This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by *Get Graphic! with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.*

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all outside and between.

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Get Graphic! Toolkit *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud

About the Comic

Building upon the foundational work of comics creator and theorist Will Eisner, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* aims to define comics through comics. McCloud takes as his explicit goal to offer a definition of the medium and to theorize the function(s) of the form.

Since its publication, *Understanding Comics* has received much praise and criticism. McCloud is celebrated for bringing attention to the particulars of the medium but has been criticized at times for his reliance on sequence as the defining characteristics of the medium because it leaves out single-panel comics. Nonetheless, his work remains the most comprehensive exploration of the comics form in the West and the most useful and accessible jumping off point for further discussions on the definition of the medium and its numerous capabilities.

From popularizing such terms as "the gutter" (the space between panels) to defining closure, McCloud's book has become essential reading for anyone studying comics. The academic and popular study of comics would be very different today without McCloud's language and images which circulate throughout comic studies. His careful study of the medium is invaluable even to those not studying comics as he offers media-specific analyses that prod readers to think about form and function.

Who is Scott McCloud?

Scott McCloud is a cartoonist and comics theorist. His work to define sequential art has made him one of the most recognizable figures in the fields of comics and visual communications. His trilogy (*Understanding Comics* (1993), *Reinventing Comics* (2000), and *Making Comics* (2006)), all of which are comics about comics, have been integral in his work to define the medium. Before writing his comics on comics, he was known for *Zot!, a* lighthearted superhero story influenced by Osamu Tezuka. McCloud has also written issues of *Superman Adventures* along with a miniseries, *Superman Strength* (2005), and a graphic novel, *The Sculptor* (2015). McCloud has not only defined the medium but demanded change in the industry, advocating for creators in the field. In 1988, McCloud was the principal author of the Creator's Bill of Rights which aimed to protect comic book creators against companies which exploit them through work-for-hire methods. This remains an issue as most comics creators notably have no rights to their creations. The most infamous example of this is Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who fought for rights to their creation, Superman, from DC Comics but were ultimately unsuccessful.

Figure 1 *Understanding Comics,* p. 1

Context: History of Comics

Most histories of the medium identify 1895 as the birth of comics in the United States with the creation of "TheYellow Kid" character by Ohio-born R. F. Outcault published in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* newspaper. The following year, 1896, sequential art stories featuring the Yellow Kid began to appear in Pulitzer's newspaper. The story of comics is different in each country, but in the United States the anti-comics crusades of the 1940s and 50s would define the medium for decades as the form became associated with juvenile delinquency. Because of the popularity and accessibilty of comics along with the medium's deceptively simple images, the form has a long history of being derided as corrupting the youth. The anti-comics sentiment culminated in 1954 with Senate Subcommittee hearings on comics and juvenile delinquency. The hearing led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority which would regulate the stories told in comics, particularly related to the genres of horror and crime. The limitations of the Code indirectly created what would become the Underground Comix movement beginning around 1965 with the easy access to new technology that allowed individuals to publish their own personal comics. In 1972 with the publication of Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary,* the autobiographical comic was born in the US. While the "Code" is now defunct, this history continues to define the perception of the medium, evident in the uses of terms including "graphic novel" which served to elevate the form. This history of devaluing comics continues to affect perception of the form; but, as others have said, it's time to just call them comics and respect the medium for its many possibilities and advances in storytelling.

Questions for Discussion

1. One of the significant contributions to the study of comics that McCloud helped to popularize is the term “the gutter” meaning the space between panels (Fig. 3). How does the gutter affect the reading experience and how can it be used to evoke feelings and thoughts from the comics reader? Consider examples of comics that do or do not utilize the gutter.

2. McCloud describes cartooning as amplification through simplification (Fig. 2). What is it about the cartoon’s simplified images that make it so inviting? How has the world of marketing embraced this concept? In what other aspects of life has this been seen?

3. In *Understanding Comics,* McCloud distinguishes between form and content (p. 6) recognizing that the comics medium has been conflated with its most recognizable genres. So, in his study of comics, he separates the content from the form to think about the particulars of the medium. How does this separation of medium from content help us to understand the possibilities of comics and other media? Why do these stereotypes persist?

4. Frames (chap. 4), lines (chap. 5), and color (chap. 8) are distinct components which McCloud identifies as ways that feeling may be introduced in comics. Consider different comics that utilize space, lines, and color to express emotion. How do frames, line work, and color, or other specific elements of the comics form affect the reading experience?

5. Comics is unique in that it requires the reader/viewer to enact closure, to decide what happens between panels, whereas we are passive with other media (Fig. 3). As McCloud discusses, this active participation incriminates the reader, but how might this active participation also create a more empathetic form?

6. In chapter 2, McCloud turns to the “icon,” stating that “ours is an increasingly symbol-oriented culture.” How does McCloud’s “Picture Plane” (pp. 52-53) help us to think about this symbol-oriented culture and to ask why the comics form and the drawn image gained such popularity in the age of the internet and the ease of photography by use of smart phones?

7. For McCloud, the less-detailed an image is the more likely we can connect with it. For example, see the smiley face in Fig. 2. Whereas the smiley face is a benign image, how can we apply McCloud’s ideas to understand propaganda which often uses simplified images for much more malevolent purposes?

8. If sequence is the defining characteristic of comics, what else might we consider comics? Where does the history of comics begin? What might not be a comic *per se* but perhaps could be read as comics?

Interviews & Additional Questions

If you want to take this discussion a step further, you can pair the book with one of the recommended interviews and suggested supplemental questions.

- Hillary Chute, *The Believer*, “An Interview with Scott McCloud,” April 1, 2007. https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-scott-mccloud/
    - McCloud sees sequential art as the defining characteristic of comics as he says in the interview: “I like the world of possibilities that my definition points to. I firmly believe that if you did a series of bas-relief sculptures on a wall in a museum that tell a story, then you’d be making comics — you’d just be making really interesting variations of what we think of as comics. If you did a series of stained-glass windows telling the story of your life, you’d be making comics. So if that leaves *The Family Circus* on the side of the road, so be it.”
    - How does this definition allow us to rethink, re-see, and re-read other visual stories from stained-glass windows to Instagram? Thinking about the prevalence of different types of sequential art across social media and the history of art, what does this tell us about the human predilection toward sequential storytelling?

- Glenn McDonald, “A Flowering of Genres: An Interview with Scott McCloud,” *PopMatter*, June 25, 2006, https://www.popmatters.com/scott-mccloud-interview-2496008780.html
    - In response to a question on comics and the internet, McCloud states: “The overall webcomics scene is basically a validation and a victory for those who had confidence in digital distribution as a powerful way for the medium to grow. It definitely serves both creators and readers to have a much more efficient connection between points A and B. Even though the economic side of it is still looking fuzzy, there are some ways that people have found to make a living at it.”
    - While McCloud does not discuss the role of the internet in his first book (although it is a major focus of *Reinventing Comics*), how does the webcomics world change the landscape of comics? Does our definition of the form need to change to reflect web comics?

- Ross Johnson, *B&N Sci-Fi & Fantasy Blog*, “Obsessive Tendencies: Scott McCloud on 25 Years of *Understanding Comics*,” July 19, 2018, https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/obsessive-tendencies-scott-mccloud-on-25-years-of-understanding-comics/
    - In an interview about the legacy of *Understanding Comics,* McCloud said “I’d like to think that *Understanding Comics* helped contribute to comics’ broader acceptance by both the general public and by various institutions like libraries, museums, and universities. But guys like me are only half of the solution. We can talk about how great comics are until we’re blue in the face, but it’s the best cartoonists (people like Spiegelman, Ware, Bechdel, Yang, etc) who prove it in the long run.”
    - McCloud asserts that his work would not have had as great an impact without the many great cartoonists that have proven the ideas he defines in his work. What other comics artists either represent the ideas that McCloud offers or challenge some of his ideas and take them further?

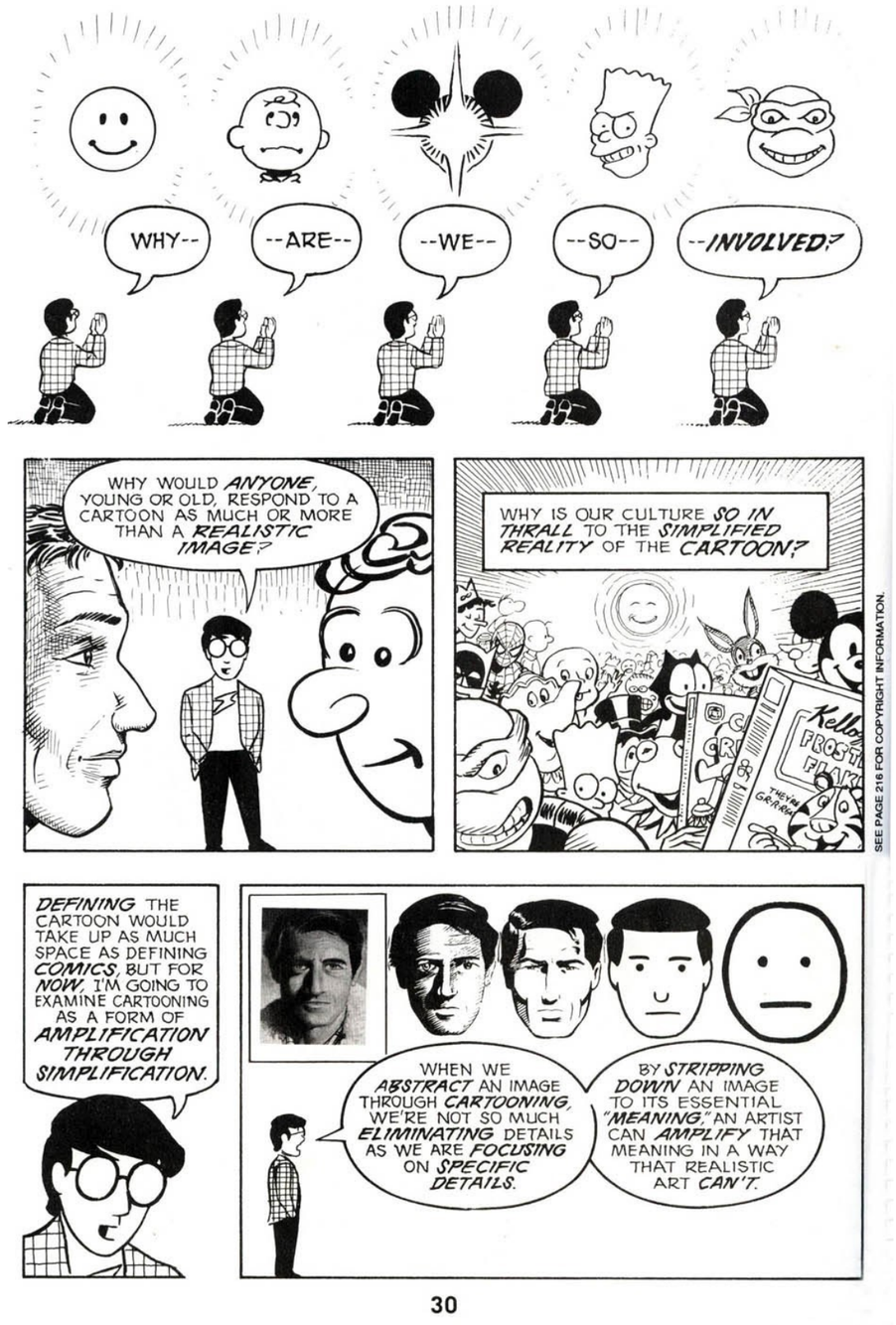

Figure 2 *Understanding Comics,* p. 30.

Scholarship & Additional Questions

If you want to advance your discussion in a more academic direction, consider pairing the comic with one of the following scholarly articles and supplemental questions.

- Hillary Chute, "Comics as literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (2008): 452-65.
    - In her article, Chute aims to redefine comics for future academic study. Focusing specifically on autobiographical graphic narratives, Chute asks important questions that define her study of comics and offers important thoughts about the form's ability to document: "What is the texture of narrative forms that are relevant to ethical representations of history? What are the current stakes surrounding the right to show and to tell history? What are the risks of representation? How do people understand their lives through narrative design and render the difficult processes of memory intelligible?" (p. 462).
    - How do Chute's questions expand upon the ideas McCloud offers in his work? How do her questions about documentation offer insight into the idea of representation in comics? Is there a particular ethics to the drawn image that we should recognize?

- Thierry Groensteen, "Definitions," in *The French Comics Theory Reader,* eds. Ann Miller and Bart Beaty (Leuven University Press, Belgium, 2014), 93-114.
    - Thierry Groensteen considers the way that comics as a medium is not defined by any particular technology as he argues, "unlike cinema, [comics] does not use any technology that is specific to it as a medium. As we have written elsewhere, comics is not a technique but consists instead in a certain procedure, an original way of using images and text and creating interplay between them. This difference renders the question of origins far more complex: do we know whether it is in fact possible to put a date on this procedure and to give it a birth certificate at some point in the long history of narrative images?" (p. 103).
    - Groensteen illuminates the important point that comics is not limited to any particular technology such as pen and paper unlike other media which cannot be transferred as easily. Film cannot be made without a camera of some sort, but comics can be made with a camera. How do we know when something is comics? What is it about the form that it is so easily transferrable?

- W. J. T. Mitchell and Art Spiegelman, "Public Conversation: What the %$#! Happened to Comics? May 19, 2012," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2014): 20-35.
    - Referring to the idea that cartooning exists somewhere between stereotype and caricature, Art Spiegelman notes, "I think that cartooning works between those two zones. It could just work with stereotype without working with caricature. But it can't work without the stereotype. It needs to have that aspect to it. Stereotyping is literally how things get copied and printed, and we're talking about a medium that traffics through that and in that. But I would say even here, one of the dangers in caricature is you move from a type toward making a statement about a type when you do it" (p. 27).
    - How does the cartoon function between stereotype and caricature? How does Spiegelman's suggestion help us to think about the uses of the cartoon?

Figure 3 *Understanding Comics,* p. 66.

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit.

- TED, **"Scott McCloud: *Understanding Comics*."** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXYckRgsdjI)
- Harvard University, **"A Conversation with Scott McCloud."** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=044MART1uOM)
- Small Press Expo, **"SPX 2015 Panel - SPX Spotlight on Scott McCloud."** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIQgG5FpDr0)
- WGBH Forum, **"Scott McCloud Discusses the Making of *The Sculptor*."** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P46qJVKxGo8)

Further Reading

If you are interested in other works by Scott McCloud:

- *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form* (William Morrow, 2000)
- *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (William Morrow, 2006)
- *The Sculptor* (First Second, 2015)

If you are interested in other comics about comics:

- *Making Comics* by Lynda Barry (Drawn & Quarterly, 2019)
- *Comic Book History of Comics* Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey (IDW Publishing, 2017)
- *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis (Harvard University Press, 2015)

If you want to learn more about the medium of comics:

- *The Visual Language of Comics* by Neil Cohn (A&C Black, 2013)
- *Why Comics?* By Hillary Chute (Harper, 2017)
- *Experiencing Comics* by Rachelle Cruz (Cognella Academic Publishing, 2018)
- *Maximizing the Impact of Comics in Your Library* by Jack Phoenix (ABC-CLIO, 2020)