

Conceived by PETER GUTIÉRREZ
(NCTE Spokesperson on
Graphic Novels)



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**READING COMICS ALOUD TO KIDS:
10 STRATEGIES THAT ENHANCE LITERACY**



Nothing would appear to be simpler or more intuitive than reading a comic aloud to children. Just pick it up and dig right in, doing all the funny voices, hamming it up as necessary, and adding extra oomph to the sound effects as you see fit. And guess what—that’s pretty much all there is to it. You’ll have a great time, so will the kids, and maybe they’ll even be inspired to keep reading on their own.

But, hey, are you interested in making the experience even more of a literacy-builder? And possibly doing so in a kind of stealth mode to which kids won’t object? Great, because here are some tips and techniques I’ve picked up as both a teacher and a dad:

- 1. Find the right book.** There are plenty of quality, digest-sized comics published for kids—but these are not optimal for read-alouds. No comic is, actually, if the lettering or panels are too small. Sure, kids will still be able to enjoy the narrative but they won’t be able to follow your reading process as an act of decoding and navigating text as well.
- 2. Use a finger to guide kids to follow your place in the text.** This is arguably more important in comics than in prose, including picture books. That’s because comics tell stories in small, discrete increments where the art, which is integral, changes with every panel. If you don’t focus a child’s attention, it can wander over an entire spread while you keep reading, essentially changing your words into a half-listened-to audio track. While guiding young eyes like this, take care not to cover any art that needs to be seen, such as the characters or their facial expressions. Here’s what I’ve found works: keeping a fingertip at the bottom of the speaking character. One happy result of this technique is that your wrist or arm can cover the panels to come, helping your audience focus on the text at hand and preventing scanning ahead.
- 3. Linger on silent panels.** The temptation, especially for kids, is to do the opposite. A silent panel can seem like filler, something to skip over until the action picks up again. But it’s really an opportunity for you to pause and ask a question or two. For a younger child this might be, “What’s happening here?” For a more experienced reader it might be, “Hmmm, why do you think this is silent? What idea or feeling is the writer trying to emphasize here?” Better yet, you might occasionally want to ask something like, “If there were a thought bubble for this panel, what would you put it in? What is the character thinking here?”

(Continued overleaf)

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4. **Pause before page-flips.** Often creators will structure narratives so that this natural break introduces a reveal or a particularly dramatic moment. That’s why they’re great for practicing the comprehension strategy of making predictions. “What do you think will happen next? What do you think we’ll see when we turn the page?”
5. **Analyze splash pages and double-splashes visually.** Often there’s not a huge amount of text on such pages, so as adults we want to move ahead to where the substance of the story resumes. But let’s not be in such a rush. Kids love to examine large tableaux for details—think *Where’s Waldo?* The trick is to connect visual literacy back to more conventional story elements such as setting. “Wow, this is some picture—what kind of place is this? What are your clues? What kind of feeling does the atmosphere create, in the characters or in you?”
6. **Prompt kids to participate at least once every couple of pages.** For example, when you come across a new character with a speaking part, stop and say something like this: “Hey, this guy is new. Have any ideas on the voice I should use for him? Why don’t you read this balloon here and give me a sense of how you think he should sound.” The idea is to treat a comic like a script, something to be performed, and to use the visuals and typography as stage and delivery directions for how it should be performed.
7. **Use sentence-starters and leading questions:** “It looks like they’re putting their eggs in a—what is that thing?” Or: “Here it appears that they’re boarding the ship to go to...?”
8. **Make sound effects an opportunity to reinforce phonics skills** since there is no semantic meaning to them. Where possible, get kids themselves to supply the sound effects. “Think you can handle all the explosions, weird laughs, and creaking doors?” Do you really think you’ll need to ask this question twice?
9. **Be on the lookout for challenging vocabulary.** Kids have a tendency to gloss over such text and instead rely on the art to make sense of a story. Turn this coping strategy on its head by coaching kids to use the visuals as context clues to figure out the meanings of unknown words and phrases.
10. **Reinforce the comprehension strategy of making inferences.** This is a big one. Comics require readers to make inferences within panels and, à la Scott McCloud, between panels in what are called the “gutters.” It’s your job to make sure that some of the subtlety in characterization or storytelling doesn’t get lost in kids. So, without overdoing it, pause briefly to say things like, “Wait, why is she doing this now? What’s on her mind?” Above all, keep these interactions brief—you don’t want to spoil the pacing of the story or make kids “pop out” of the experience and feel like they’re being assessed rather than being entertained.

Well, that’s it. Now go find a kid or two and read to them!



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