Comics Workshop Exercises

This is a small collection of quick exercises for any comics workshop or program. These are primarily based on the "Teaching Comics" section of the Center for Cartoon Studies website and Lynda Barry's book *Making Comics.* Feel free to add more exercises from these resources (or your own) and change them to fit what you need. The times chosen were for an hour presentation, so I suggest adding more time for each one if you can spare it. Each exercise is timed and very quick, so there are no masterpieces here—these are primarily meant to be warm-ups and ways to generate ideas. The exercises below are generally intended for teens and up, but they can be adapted or simplified for younger age groups.

Exercise 1: Characters from Memory – 2 Minutes

*Can you picture a well-known character or recognize them when you see them?*

Try to draw a famous cartoon character from memory with no references in just 2 minutes. Resist the urge to Google or make a stick figure!

Need some ideas? Try:

- Batman
- Charlie Brown
- Garfield
- Mickey Mouse
- SpongeBob

Why This Exercise: There are certain traits that make a character recognizable, no matter how "poorly" they are drawn or if we don't have a reference to copy from. This is something to consider when making your own characters—how do they stand out from any other character? What do you picture when you think of this character in the simplest terms? Try to guess which characters everyone had drawn and what features tell us it's that specific character (and no one else).
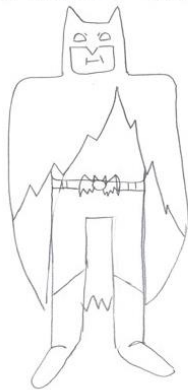

Exercise 2: Quick Characters - ~3 Minutes

What's makes a character that character? Is it their hair, their clothing? How are they unique?

Now divide another piece paper into six sections as evenly as you can.

In the first box, draw the same character in just 60 seconds. Again, try to avoid stick figures!

We'll continue with 45, 30, 20, 10, and 5 seconds.

Why This Exercise: Like the last exercise, there will always be certain features that help us recognize a character. As you draw more quickly and simplify your character, the less important details begin to fade away with each time decrease. How far is it until the character is no longer recognizable? What features stay in each iteration of your character? If you had to do it again, what would you keep/change? This same idea can be applied to making your own characters—if they simplified or far away (smaller) in a particular scene, how could you recognize them over another character?
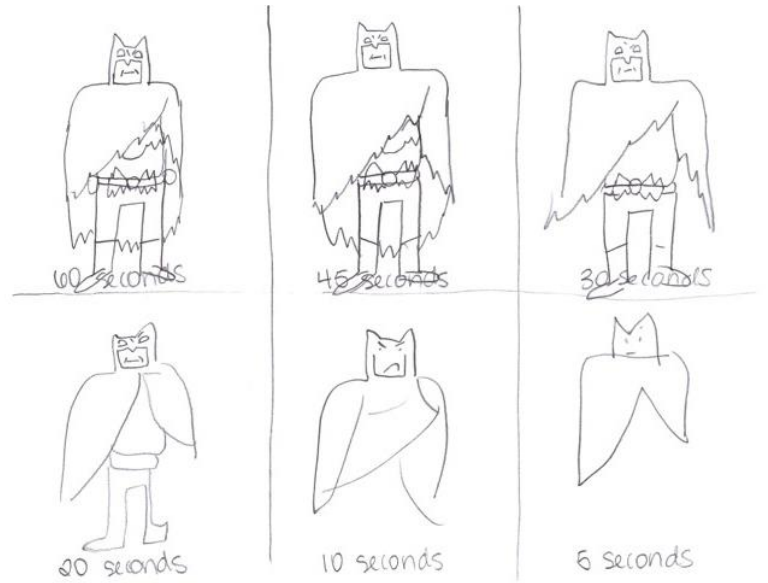
Exercise 3: The Passage of Time – 6 Minutes

You can show a passage of time with different kinds of transitions. The time might be seconds or years between two panels!

Draw a simplified comic strip showing a person doing an everyday task, broken down into individual steps. Don't use any words! You can use stick figures and any number of panels in just 6 minutes.

Need ideas? Try:

- Getting in the car
- Getting up for school
- Changing a lightbulb
- Making a sandwich
- Tying shoes

Why This Exercise: Comics are used to convey some sort of information or story—this can be anything from a *Peanuts* comic strip or emergency instructions on an airline. In this way, comics can be quite similar to graphic design in that they are a form of visual communication. If you are only using images (no words), it is vital to simplify and be direct in order to be easily understood. How simplified can you make something without its meaning being lost? How can you show a simple action without it getting confused with something else?

Editing your comic is another aspect of this exercise. The gutter works its magic and we are able to tie the moments together into one coherent story. What do you leave in or take out in a sequence to get the same idea across? How does each moment change the story? What steps are you implying happened in between each scene? How quickly do you transition between each moment (seconds, a minute, an hour)? Once everyone has gotten a chance to finish, what would they change to make their comic clearer?

Passage of Time - changing a lightbulb
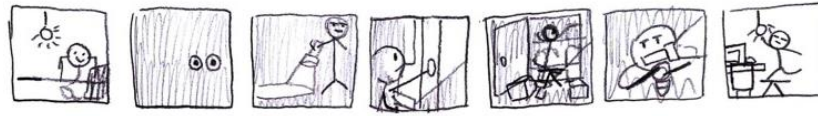
Exercise 4: Character, Place, Situation - 6 Minutes

Adding the element of randomness can help with generating ideas—or just warming up.

We're going to randomly select a type of character, place, and situation. Your character doesn't have to be human or an animal.

Take 6 minutes to make a three-panel comic. Try to avoid stick figures as much as possible!

Why This Exercise: This exercise is useful for those who are out of ideas or nervous about putting pencil to paper. Because it is so quickly paced, and the basic ideas are already decided, there is little to do but get started and draw. Everything is chosen at random, so there are often silly and spontaneous results. The comic doesn't have to be "good" or exciting, and isn't meant to be, but it gets you thinking about how to connect these different ideas together into a (somewhat) coherent story. Is there a conflict or problem in the story? Is there a resolution? Where and why is this happening? What other directions could this story go or what happened before this occurred? What do we learn about the character(s), even in this small amount of time?

At the end of this document is a list of ideas that can be used for this exercise. You can print or write down these items on strips of paper to draw at random. You could also code a random prompt generator or use an online random number generator to choose items from the list.

Character, Place, Situation
(cat) (Library) (Honeymoon)

Exercise 5: Making a Lifetime... in 8 Minutes! - 8 Minutes

Let's take some time to explore the same character in the previous exercise.

Divide a new piece of paper into four sections as evenly as you can. (NOTE: This exercise can be easily made into six sections, expanding the number of moments seen in this character's life.)

In the first box, draw your character as a newborn in a certain setting. Where was this? Who was there? You have 2 minutes!

In the last box, draw the character at the end of their living days. They lived to be old. Who's there? What is happening? You have 2 minutes!

In the third box, draw your character as an adult in the prime of their life or middle-aged at work. How are they feeling? What are they doing? You have 2 minutes!

In the second box, draw your character as a young child or teen engaged in an activity. Are they happy? What did you do as a kid or a teen? You have 2 minutes!

Why This Exercise: This exercise focuses more on developing characters (whereas the previous exercise is more about story). A key part of this exercise is that each moment of this character's life is created out of order—this method helps to make more spontaneity and make the end result a little more unexpected. Again, this comic doesn't need to be exciting, but it helps to practice connecting ideas together. How does this character change (or stay the same) over time? Are there any big moments or decisions that shaped their life? What in their people or places impacted them? How are they feeling in each moment? Could we guess what happens in between these moments? Does the previous exercise's situation fit in to this timeline, and if so, when did it happen?
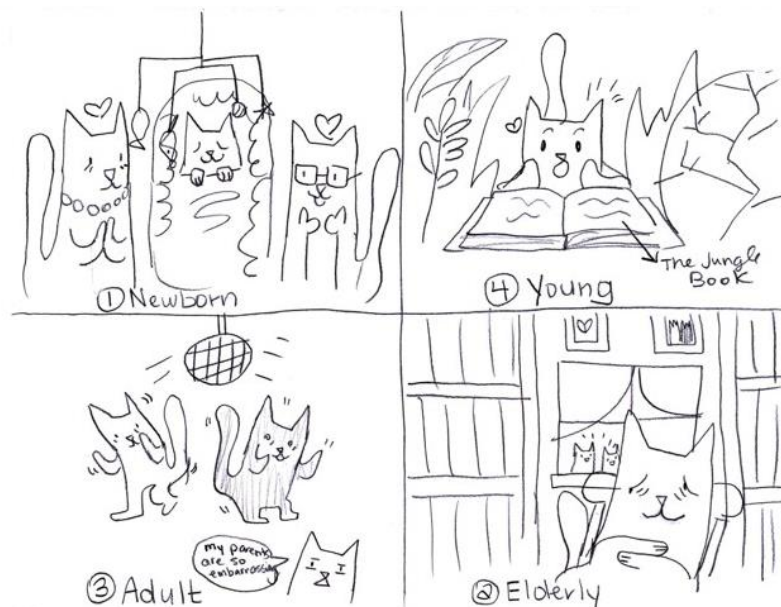
Character, Place, Situation List

Character

1. Susan
2. Dinosaur
3. Cowboy/Cowgirl
4. Alien
5. Dog
6. Cat
7. A Couple
8. Cook
9. Ghost
10. Fred

11. Dancer
12. Bird Trainer
13. Singer/Musician
14. Mr./Mrs. Wellington
15. Dr. Robert
16. Park Ranger
17. Robber
18. Therapist
19. Siblings
20. Librarian

Place

1. The Zoo
2. The Moon
3. The Kitchen
4. Convenience Store
5. The Beach
6. Gym Class
7. The Bathroom
8. Fast Food Restaurant
9. Classroom
10. Doctor's Office
11. Busy City Street
12. The Countryside
13. Ye Olden Days
14. Caveman Age
15. The Playground
16. The Library
17. In a Tree
18. Inside the Earth
19. Haunted House
20. The Ocean

Situation

1. An Argument
2. A Romantic Breakup
3. A Revelation
4. A Confrontation
5. A Shopping Spree
6. A Honeymoon
7. Getting Fired
8. A Misunderstanding
9. A Love Triangle
10. An Accident
11. Embarrassment
12. Losing One's Temper

13. A Getaway
14. Getting Caught
15. Falling Asleep
16. Getting Stuck
17. Success
18. Failure
19. A Nice Dinner
20. Charity/Giving