I love what comics can do for kids. I’ve seen reluctant readers introduced to the joy of books by way of comics. I watched a teen develop an abiding interest in history via Larry Gonick’s *Cartoon History of the Universe*. I’ve seen hesitant writers become enthusiastic when their writing has a purpose - adding text by way of speech bubbles and captions to a comic. And I’ve seen school assignments brought to life when kids are encouraged to use a comic format to present information or demonstrate learning. While creating comics, children have opportunities to develop many creative and critical thinking skills - skills that are highly-prized by potential employers.

Since adults use online comic creators too, supervising kids is a must with some of the websites I share here.

In this booklet, I’ll introduce you to ways of making comics online, and suggest activities that will sneak lots of learning into the sheer fun of creating a comic. But first, turn the page to discover how comics can be used to cater for multiple intelligences, and read about my favourite comic creation software.

*The top two comics were made at ToonDoo. The image at lower right is a profile pic from Bitstrips.*
This great visual (left) from S Marek Bennett shows us that when creating comics, kids have opportunities to use their visual-spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical and naturalist intelligences. While comics and comic creation have been disregarded by many, I believe forward-thinking teachers and home-educators are turning to comics as a format that motivates children, is achievable, and helps develop many skills in an enjoyable way.

Find more educational resources on Marek’s website, Comics Workshop.

Comic Life Software, (Mac, Windows, iOS) made by Plasq is reasonably priced and versatile software. Basically, it allows you to choose from a range of templates, insert photos into each panel, then add captions and dialogue.

I love the potential for even more creativity with this form of digital storytelling. It allows kids to draw, scan and upload their own images, meaning their stories are not circumscribed by the limits of provided art work.

You can see a short Comic Life story made based on Mini-mizer characters at right.
How to Use Online Comic Editors

Most comic editors work roughly the same. You choose a template with one, two, three or more panels. Scroll through backgrounds, characters and props to choose the ones you want by clicking, or drag and drop. Once that's done, add speech bubbles and text, and captions if you want them. Some speech bubbles are editable. Others have text that needs to be added in a separate way.

Let’s look at the Boy's Life Comic Creator process, captured in the annotated image above. Kids can choose the character, Pedro, say, by clicking on Pedro. Next, they click the green arrows either side of the top left box to scroll through Pedro choices. Clicking again makes the chosen Pedro appear in the working screen, top right. The same process is followed to add speech bubbles and other elements. The vertical row of boxes is used to make minor adjustments.

Kids usually get the hang of an editor quickly, but it helps to have time to explore and play. I suggest having them look through the range of different elements the comic editor offers, before asking them to think of a story they can tell with one or more characters.

At right, I list some of my favourite ways for kids to make digital comics. However, if children are really interested in the art of comic creation, nothing beats pen and paper.

NOTE: Some websites require children to be 13+ to register and use their content. That makes it difficult for primary classrooms. But parents sharing comic editors with their own kids makes for a wonderful learning experience, and means they can monitor appropriate content.

Ways to Make Digital Comics

- Comic Life (software)
- ToonDoo (web-based)
- Creaza’s Cartoonist (web-based)
- Kerpoof (web-based)
- Bit Strips (web-based)
- StoryJumper (web-based)
- Make Beliefs Comix (web-based)
- Professor Garfield (web-based)
- Boy's Life Comic Creator (web-based)
- Myths and Legends (web-based)
- Ribbet (web-based image editor with speech bubbles, text and stickers you can add to your own images)
- Pizap (web-based image editor with backgrounds, character stickers, speech bubbles and text)
- Carnegie Library’s My Story Maker (web-based)
- DomoAnimate (web-based)
- StripCreator (web-based)
- Aven’s Corner (web-based/pre-school)
- Digger and the Gang
- Comic Master
- Pharaoh’s Quest (web-based LEGO)
- LEGO Hero Factory
I believe creating a story with a comic editor makes an excellent family project. Watching and listening to parents think their comic creation process aloud is a golden educational opportunity for pre-schoolers. When kids are old enough to write, they can take over more ownership of the comic creation process. Younger children will be most likely to use the comic as a way to tell a story. Simple narratives are an excellent way for kids to practise creating a beginning, middle and end to a story and using a logical sequence.

More ideas:

* Create a class comic book from individual class comic pages where kids use software or an online image editor to tell about themselves.

* Write a book review or give feedback about an excursion using a comic template. Kids can draw favourite scenes as illustrations, or find CC licensed images that help illustrate what they want to say.

* Create a story about a cartoon character a child has drawn, or choose characters from clipart of comic editors. Tell the story in a four or five frame comic template. Another idea is to create a story about a child’s toy, set up individual scenes with the toy, then use your camera to grab the scenes. You can read more about this process in Visual Story Telling.

* Create a record of just about anything! If you’ve just had a 5 year-old birthday party and you took lots of pics, consider creating a cartoon using some of the images. It’s a wonderful activity to share, helping kids to learn all sorts of things with you. And it makes a great souvenir of the party to send to attendees. Or use some of those pictures kids snapped on a recent class excursion to make a class comic to remember the event.

* If your kids are learning about information texts, have them develop an instruction manual and use a comic editor to publish it eg Comic Life. They can share how to play a sport, tie a shoelace, look after lizards, bake cupcakes etc. If you’re looking for models to inspire the kids, check out Howtoons which has great visuals.

* Research a topic and present key facts in the form of a comic or poster or little magazine. Add speech bubbles and text via an online image editor or photo software. Toon Doo Book Maker lets kids compile individual comics into a book.

* Fracture a fairy tale and make a digital story of it. Creaza is particularly good for this as it has "worlds" of fairytale settings eg Billy Goats Gruff and Red Riding Hood.

* Use a comic template of four or six frames to describe the life cycle of something.

* Practise writing in your own or another's language. Use the comic format to focus on dialogue and vocabulary. Inventing characters and a story gives context and enjoyment to memorising vocabulary, as well as a purpose for communication. Or use a comic template to simply label everyday items you’ve found in photos.

* Present the life of a famous person in comic format.

* Make up a short story that’s really an ad for a product and present it as a comic.

* Re-tell a nursery rhyme or fairy tale using software like Comic Life. Or try some online comic editors like Creaza or Myths and Legends.

* Create a simple sequential story and set it out with specially taken photos in a comic template. Add captions as needed. Cut the comic up and have kids re-sequence it.

* Add empty speech bubbles to a real comic or images for kids to fill in. If you have a print comic, white out the speech bubble and have kids invent their own dialogue. Find images online that lend themselves to text, and help kids think about what a character might be saying/ thinking. You can also do this with family snaps. Use an online image editor or your camera software to add speech bubbles that show what Dad might be thinking!

* Make an alphabet book for toddlers using pictures of family and everyday objects and activities. Try one page and image to each letter. Add interest by putting in captions and/or speech bubbles.

* If you need to send a class thank you, or a family greeting, consider asking kids to create a comic to express their thoughts and their thanks. Something different and appreciated!
USING COMIC EDITORS WITH KIDS

If you’d like to discover more about individual comic editors, click on the linked titles to read about each at The Book Chook:

Create a Comic at Stripcreator
Create a Comic at Comic Master
Quickly Write at Write Comics
My Story Maker
Cartoonist - Sharing Stories with Cartoons (Creaza)
Make a Comic at Digger and the Gang
Make Your Own Comic at MakeBeliefsComix
Review, Myths and Legends Website
DomoAnimate
Children’s Writing with Toon Books Comic Maker
Make a Lego Comic at Pharaoh's Quest

Lego Hero Factory Comic Builder

Write Stories and More at Kerpoof

Comics are a great way to engage kids in a story creation process. A comic isn’t as daunting to embark upon as a long narrative, yet children are involved in creative thinking, choosing setting, plotting, creating dialogue and using characters to get a message across to their audience. If you think about it, those are the same skills a novelist uses, but scaled down.

I love what comic editors offer children and families. Even pre-school kids can enjoy and learn from playing with words and images. Once kids start school, comic editors are a wonderful way for them to express themselves and present ideas during lessons. Comic editors also give a voice to teens and allow them to reach out to a global audience. By sharing their stories, they enable us to gain a greater understanding of some of the problems facing kids today. And by sharing their stories, I believe young people contribute to making our world a better place, and help to shape their own futures.

SUSAN STEPHENSON is an Australian writer, reader and reviewer. As a Primary School teacher, she loved encouraging kids to create and enjoy learning. Through The Book Chook blog, and her website, she continues that passion by sharing tips with an audience of parents, teachers and librarians. Her main focus is the three Ls: children’s literature, literacy and learning. She is fascinated with what technology offers us, but believes we need to maintain a balance in our kids’ lives. Susan hopes you’ll try comic editors with your students and children!