

This toolkit was created as part of the *Superman's Cleveland: Lineage and Legacy* celebration.

*Superman's Cleveland* honored the 85th anniversary of the creation of Superman by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938 in their hometown.

The program was organized by the Rust Belt Humanities Lab at Ursuline College and the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library with support from Ohio Humanities.

# Get Graphic! Toolkit

## *Action Comics*

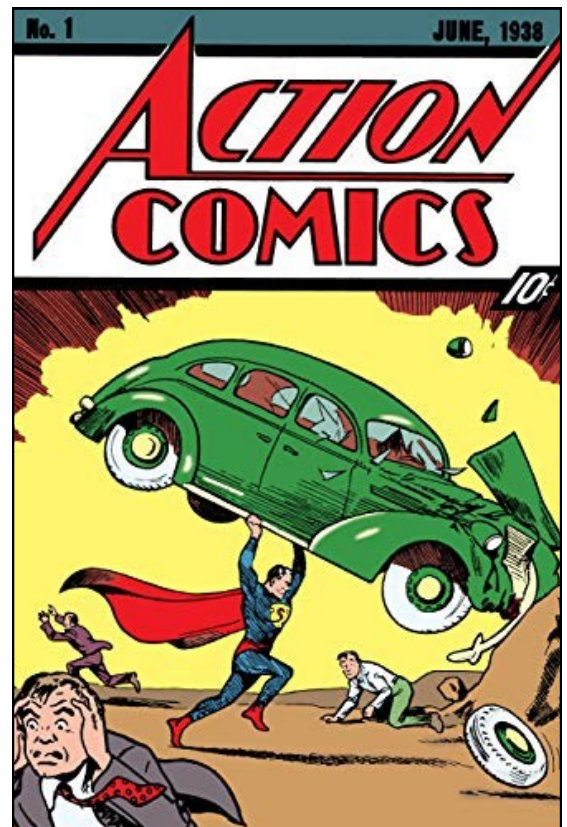
### By Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster

## About the comic

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Action Comics* #1 originated the superhero comics genre.

In that very first issue, Siegel and Shuster defined the genre itself as well as Superman's character for the next 85 years and beyond. His superhuman strength, his mission as the "Champion of the Oppressed," and his costumed identity are all established on the first page of *Action Comics* and further refined in that first year of stories.

In these issues, Superman takes on corrupt politicians, and coal barons and an automobile manufacturer well aware of the defects in their industries that are causing deaths. In the early issues of *Action Comics*, Superman, the "Champion of the Oppressed," is an agent of social reform who uses his powers to often punish the corrupt in power, not yet to stop supervillains. Issue #13 began a new era for the genre with the introduction of the first supervillain. These early issues also introduced classic characters that will define the Superman mythos, including Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen.



This readers toolkit focuses primarily on the first 13 issues of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Action Comics*, the most-often reprinted issues, and follows the first year of Superman's stories. Many of the questions here can be adapted and applied to that entire run.

# Who are Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster?

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster are most recognizable as the creators of Superman with the publication of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. The children of Jewish immigrants, Siegel and Shuster met at Glenville High School in Cleveland, Ohio. For years, they worked on the character who would become Superman. In addition to Superman, Siegel and Shuster also created Doctor Occult, Slam Bradley, and other characters.

Siegel and Shuster were inducted into the comic book industry's Will Eisner Comic Book Hall of Fame in 1992, the Jack Kirby Hall of Fame in 1993, and the Jewish-American Hall of Fame in 2021.

Siegel also co-created the long-running DC Comics character known as The Spectre as well as ten of the characters who would comprise the Legion of Super Heroes.

Joe Shuster died on July 30, 1992; and Jerry Siegel passed away on January 28, 1996. Both men have become established in the pantheon of comics creators.

## Themes

**There are several themes throughout the book that can help frame your discussions:**

- **Social Reform** — Rather than fight supervillains, Superman takes on corrupt coal barons, politicians, and car manufacturers in his early adventures. He fights for social reform in these early issues, and this theme is one way to frame the stories.
- **Journalism** — One of the defining characteristics of these stories is the role journalism plays, and not only in the life of Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent. Siegel and Shuster themselves both worked for *The Glenville Torch* in high school, and their interest in journalism pervades these stories and can be threaded through the discussion of these plotlines.
- **Birth of the superhero** — With the publication of *Action Comics* #1, Siegel and Shuster established a new genre. One way to organize the discussion is how these stories established the tenets of the superhero genre which became popular across comics, television, movies, and other media.
- **The immigrant experience** — Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both the children of Jewish immigrants. Superman's origin story is that of a literal alien who finds a future on a new world. One frame to understand this story then is as a metaphor for the immigrant experience.



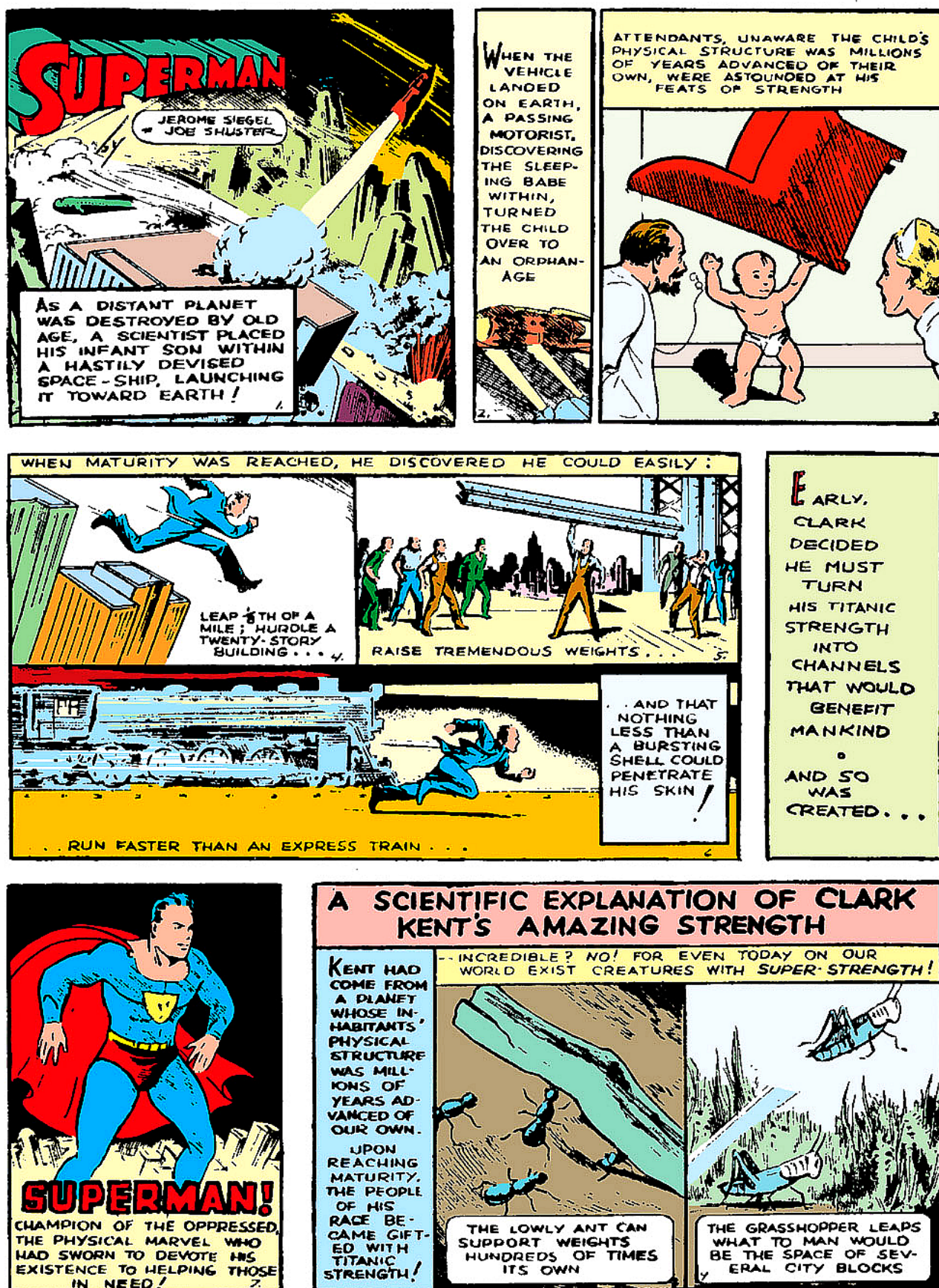


Figure 1. Action Comics #1 . p. 1 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. ©DC Comics

# Questions for Discussion

1. On the very first page of *Action Comics* #1 (Fig. 1), Siegel and Shuster define the key elements of the superhero, including the introduction of his mission, his powers, and his costumed identity. What other elements of Superman as a character and the superhero genre itself are defined in these first issues?
2. The first page of *Action Comics* #1 demonstrates one of the greatest elements of the comics medium: its ability to compress storytelling. Siegel and Shuster define a character and genre in a single page. Throughout their stories, Siegel and Shuster lean into this power of comics. Discuss how they specifically use the comics medium to tell their stories.
3. There are no supervillains in the first 12 issues of *Action Comics*. Superman instead addresses everyday human corruption. How does this focus change how we see the role of the superhero?
4. In *Action Comics* #3, Superman takes on a corrupt coal baron who has ignored safety protocols, an unlikely villain today as superheroes rarely address such societal concerns. Why do you think superhero comics have strayed from this social commentary? Why do you think Siegel and Shuster imagined this as the role of the superhero, and why did they shift to supervillains?
5. In issue #10 of *Action Comics*, Superman documents the abuse of prisoners with photographs and eventually obtains a confession from the warden. How does the story make an argument for the power of journalism even when superhuman power is available?
6. At times in these early issues, Superman sometimes acts more like a vigilante than the “boy scout” we know today. For example, in *Action Comics* issue #12, he tears down the automobile manufacturer who is producing faulty cars. Can you imagine the character acting this way today? What do you think of this approach for Superman?
7. In issue #13, we are introduced to the first true supervillain, The Ultra-Humanite (Fig. 2). How does the superhero story and the genre change with the introduction of the first supervillain?
8. What elements of the supervillain do we see defined in issue #13 of *Action Comics*? How has the supervillain as a character type evolved?
9. How does Clark Kent/Superman’s character evolve over the course of the first year of *Action Comics*? What elements of the character are still visible today? In what ways has he changed?
10. Along with Superman/Clark Kent, Siegel and Shuster also introduce Lois Lane in the first issue. How does their version of Lois Lane compare to other versions of the character you have come to know? How do other characters introduced in these issues compare to their counterparts today?
11. Superman’s story is one of hope. The stories of Siegel and Shuster were written and published during the Great Depression in Cleveland. How does The Depression figure into these stories? How do you think it influenced these stories?
12. Jerry Siegel were the children of Jewish immigrants. In what ways do you see the influence of the Jewish/immigrant experience? In what ways do you see these comics documenting and addressing the horrors of the war in Europe before the United States entered the war?



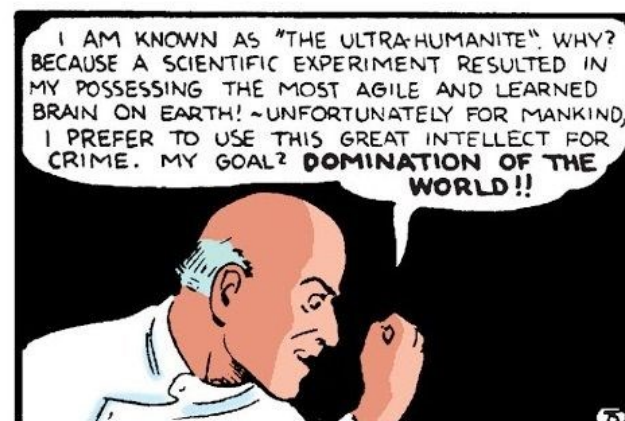
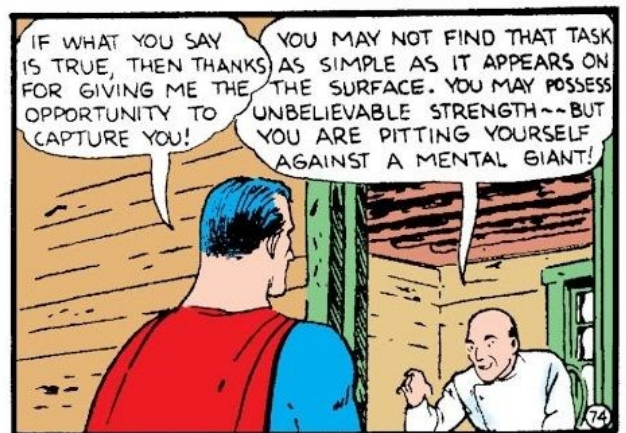
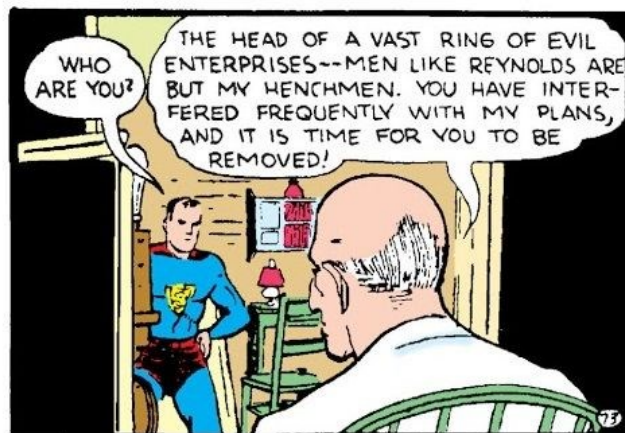
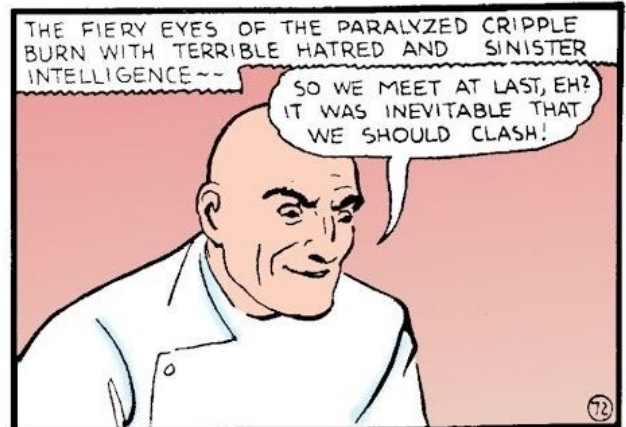
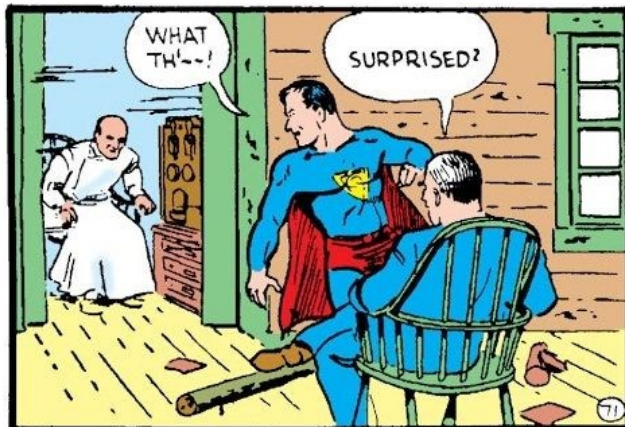
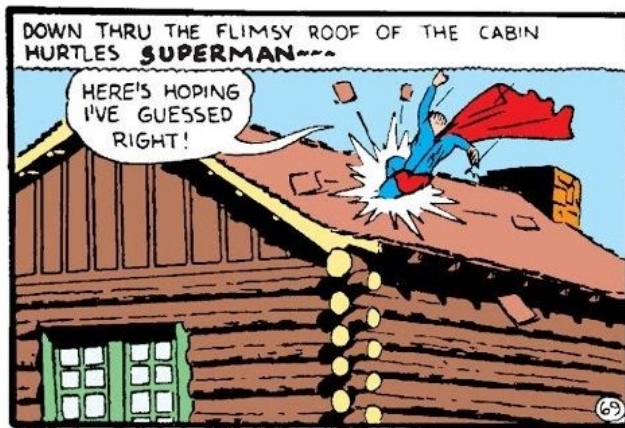


Figure 2. Action Comics #13 . p. 1 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. ©DC Comics

# Further Supplemental Materials

## Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

### Books

- Ian Gordon, *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (Rutgers University Press, 2017)
- Edward Gross, ed. *Voices from Krypton: The Complete, Unauthorized Oral History of Superman*. Foreword by Brandon Routh. Afterword by Mark Waid (Nacelle Books, 2023)
- Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster — The Creators of Superman* (St. Martin's Press, 2013)
- Roy Schwartz, *Is Superman Circumcised?: The Complete Jewish History of the World's Greatest Hero* (McFarland, 2021)

### Article

- Samantha Baskind, "Plain Dealing Women: Lois Lane and the Origin of the Comic Book Heroine — A Conversation with Laura Siegel Larson" (*Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 2018)
  - Link: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21504857.2018.1540131>

### Videos

- *It's A Bird, It's A Plane: Honoring The Creators of Superman* (The Jewish-American Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, 2021):
  - Link: <https://youtu.be/FyOmqiQM0dY?si=8mpNhqzvPEeHGuHu>
- Mark Waid, ""Superman, Superman's Legacy, and Why - Especially Now - Superman Matters."
  - Link: <https://youtu.be/oKI0bVxsSJA?si=M32PlqyeNbSIODyz>

# Further Reading

## If you are interested in other interpretations of Superman's origin story:

- *Superman For All Seasons* by Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale
- *Superman: Birthright* by Mark Waid and Leinil Francis Yu
- *All-Star Superman* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely

## If you are interested in contemporary Superman stories:

- *Superman Smashes the Klan* by Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru
- *Superman: The Harvests of Youth* by Sina Grace
- *Superman: The Warworld Saga* by Phillip Kennedy Johnson and various artists

## If you are interested in reading books about other characters from the Superman Mythos

- *Supergirl: Being Super* by Mariko Tamaki and Joelle Jones
- *Superman: Son of Kal-El* by Tom Taylor and John Timms
- *Girl Taking Over: A Lois Lane Story* by Sarah Kuhn and Arielle Jovellanos