LESSON PLAN

Comic Book Characters

his 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 5 to 8

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Overview

In this lesson, students learn how shapes are used in character design in comics and animation and look at how male and female characters are depicted in comic books. Using a Comic Book Analysis sheet, students will record the attributes of male and female comic book characters. As a class, students will record common patterns and discuss what messages about men and women are communicated. Students then design a comic book character that uses shapes to communicate what they think a real hero is.

Learning outcomes

Key concepts:

- Media are constructions
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form
- Media have social and political implications

Students will:

Know:

- characteristics of comics and animation as media forms
- recognize how comics and animation artists use shapes in designing characters
- list the ways that shapes can communicate character

Understand:

- recognize that the media construct reality
- analyze recognize that media have social and political implications
- analyze how character designs communicate and imply character
- identify how gender perceptions are affected by media representations

Do:

- critique gendered character designs
- design a character that demonstrates their understanding and analysis
- justify their design decisions

Preparation and Materials

- Prepare to project the slideshow *Comics and Cartoon Characters*
- Bring in or have students bring in an assortment of comic books. (Thrift stores are a good source for old comics.) Alternately, you can have students borrow comics collections from the school or municipal library.
    - Make sure there is at least one comic for every two students.
    - They don't all have to be superhero comics, but the exercise will not work as well if the artwork is highly realistic and the characters don't wear any sort of unusual costume.
- Prepare to distribute the *Comic Book Analysis Sheet*. Have blank paper or tracing paper available for students
- Optional: Prepare to distribute the handouts *Superman vs. Batman* and *Batman vs. Batgirl* (you may choose to do this if you feel students will benefit from a more hands-on version of the "Shaping Character" activity.)

The Lesson

- Start by asking students if they have ever read comics or watched cartoons or animated movies. What are (or were) some of their favourites? (If students are reluctant to name any, ask them for younger siblings' favourites.)
- Point out that the *character design* of a comic or cartoon character is very important. It tells you a lot about a character right away, and a good character has a very memorable design.

SHAPING CHARACTER

- Project **slides 1-2** of the slideshow *Comics and Cartoon Characters*. Explain to students that because comics and cartoons are drawn (either by hand or on a computer), a lot of a character's personality comes from the shapes that are used in their design. We're not always consciously aware of it, but shapes have a lot of personality.

- Ask students: If each of these shapes (a rectangle, a circle, and a triangle) was a person, how would you describe them?

    - *Optional*: For younger students, you may want start by having the class make a list of words you could use to describe someone. Then have students pick the ones that these shapes make them think of.

- Once students have made some suggestions, advance to **slide 3**. Explain that squares and rectangles feel strong and reliable, but they can also feel inflexible like a wall or a locked door. Circles feel friendly and open, because they don't have any straight lines or sharp points; and triangles are all points, so they may feel dangerous and unpredictable.

- Advance to **slide 4** and explain that artists aren't limited just to basic shapes:they can modify them in different ways to get more complex effects. One way of doing this is to mix shapes, just like we get new colours by mixing them; rounding a square's corners gives us a combination of its strength and the safety of the circle for a protective feeling. Rotating shapes can change how we read them, too. Flipping a triangle de-emphasizes the points and gives it the strength of a square, giving a sense of being powerful. Finally, changing the balance of a square by tilting it emphasizes the points by making them sharper. This can make an inflexible square feel more dynamic, but it can also give a feeling of being unstable or off-kilter.

- Advance to **slide 5** and tell students that making a shape off-balance – by tilting it or just adding an extra line – can add character even to a simple stick figure. Even if you don't know this character is named Cynicalman, for example, you can guess his personality just by looking at him.

- Advance to **slide 6** and tell students that comics and animation artists put a lot of time and thought into a character's design, and shapes are a big part of that.

- Ask students to compare the drawings of Batman and Superman. What shapes are used in their designs? Which do the two characters have in common, and which are different? How does that affect how we see the characters?

    - *Optional*: For younger students or those with less experience in media literacy, distribute the handout *Superman vs. Batman* and have them draw shapes directly on the handout to help them visualize them.

- After students have discussed this for a few minutes, advance to **slide 7** and explain that Like most superheroes, they both are built around the inverted triangle that gives a sense of power. (Superman even has a second inverted triangle on his chest.) The rest of Superman is all rounded squares. This gives us the feeling that his power is mostly used for protection, like a shield.

- Batman, on the other hand, is made up mostly of triangles, giving him a more aggressive, dangerous look. Most of the triangles are asymmetrical, with uneven sides. This use of balance increases the feeling of danger and unpredictability, in contrast to Superman's stolid, dependable look.

- Point out that each of the characters also stands slightly at an angle to give them a bit of dynamism: if a character is too balanced they seem static and dull.

- Advance to **slide 8** and explain that If we wanted to show Superman protecting people by blocking bullets with his chest, on the other hand, we might give him a wider, more balanced stance. Now he's almost totally symmetrical, with just his waving cape giving us a bit of dynamism.

- To make Batman feel safer and more kid-friendly, we could take out most of the triangles by shortening the ears and curving the spikes on his gloves. Making his shoulders rounder, adding the round black highlight to the mask, and putting the bat on his chest inside an oval all add circular shapes to the design, giving him a safer, friendlier look as well.

SHAPING GENDER

- Advance to **slide 9** and ask students to compare the character designs for Batman and Batgirl. (Point out that these are both from the same series, so they were made by the same artists and intended for the same audience.) While there are some obvious differences (like size) remind them to focus on the shapes that are used in the designs.

  - *Optional*: For younger students or those with less experience in media literacy, distribute the handout *Batman vs. Batgirl* and have them draw shapes directly on the handout.

- Let students discuss the differences for a few minutes. Make sure the following points are raised:

  - The Batgirl design does have triangles, but they're less

prominent than the Batman design: the spikes on her gloves and the wings of her bat-emblem are less sharp, and the scalloping on the end of her cape is shallower.

- Her chest is an inverted triangle like Batman's but her shoulders are rounded, like the kid-friendly Batman, so the sense of being powerful is not as strong.

- Only the bat-ears are about as triangular as Batman's, and even those aren't tilted back like his for a less dynamic effect.

- Everything rectangular in Batman's design – the straight rectangles of his belt and the rounded rectangle of his head – becomes a circle for Batgirl: a single circular buckle on the belt, and an oval head whose roundness is underlined by the blue highlight. The hair coming out of her hood adds extra curves too.

- Finally, while Batman's eyes are tilted triangles, Batgirl's are each a double circle, with a full circle inside a pointed oval. The point and angle of the ovals still give her a somewhat unpredictable, mischievous look, but not the menacing look Batman has.

- Advance to **slide 10** and ask students how those differences in design change how we see the characters. Which one looks more heroic? Who looks more dangerous? What words might you use to describe her that you wouldn't use to describe Batman? (*Prompts: Friendly, cheerful, helpful, mischievous, tricky*.)

- Now ask: What messages about the differences between boys and girls might we get from the differences between Bat*man* and Bat*girl*? Does that match your experiences with boys and girls? Do you think real female athletes look more like Batgirl or more like Batman?

- After students have discussed this for a bit, advance to **slide 11**. Explain that shapes in character design can be used to *code* gender for characters that aren't human, like cartoon animals, and even ones that aren't male or female like robots. For example, in the movie *Big Hero 6*, Baymax is a robot designed to be a nurse – a job we usually associate with women. His basic form is all circles and ovals. His fighting armour, on the other hand, gives him the inverted pyramid we saw on Batman and Superman, turns the ovals into rounded rectangles, and adds some triangles (the wings and antennae). Now he's made of "male" shapes to match his new role as a fighter and protector, something we often see as a "male" role.

- Explain that in this movie, the use of shapes to *code* gender was a conscious decision by the film-makers: Bayman has to be literally stuffed into the armour.—a visual way of showing how some people feel forced to behave the way other people think boys or girls "should" act. Then tell students that not all artists are as aware of the messages about gender they send with their character designs.

COMIC BOOK ANALYSIS

- Distribute the *Comic Book Analysis Sheet* and have students choose one or more comics. Have them select at least one male and one female character from each comic and analyze their design in terms of shapes. (You may also distribute tracing paper if you have it, or photocopy selected pages from the comics so that students can draw shapes directly on the artwork.)

- Next, have students pair up and share their findings with a partner. Have the student pairs complete the second part of the *Comic Book Analysis Sheet* together.

As a class, share and discuss ideas and observations:

- Are there any similarities shared by female characters? What shapes are used most often in their design? What shapes are used less often?

- Are there any similarities shared by male characters? What shapes are used most often in their design? What shapes are used less often?

- If there are non-human characters, are they "coded" with one gender or another? What shapes are used to do that?

- Besides shapes, what other trends do you notice in the characters you studied? Are there some comics that are exceptions to those patterns (for example, the male characters in the comic Bone are mostly made of curved shapes, while the female characters are primarily rounded rectangles.)

- Are there patterns in colours, in powers (for superheroic characters) or the roles they play in the stories?

- If all you knew about gender, or about men and women, came from these comics, what *messages* or *conclusions* could you get from the patterns you observed?

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

- Distribute the assignment sheet *Shaping Character*. Have students choose someone they consider a real-life hero, or create a character they would see as heroic. (If you want, you can have the whole class brainstorm the definition of a hero and make a shared list of possible heroes.)

- Have them make a character shape design of the character and then a full character design based on those shapes, and write a paragraph explaining their choices. If you like, you can have students share their characters with the rest of the class through presentations or an art walk.

COMIC BOOK CHARACTERS

Media Smarts

Comic Book Analysis Sheet

PART ONE

Pick one or more comics to skim through. Choose at least **one male and one female character** from each comic. (If there is a non-human character like a robot, an alien or an animal that doesn't have a clear gender, you can choose that instead of either the male or the female character.)

Pick a panel that shows a full-body view of each character look at what shapes are used in their design. Which shapes are most common and which are least common in each character design? Which are most prominent (biggest or seen most often)?

• Make sure to include not just the shapes used in characters' bodies but their costume or clothing as well (like the upside-down triangle of the "S" on Superman's chest.)

You can use tracing paper to draw the shapes, or other paper that's thin enough to see the art underneath. If you have scans or photocopies you can draw shapes

right on the artwork.

Now compare the two characters. How do the male and female characters compare in terms of what shapes were used in their design? How does that match with the role they each play in the story (for instance, are characters with more rounded shapes helpers or caregivers? Are characters with more unbalanced shapes unpredictable or untrustworthy?)

If there are non-human characters, are they "coded" with one gender or another? What shapes are used to do that?

PART TWO

Pair up with a partner and work together to compare the four characters you have analyzed.

• Do you see the same patterns in both comics or are they different?

• Besides shapes, what other trends do you notice in the characters you studied? Are there gendered patterns in colours, in powers (for superheroic characters) or the roles they play in the stories?

Be ready to discuss your analysis in class.

COMIC BOOK CHARACTERS
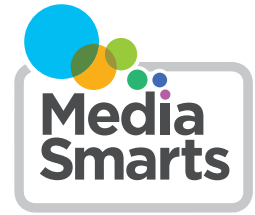
Shaping Character

In this exercise, you will use shapes to design a heroic character.

Start by choosing someone that you think of as being a real hero. This can be someone from history, a family member, someone from your community or anyone you want.

You're now going to make a **cartoon version** of that person. Your character design will get across their personality and what makes them heroic.

> Your character can be any gender.

> You don't have to make them a **super**hero, but you can if you want!

If you can't think of anyone, think about what makes somebody heroic to you and use that as your starting point.

Next, draw your character using only shapes. (This is like what we did with Batman and Superman, but the other way around.)

> Choose shapes that will get across your character's **personality** and the things they do (or did) that **make them heroic** to you. Do you want to use mostly one or a small number of shapes, or balance different kinds of shapes?

> Remember that you don't just have to use basic shapes: you can **combine** shapes, **rotate** them or **tilt** them (make them unbalanced or asymmetrical.)

Now draw your finished character based on that shape design. If you like you can start by putting tracing paper over your shape design.

Remember that you can add shapes as part of their clothing or costume. You can do this as a way of **emphasizing** a kind of shape (by adding more) or **balancing** the shapes (by adding shapes with different meanings.

You don't have to use **exact shapes**. Unless it's something that would naturally be a clear shape (like a belt buckle) you can smooth it out to make it more organic. People will still get the idea if you make the shapes the basis of your design.

Last, **write a paragraph** where you explain the design choices you made:

• Which shapes did you choose?

• Did you mostly use one kind of shape or did you mix shapes together?

• How did you use combination, rotation and balance?

• Why did those choices make sense for your character?
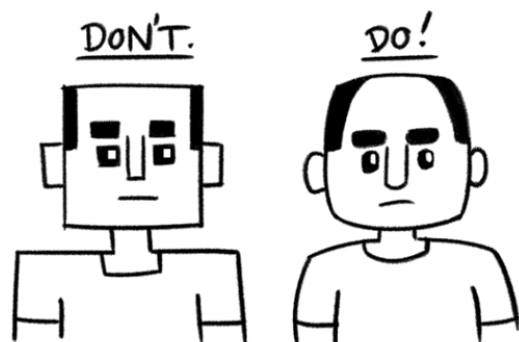
Art from *Tips & Techniques: Shape Language*. Walt Disney Family Museum.

COMIC BOOK CHARACTERS

Superman vs. Batman

Compare the drawings of Batman and Superman. What shapes are used in their designs? (You can draw the shapes on top of the artwork to be able to see them more clearly.)

Which shapes do the two characters have in common, and which are different?

Based on what we've learned about shapes, how does that affect how we see the characters?

COMIC BOOK CHARACTERS

Batman vs. Batgirl

Compare the drawings of Batman and Batgirl. What shapes are used in their designs? (You can draw the shapes on top of the artwork to be able to see them more clearly.)

Which shapes do the two characters have in common, and which are different?

Based on what we've learned about shapes, how does that affect how we see the characters?