

Comics: Use for Practice and Review

By Cynthia McFadden

Cynthia McFadden, a retired teacher, says that comics provide high interest, illustrated short stories for students to practice and review what they've learned. She develops five multiple-choice questions for students to answer about specific comics and supports students with definitions and/or models that serve as background and reference. Teachers (and/or students) can also write multiple-choice questions similar to Cynthia's about specific comics. Examples are provided.

Choosing comics allows teachers to vary text complexity. Some comics are more difficult to grasp because readers need to understand history, philosophy, literature and/or current events.

Teachers will want to review comics and use first the cartoons and comics that students will immediately understand and develop their ability to understand more difficult cartoons and/or comics. The humor may be difficult to grasp in some cartoons or comics and lead to "collaborative conversations" (Speaking & Listening, CCSS).

McFadden reviewed North Carolina newspapers in print and found the following comics appear in numerous editions: *B.C.*, *Baby Blues*, *Beetle Bailey*, *Blondie*, *Born Loser*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Dilbert*, *Family Circus*, *For Better or Worse*, *Frank and Ernest*, *Garfield*, *Get Fuzzy*, *Mutts*, *Peanuts*, *Pearls Before Swine* and *Zits*. Other comics appear in newspapers. Check your area newspapers to find if any publish comics and which comics they publish. Base questions on the widely-distributed cartoons and comics that appear in your newspapers. Encourage students to share favorites with their parents and friends.

"Comic strips provide material to keep literary skills on front burner. A single strip with a question keeps kids' skills sharp. Teachers can adapt the format/idea of using comics to satisfy class needs."-Cynthia McFadden

How to Use Comics

McFadden includes SUPPORT or definitions/ examples of only the terms used in the five questions she writes. In one, she defines INFERENCE. Then she requires students to make “inferences.” She lists five comic strips, creates four choices (A-D) under each strip and asks: What can the reader infer from Y comic strip? Similarly, she might ask readers to identify comparisons (similes and/or metaphors) in five strips.

LITERARY TERMS (the language of literature)

A glossary of literary terms can also be used as SUPPORT for questions that require students to find examples: <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/reading-writing/online/lit-terms.html>

SUPPORT for questions about literary terms:

- Hyperbole – exaggeration
- Irony – what is said and what is meant differ or how things look and how they are differ; contradictions
- Onomatopoeia – word sounds that express an idea, such as **BUZZZ**
- Metaphor—comparison using “to be” form of verb that states or implies that two people, places, things, events are the same or similar
- Parody – a copy that makes fun of or imitation for comic effect
- Pun – use of words/terms that have more than one meaning/ interpretation
- Simile – comparisons that use ‘like,’ ‘as’ or ‘as if’

QUESTIONS:

1. Which literary device has the X cartoonist in Y comic used to create humor?
2. Which type of figurative language did the cartoonist use to make the strip humorous?
3. What is the purpose of the simile (or metaphor) in Y strip?
4. What best describes the irony in Y comic?
5. Which cartoonist uses hyperbole?
6. What play on words or “pun” did the cartoonist in Y strip use?
7. Which literary device has the cartoonist used to create humor?
8. Which literacy device does Y strip use most effectively?
9. What is the purpose of the simile (metaphor or other device) used in Y strip?
10. Which strip uses word sounds or onomatopoeia?

MESSAGES and MEANING

SUPPORT for getting the meaning or “gist” and/or interpreting comics

- **Allusion or shared prior knowledge**—information that the reader shares with the writer or speaker. In the case of comics, if the ‘audience’ does not share background information with the cartoonist, the message will not be communicated effectively. In other words, the comics will not be ‘funny’ or ‘meaningful’ if the cartoonist and readers do not ‘share’ prior knowledge. Discussions become “teachable moments” when teachers and students share what they know about the subjects in comics.
- **Comparison**-an explanation of how things are alike and/or different
- **Inference** – reading between the lines, understanding what is not specifically said/written but is understood to be a part of meaning.
- **Main idea**— overall idea, the central thought; sentence that tells what text is about; not a lengthy retelling, detail or series of details
- **Mood** – the feeling the reader/audience takes from the story
- **Tone** – the feeling the author sends to the reader/audience

QUESTIONS:

1. What is the main idea?
2. What is cartoonist’s message or lesson?
3. What or who is taking up most of the character’s time (or attention)?
4. What can the reader infer from the cartoon or comic?
5. What can the reader understand that is not directly said?
6. What must the reader infer to “get” the cartoonist’s message?
7. How does the cartoonist share his thinking without using words?
8. Would you understand the cartoon’s meaning without the words?
9. What must the reader understand in order to appreciate the humor in a specific strip?
10. What prior knowledge does the reader need to understand the humor in Y strip?
11. What experience does the reader need to have to understand what the cartoonist’s saying?
12. What knowledge must the reader and cartoonist share in order for the reader to understand the comic or cartoon?
13. What must the reader understand to appreciate the humor in the strip?
14. How are Y and Z strips similar and/or different?
15. What does the cartoonist (author) think about the subject or character in Y cartoon or comic strip?
16. What is the mood of Y cartoon or comic strip?
17. What tone does the cartoonist convey in Y cartoon or comic strip?

18. Which word or phrase best describes the feeling that X and/or Y characters are expressing?
19. Which word or phrase best describes X character's behavior in Y strip?
20. What's the cartoonist's purpose? Consider today's cartoon or comic strip, then review comics published over a period of time.
21. Comic characters are not real, but their stories and their meaning appear true. What is fictional about Y strip? What is true to life about Y strip? How is the strip similar to and/or different from real life (consider characters, plot, setting, action, lesson or message)?
22. What conclusion or generalization can be drawn from Y strip about ...?

WORD STUDY/ LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS:

Use comics for word study or for mini-lessons on language conventions. For example, B.C. is the abbreviation for the time "Before Christ." Sample questions follow:

1. In Y strip, which word in Y strip expresses action?
2. Which strips contain unfamiliar words? Can you figure out their meaning from their use in the cartoon or comic (context)?
3. What is the purpose of the apostrophe (or other punctuation) used in the X frame of Y strip?