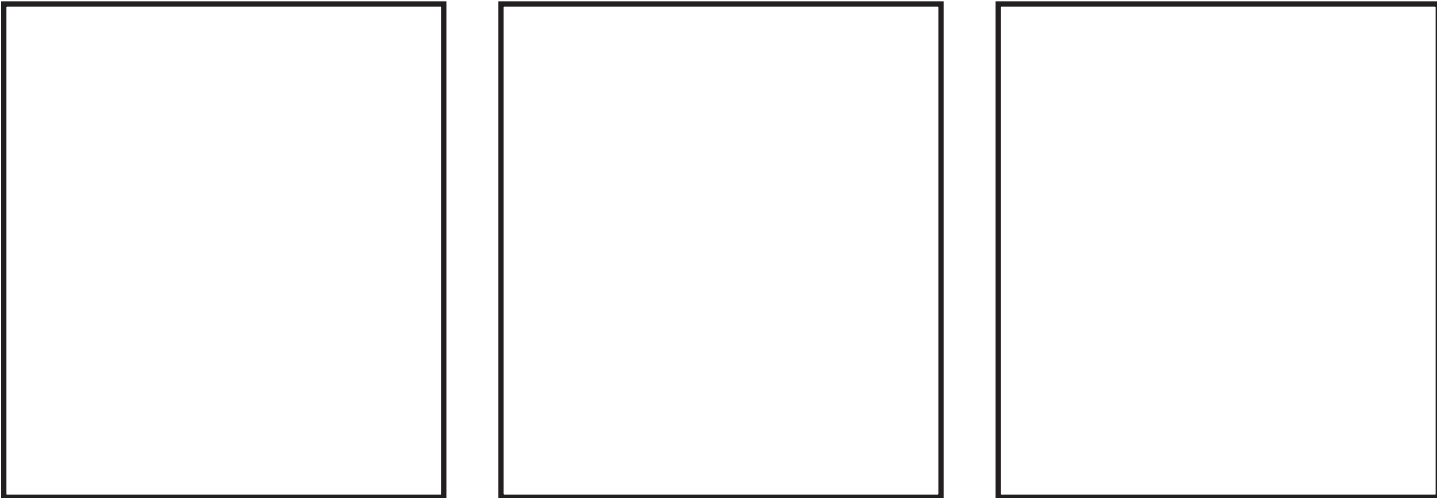
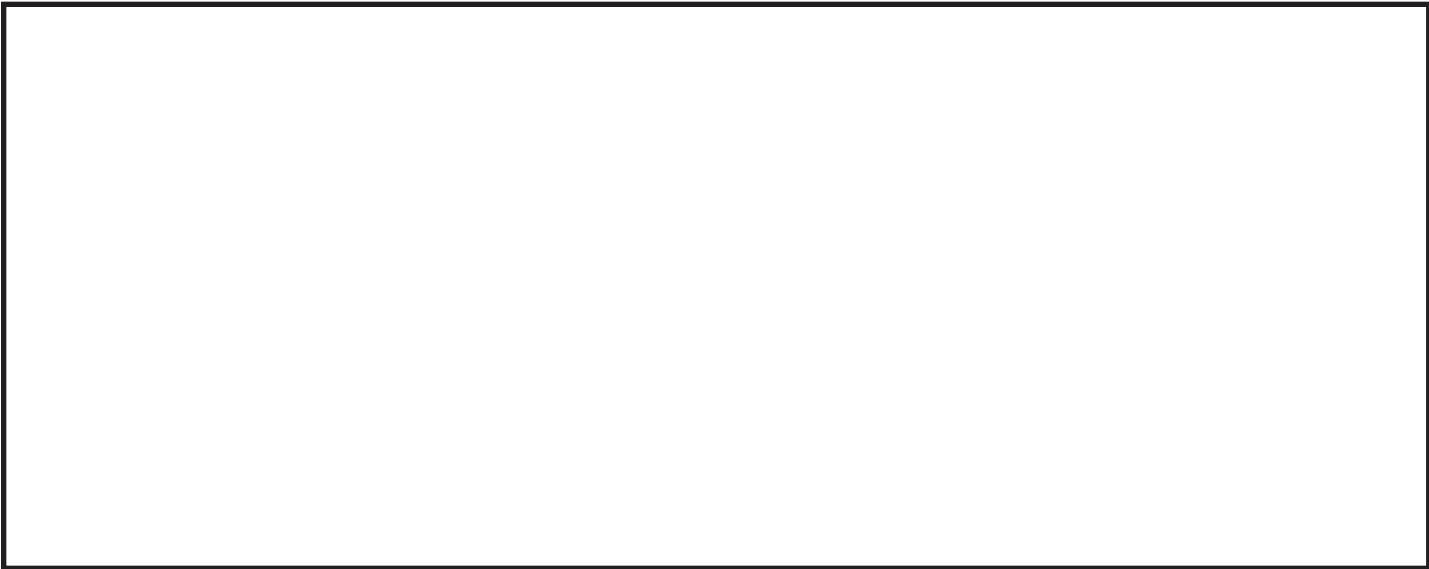
Sample Panels

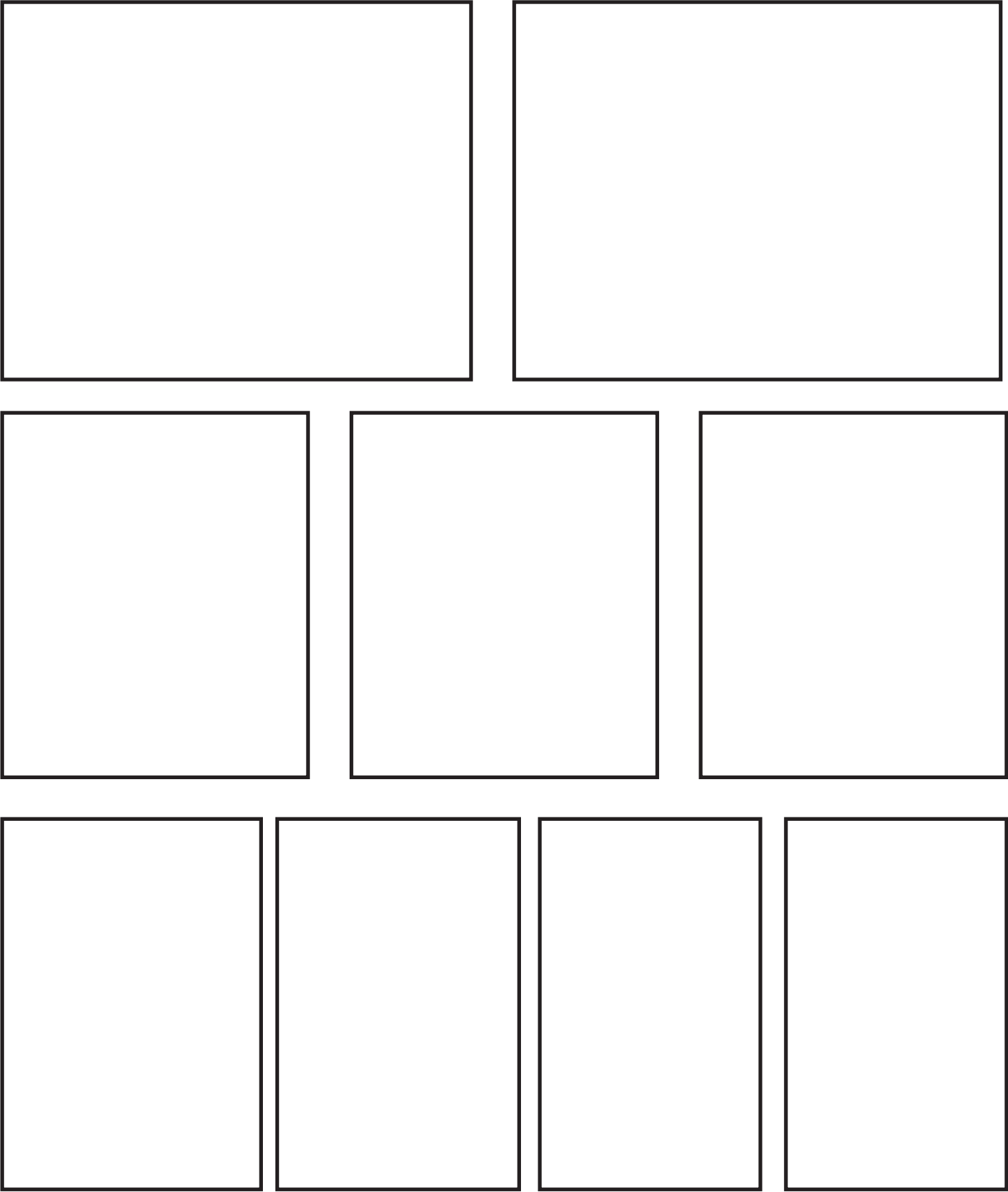
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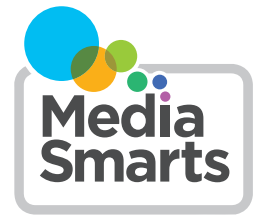








MAKING COMICS



Making Comics

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Now it's time to make your own comic. Your comic should tell a whole story. If you want help getting ideas, you can use the Story Starter.

You can use as many pages and as many panels as you want. Use all the things you learned about angle and distance, panel layouts and how to lead the reader's eyes.

Here's an easy way to start a story.

Start with the words in each box, then write whatever you think of.

The story doesn't have to be about you. It can be about a person you make up or just a random person.

If you want, you can go back and change what you wrote before.

Every day... <i>Think of things people do every day like:</i> <i>Walking to school</i> <i>Feeding your pet</i> <i>Eating dinner</i> <i>Brushing your teeth</i>	
But one day... <i>What can happen that is different?</i>	

And so... <i>What happens because of the thing that is different?</i> <i>What problems does it cause?</i> <i>What new things can happen because of it?</i>	
And finally... <i>If the change caused problems, how are they fixed?</i> <i>If the change made new things happen, what is the result?</i> <i>How is the person different at the end?</i>	

After you are done, think about the choices that you made in telling your story.

When your comic is done, think about the choices you made.

1. Pick one panel that has a high angle, a low angle, a close-up or a wide shot. Why did you choose that for this panel?
2. Pick two or more panels that are not the same size. Why did you choose that layout for those panels?
3. Pick one thing you did to guide the reader's eye. Why did you choose that?