

**THIS GUIDE CONTAINS:**

- 3 lesson plans
- Link to exhaustive resource list for PreK-12 and adults
- Additional Recommended Resources

**TIME FRAME:**

- 2-3 class sessions

**TARGET AGE:**

- Grades 5-8

**DISCIPLINE:**

- LANGUAGE ARTS

**A Study Guide from  
Chicago Humanities Festival  
2009 SUMMER INSTITUTE  
FOR TEACHERS**

**GRAPHIC NOVEL/COMICS**  
*with Josh Elder*



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JOSH ELDER is the author of the graphic novel *Mail Order Ninja*, winner of the 2005 grand prize in Tokyopop's Rising Stars of Manga contest. *Mail Order Ninja* was soon picked up as a syndicated comic strip in over forty-five newspapers, including the *LA Times*, *Denver Post*, and *The Boston Globe*. Elder serves as the director of operations for Kids Love Comics, a non-profit organization promoting literacy, and is the executive director of Reading with Pictures, an organization dedicated to bringing comics into the classroom.

**What if comics didn't rot your brain? What if they could actually help kids learn to READ???**

JOSH ELDER is a champion for the increased use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom. He offers anecdotal evidence about the benefits of using this type of mixed-media, especially with struggling readers. (The statistical evidence is forthcoming. Stay tuned to Reading with Pictures, <http://www.readingwithpictures.org>.) According to Elder, much of the power in graphic novels happens in between frames and the story lives in the imagination of the reader as he or she connects the pictures that only tell part of the story. This desire to know more of the story also enhances a reader's desire to read. If they are intrigued by the pictures, they will want to know what the text means as well. Additionally, English Language Learners can benefit from the visual representation of the language that they are still learning. Finally, Elder offers activities for fledgling comics writers and for the uses of graphic novels with higher-achieving students.

## **#1 BASICS OF ILLUSTRATION: COMMUNICATING THROUGH SYMBOLS**

**PURPOSE:** This exercise is an opportunity for students to practice and discuss how to communicate emotion in a purely visual way.

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

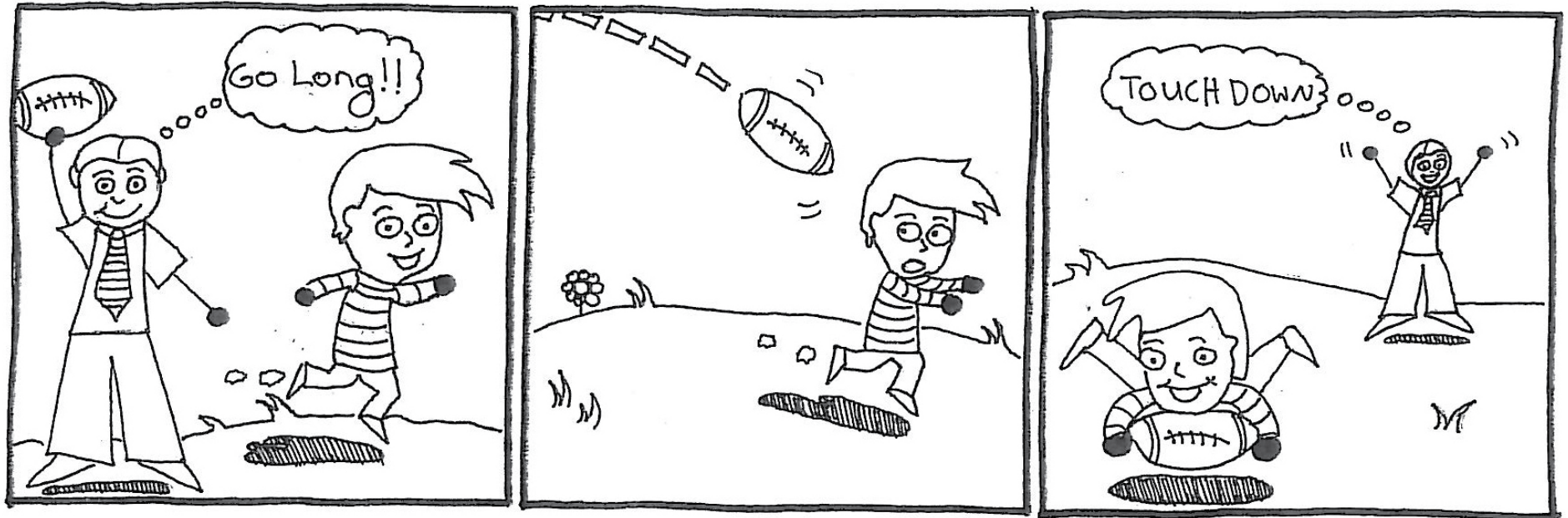
- Have students select a slip of paper from a bucket or hat that has an emotion written on it.
- Assign students the task of quickly but effectively drawing a face that conveys that emotion without using words.
- Have students share these drawings to see if their classmates can correctly identify the emotion.
- Discuss what made these symbols easy or challenging to interpret.

Students should be successful when guessing the emotion, or at least offer similar types of emotions as guesses, but they are also likely to have drawn figures that look nothing like what actual human faces look like. This ability to make symbolic associations is good fodder for discussion, and it is also key to understanding how reading works. Words are a different form of symbolism, but they still accomplish the same goal.

## **SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS (SIT)**

Each year, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers the Summer Institute for Teachers (SIT). This three-day workshop is designed for educators interested in personal and professional growth with lectures, workshops, and discussions from presenters who work in professional fields related to the yearly topic. The 2009 SIT theme was Creative Writing: Innovative Approaches to Writing & Reading in the Classroom. Presenters included cin salach on POETRY, Lawrence Weschler on NARRATIVE NON-FICTION, Stuart Flack on PLAYWRITING, Josh Elder on GRAPHIC NOVELS, Natalie Moore on JOURNALISM, and Bayo Ojikutu on FICTION.

The following lesson plan and comprehensive bibliography were developed by SIT's Master Teacher, Greg Wright, from Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, and CHF staff based on Mr. Elder's presentation at the 2009 Summer Institute for Teachers.



## #2 THE THREE-PANEL COMIC

**PURPOSE:** This activity will give students a basic understanding of what goes into creating a comic and is an effective tool for teaching the fundamentals of the narrative arc. The three-panel comic is similar to plot maps or mountains that start with exposition, build a conflict up to a climax, and then end with resolution. (See example above.) Students who understand the three-panel comic should be able to shift that knowledge to other forms of reading. Also, it may help them to plan out stories that they write themselves.

### INSTRUCTIONS:

- Have students get out a piece of paper that they section off into a three-panel comic (three boxes side-by-side).
- Explain the purpose of each box in a comic. The first box is the exposition box, establishing the scene and who is participating in it. The

second box is the conflict box, where some action with uncertain results should take place. The third box is the resolution box, where the reader understands the results of the action from box two.

- Have students illustrate their own three-panel comic.
- Have volunteers put their comics on the board to share with the class.
- Let the class interpret the comic without assistance from the author and discuss the results.

### ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, to enjoy, and to support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities—at a low ticket price—depends in part on the generosity of its committed and enthusiastic supporters. [www.chicagohumanities.org](http://www.chicagohumanities.org)

### #3 INSTRUCTIONAL WRITING

**PURPOSE:** This exercise emphasizes the need for clarity in writing. If students' directions are unclear, they are not likely to get a final product that resembles the image they had in mind when creating the piece. Students who give clear and detailed directions are more likely to get back what they had envisioned. This activity also teaches instructional/technical writing, which is a common type of writing required by the workforce even though it is less frequently taught in schools than argumentative or narrative writing.

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

- Show students [this sample](#) of what a graphic novel or comics looks like after the author has written it but before the illustrator has begun to work. This product is similar to a film script in that it is largely explanations of how each frame should look.
- Then show students [this excerpt](#) from Chapter 1 of Elder's acclaimed graphic novel for 'tweens, *Mail Order Ninja*.
- Have students discuss: compare and contrast the original "script" and the final product.
- Now, have students plan out their own comic book and write out instructions for each page and panel.
- Have students exchange their instructions with another student who becomes their illustrator.
- Have the students illustrate their graphic novels based solely on the instructions given to them by the author.
- Pass the finished product back to the original author to see if the final product turned out how they imagined it to be.

**TAKING IT FURTHER:** This activity could be a one- or two-day lesson or it could be a more major project depending on the amount of time teachers want to spend on this type of writing. Teachers who would like to make true comics or graphic novels rather than shortened versions may want to consider making this an interdisciplinary activity, teaching it collaboratively between classes, where English students write the directions or storyline and then hand off to art students to illustrate.

#### WORKS CITED

Elder, Josh. *Mail Order Ninja*. Los Angeles: TokyoPop, 2005.

#### GLOSSARY AND RESOURCES SPECIFIC TO COMICS

Click [here](#) for Josh Elder's Lexicon and comprehensive list of online, and software resources and recommended reading for ages 4 - 18 and adults.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1986, 2005.

Lamott, Annie. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

Lerman, Liz and John Borstel. *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*. Available at: <http://www.danceexchange.org/performance/criticalresponse.html>.

McSweeney's, especially [Issue #31](#) (March 2009) on Form.

Postman, Neil, "Future Schlock" from *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 162-174.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Reading with Pictures:

[www.readingwithpictures.org](http://www.readingwithpictures.org)

Reading With Pictures is a nonprofit organization that advocates the use of comics in the classroom to promote literacy and improve educational outcomes for all students.

Teachers and Writers Collaborative:

[www.twc.org](http://www.twc.org)

Teachers & Writers Collaborative (T&W) seeks to educate the imagination by offering innovative creative writing programs for students and teachers, and by providing a variety of publications and resources to support learning through the literary arts.