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Getting Graphic about Writing

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Overview

I remember growing up we read lots of fairy tales and stories about imagination in school and at home. In school during reading groups we usually read books like *Where the Wild things Are*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *Dr. Seuss* books. We had multiple recesses and played outside. We made up our own games and our own worlds, we created our own characters in these worlds and spent hours playing with our friends. School was all about the imagination and play in the primary grades. In fact, I don't remember even having a desk until about third grade. What happened? Why has all of the fun and imagination been replaced by nonfiction and organized play? Students never get a chance to be children or use their imagination! We expect them to sit in a chair and read a book, do math, or copy things off of the board at the beginning of first grade. Our recess and play time has gone from three recesses a day (one thirty minute recess after lunch and one fifteen minute recess in the morning and another one in the afternoon) to one ten to fifteen minute recess a day. We wonder why so many students do not like school or have behavior problems. I find myself wondering how much this has to do with the way we teach and the never ending demands and expectations we put on our students. I wouldn't like school either, there is very little fun or joy there.

I want my students to have fun in reading and writing and to do this we will be learning how to write comic books. The best person to help us achieve this is Scott McCloud. He is a cartoonist, best known for his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, who really opens your eyes to using your imagination in the creation of comic books. This book explains everything we need to know about making comic books and graphic novels. We will be using everything we learn about making comic books to make our own stories and eventually a class comic book.

To learn about writing and how comic books are put together we will be reading graphic novels as a class using the read-aloud approach. Colleen Af Venable is the author *Guinea Pig Private Eye* series of graphic novels that are not only engaging but will help my students learn about how to take care of our classroom pet. This series along with the *Mr. Badger and Mrs. Fox* series written by Brigitte Lacianai and Eve Tharlet will be used throughout this unit. These books will help teach character education and how to take care of animals in a fun way by reading graphic novels to learn. We will then use what we have learned about comics to make our own comic books during independent writing time.

Demographics

I work in a high poverty, Title One school where 100% of the population qualifies for free breakfast and lunch. We also have a high population of ELL students who speak minimal English, if any at all. The students that do speak English do not always comprehend English. Some of my parents do not know how to read and most of them that can read have minimal education or understanding of the higher level thinking that is required of first graders today.

Over half of my students do not receive any help on homework or reading at home. Sometimes this is due to parents not understanding how to help them; sometimes it is because their parents work long hours or multiple jobs, and some students spend their night time with day care workers or babysitters.

Most of my students come to first grade without any pre-reading skills. Most students do not even have the foundational skills they need to be able to spell kindergarten words or believe they can write. Some students come in not knowing their letter sounds, or without knowing the alphabet. In addition, even when they do want or like to write, they do not know how to access their imagination, they only write about what they know to be real.

My class size has gotten larger every year I have taught, but is usually somewhere between eighteen to twenty nine students per classroom. In addition, we have a large mobility where I teach, so the students I start with are not always the same students at the end of the year.

Rationale

Every year it is a struggle to get my students to write. Even my students that are reading on grade level tend to struggle with writing and using their imagination, they only want to write about violence, crime, being arrested, or even death. They only think about things that they deal with on a daily basis in their neighborhood. Things they know to be "real", their reality.

Why do students appear to not have an imagination like they did back when I grew up? I find myself asking, "Is it because they don't get the opportunity to build it through play?" With the video games children play they don't need an imagination, it is all there for them. We don't teach fairy tales and nursery rhymes like we used to, there is such a push on non-fiction. Students never get the experience of make believe or pretend. Students don't watch Disney movies, now they watch scary dark movies that are not always age appropriate. How can I build their imaginations? How can I get my students to think about happy times instead of always tragedies?

I want my students to learn that there is happiness in their lives! I want them to be able to think about the good things that happened within their dark stories. Maybe when their character was robbed in the story, the character's sister protected him or her. I want them to write about the good times.

As a famous playwright Susan Glaspell once said, "There is good and there is bad in every human

heart, and it is the struggle of life to conquer the bad with the good." ¹

I want my students to write about happy times and "what if" stories! What if you could go anywhere in the world, Where would you go? What if the dog next door had special powers, what would it be and what would he do? I want my students to unlock or develop that imagination that I know exists. Most of all, I want my students to enjoy reading and writing and not just be something they are required to do each day.

I know my students have an imagination, because I see them "reading" books with no words and making up their own stories to books that are above their reading levels. I just need them to realize they can write about their dreams, thoughts, and make-believe.

Objectives

In my unit, I will be helping my students learn to write comic book stories using their imaginations. Since my students are reluctant to write but love to check out graphic novels from the library, even though they are above their reading levels, this makes me believe they might be more interested in writing if we were writing in the comic book fashion. Students will be learning about the rules and procedures of comic book writing though our daily whole group read aloud.

I will be using graphic novels on a first grade reading level to help entice my students to reread the books. We will also have a variety of graphic novels in our classroom library so students will have many opportunities to read comic books and graphic novels.

Graphic Novel Read Alouds

We will begin by reading *Hamster and Cheese*; this is a story about a guinea pig at a pet shop. His cage door was slammed and the g fell off of his name plate. Now the animals at the pet shop think he is Guinea P.I and he is on a case trying to find out what happened to a missing sandwich. They make some predictions, like the snake has a square in its stomach, he must be the thief, right? You will have to read the story to find out the answer.

I chose this book because it is a great way to introduce our class Guinea Pig and learn about how to take care of our classroom pet and still learn about how comic books are laid out. We will discuss the frames, and how some frames do not even have words, they just have a picture. We will discuss what that picture is telling us, why is the picture important, why do they think the author chose not to have words on that particular frame. How do you make sound on a comic strip? We will discuss all of these issues during reading this book.

I believe using comic books with few words and lots of pictures will help my students stress level when it comes to writing, now they can do their pictures and then decide if they want words on that particular frame. This is one thing that most of my students love to do, draw pictures and color. I want to take what they love to

do and turn into a writing activity that they will enjoy working on.

We will read *And Then there were Gnomes*, this is the next book in the series of Sasspants the private eye hamster in which the animals believe the pet shop is haunted and there is a ghost that lives there. During the read aloud of this book we will read a few pages and then the students will make a panel or series of panels of what they think will come next. During this read aloud we will concentrate on McCloud's techniques of deciding what to put in a frame and what is not needed in a frame. We want just enough to make it interesting and understandable. My students will begin their writings by journaling in a comic book fashion, they can make a frame and do their picture, spending a lot of time on getting their picture they way they want it, and then we will discuss what their picture is saying before even writing any words.

For practice of making our comic books as a class we will read some books like *The Ferret's a Foot*, this book I chose to try to get my students to use their imagination. I will read a few pages, and then we will do our own frame of what we think should happen next in the story. This is what Scott McCloud refers to as flow or making sure everything makes sense in your story or comic book, who wants to read a story they if they do not understand what it happening. We will begin my doing this as a group on the white board, students will take turns adding to the picture and then will add our word bubbles and even action words if needed.

After spending a few weeks on journaling graphic novel style, I would like to incorporate the *Mr. Badger and Mrs. Fox* series because it is about single parent homes and being homeless, this is something most of my students can relate to. First graders like to write about their life experiences and my goal is for them to understand they know about more than just violence. They could write about a trip they took with mom to the grocery store, or a family party they attended. I think once they get to writing we can work more on their imagination and writing about things that are make believe. During this time we will be learning how to make our own comic strips by drawing the panels and talking about what makes a panel and how to read a panel and exploring how we can make ours a little different than our friends. We can change the shapes of the panels, add more to our graphics to make them more specific, add more action or action words (revision in comics). We want to take our time to make sure all of the students are making their comics easy to follow so the reader know what panel to go to next, McCloud said this is one on the most important areas in writing comic books.

I am using graphic novels that are on my students reading levels so they will have a chance to reread the stories. My students love to read the books I have read to them, even when they can't read. This will also help them improve in reading and understanding of comic books and graphic novels.

Background Information about Authors and Illustrators

Scott McCloud was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Scott McCloud read his first comic book at the age of fourteen and on that very day he decided he wanted to make comics. He is best known for his books on making comics, *Understanding Comics The Invisible Art and Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*. He ascribes his success in comic books from his dad who became blind at a young age due to a bacterial infection.²

He was the author of *The Creators Bill of Right* in 1981 which helped to protect the authors and illustrators

from being exploited. Steve McCloud also does teaching and consulting at Universities on turning their ideas into art, graphics, or comics. He even created a comic to explain how Google Chrome™ works. He has also consulted with MIT, Pixar, Microsoft, and the list goes on.³

Colleen Af Venable, who wrote *Hamster and Cheese*, grew up in Brooklyn, New York and was voted "biggest dork", or first in class, in her Studio Art class, for a play she wrote that was produced Off Broadway.⁴ She grew up reading *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Far Side* and *Muppets: Short, Green, and Handsome* and fell in love with web comics. She writes a variety of graphic novels for all ages including *Fairy Tale Comics* and *Nursery Rhyme Comics*, that might be a great addition to this unit.

Stephanie Yue illustrated *Hamster and Cheese*. She grew up in China, Hong Kong, and the United States.⁵ She loved to marathon read *Calvin and Hobbes*. She studied Illustration in New York and is also a martial artist. She has won many awards including an Eisner award for Best Publication for Kids (8-12) for *The Ferret's Foot* in 2012 ⁶ and a Children's Book Committee at Bank Street College Best Book of the Year.⁷

Eve Tharlet is the illustrator of over one hundred and fifty children's books including the *Mr. Badger and Mrs. Fox* series. She has won a *Books Top 10 Graphics Novels for Youth* award.⁸

Brigitte Luciani who is the writer of the *Mr. Badger and Mrs. Fox* series was born in Hanover, Germany to a German mom and Hungarian father. As an adult she moved to India where she became an assistant at a small publishing company. In 1994 she moved to Paris where she begin writing graphic novels for children.⁹

James Kochalka the author of *Johnny Boo: The Best little Ghost* is not only a comic book writer but all a musician.¹⁰ I will be using his book to help students learn to use their imagination with their characters.

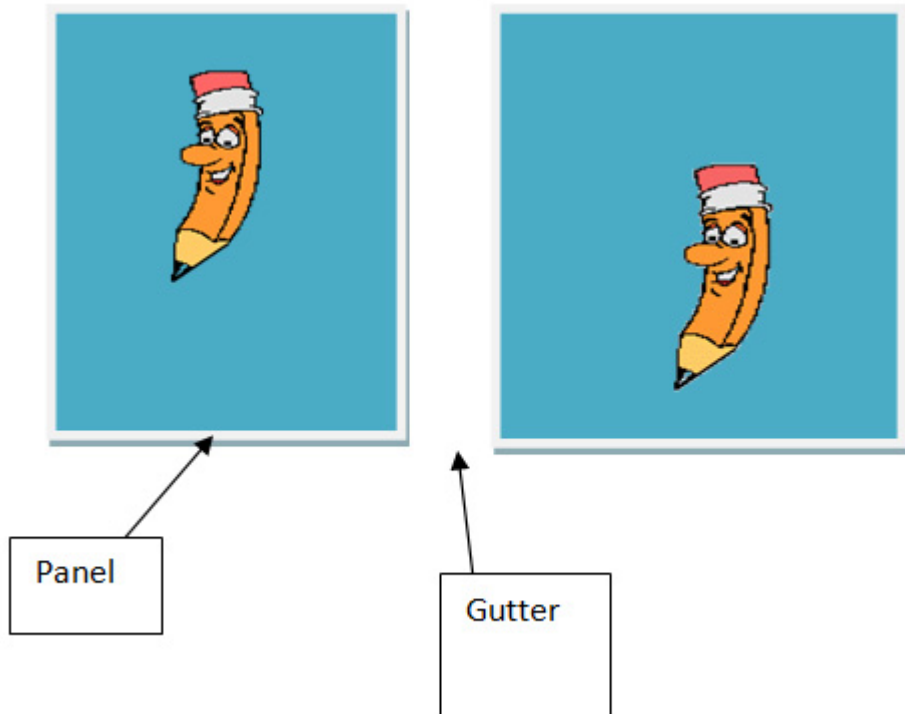
Comics and Graphic Novel Vocabulary

While reading, *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud I was surprised and intrigued at how much thought and work actually goes into making a comic book. I also find myself thinking how interesting this will be to my students, especially by boys who are so reluctant to read or write.

The panel is just the line around the individual comic. It is just a border, like making a bold box around text box. This is the beginning of your comic strip. Panels come in all shapes and sizes. You just need to make it easy for the readers so they don't get lost in knowing what panel to read next.

The space between the panels is called the gutter. This is a very important part of a graphic novel or comic book.

"Despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics!" ¹¹



The width of the gutter stands for space or time. The wider the gutter space the more time has elapsed between what has happened in the first panel to the second panel. The thinner gutter would mean that it is happening fast, like running.

"Space does for comics what time does for film!"¹²

Comics are usually written in tiers, a tier is a single row of panels. A tier is typically found straight across the page. Each row across is another tier.



Three panels across is a Tier

Closure is when we use what we already know to make predictions about something. For instance, If you see the side of a Pepsi™ bottle, even though you can't see the whole bottle your brain tells what it is by using your background knowledge.

Clarity is making your comic easy to follow and understand by the reader. There are five things you must think about clarity when you are making your comic; Choice of moment, choice of frame, choice of image, choice of words, and choice of flow. These are not done in any certain order but you need to think about each one while making your comics.

There are three kinds of sounds in comics, word balloons, captions and sounds effects. There are also different kinds of word balloons that mean different things. If a word balloon has a jagged edge it means the word is being shouted. If it has ice cycles hanging from the balloon it should be read in an icy tone. Word Balloons that have bubbles means it was not spoken but thought. If words are very tiny it means it is whispered. Sound effects do not have balloons and use onomatopoeia. (sound like the word) Captions are usually not in the frame and are words spoken by the narrator.

A splash is a one page comic strip and a spread is more than one page.

There are six steps in making a comic: Idea or purpose, form, idiom, structure, craft, and surface. All of them are just as important but do not need to be done in any certain order. Idea/ purpose: Why are you writing the comic? Form: What are you making? A drawing, comic book, a flip book? What are you using? Crayons, colored pencils, ink? Idiom: What are you writing about? What are you trying to accomplish? Structure: How are you going to arrange your writing? Are all of your panels going to have words? Is it going to be in black and white or color? Craft: The actual writing and art. Surface: The actual comic and what people notice first when they pick it up.¹³

There are five areas of making comics that will your readers understand what you are saying or just leave them confused. In addition, intensity will also bring understanding and clarity to your comics.

Choice of moment is deciding what you want in your comic and what you want to leave out. If you put too much information in the comic the reader will get confused or bored but you want to make sure you have enough in the frame so the reader understands what you are trying to get across to them. An example might be, If you draw a dog running and the dog stops to pick up a bone, then he moves the bone to another location and buries it, then he sees his friend and runs and jumps on the friend giving them kisses. The plot has nothing to do with the bone, it is not needed and just confuses the reader.

"Obsessing to much over such details is a classic beginner's mistake".¹⁴

Choice of frame is deciding the shape and how far apart you want each frame. Remember the space between the frames (gutter) shows time in between the frames. If your character is running the frames you would them to be closer together and if your character is walking they would be farther apart.

Choice of image is making sure your frame is clear and not cluttered with pictures or words that are not needed. If you are drawing a man building a house you don't need a bunch of flowers and trees in the frame. Make is simple and easy to follow, especially when you first start making your comics.

Choice of word is just like it sounds. Find the right words you need in each frame. Do not put to many words in or it will look cluttered and hard to read.

Choice of flow is making sure it is clear what frame the reader needs to go to next. There is nothing worse than a reader getting lost and confused. They may not want to finish reading your comic.

Intensity

There are some comic book techniques that tell the reader "this frame is special", like visual and depth cues, using diagonals, and even frames without borders.

"Visual techniques which add contrast, dynamism, graphic excitement, or add a sense of urgency to a panel."¹⁵ All of these show intensity.

Depth cues makes something look either far away in a frame or can make things seem closer in a frame.

Putting Diagonals in a frame can make something look like it's falling or your character is climbing something like a building.

Making frames without borders makes things come alive and look like it's jumping off the page.

Making frames different shapes and sizes is another way to bring attention to your comics.

Whatever you do in your comic your overall goal is to make the comic clear so the reader understands your story and make them know you care about what you made. After all, you spent a lot of time of your project, make it count!

Building Characters

There are three areas in building believable characters without losing your readers attention, an inner life, visual distinction, and expressive traits. Everyone knows that each character needs to be unique but think closely before drawing your character. Is your character nice? How can I make them look nice? Is your character rich or poor? What does that look like? If your character that lives in poverty you do not want them wearing fancy clothes or driving an expensive shiny car. If your character is a puppy that lives on the streets he needs to look dingy and not look clean with bows in his hair.

Another important area to think about is you do not want all of your characters to be the same. If you are writing a story about the homeless puppy, everyone in the story does not need to be homeless, in fact if they was it would probably be a really boring story. In the story *Guinea Pig Private Eye*, all of the characters are not animals, some are people. Not all of the animals talk in the book just the animals trying to solve the mystery. They also made sure to include all kinds of animals you might find in a pet shop and not just cute furry animals. This make the characters more realistic to the reader.

The most important thing about making comic books is to have fun and use your imagination. Chances are if you are having fun writing them, your readers will have fun reading them.

Strategies

Writer's Workshop

All students come in at a different place in writing, some are just drawing pictures stage, some are putting letters to represent words stage, and some a writing putting words together to make sentences. Writer's Workshop is a way for all students to be successful with their writing by slowly building on what they already know how to do. I will meet with different students daily to see where they are and what they are needing assistance with. It might be organization, punctuation, and sometimes it is just motivation.

As I meet with students I will take notes on what each student needs, and that is how I decide what our mini lesson will be for the next day. If I see a few students struggling on organizing their ideas, we will have a class mini lesson on that subject. A mini lesson usually last no more than ten minutes. I do my mini lesson usually during the middle of writer's workshop. This will give the students a break in writing and a chance to think of something new they might want to do in writing.

Sharing is caring: During this time we get together and groups to share what we have done for the day. There is no negative comments during this time! Students will talk about their writing and the other students in the group will give them ideas of what else they could add to their writing or something they would have done differently if they was writing that story or graphic.

The final part of writer's workshop is Author's Chair. This is when students have their paper, book, cartoon, or graphic finished they get to sit in the special Author's Chair and share with the class what they have done. During this time students are only allowed to comment on what they like about their classmates work. No negative feedback is allowed during Author's Chair EVER. This is not the time to give advice, this is someone's finished project that they are proud enough with, that they wanted to share!

Listening Comprehension

During read aloud we will be developing our listening comprehension by discussing what is going on in the stories. Students will be able to answer questions about the characters and what the characters might be thinking or feeling. Students will be able to ask and answer questions about what is actually going on in the story and be able to discuss this with their peers during turn and talk.

I also want to stay with a theme on my read aloud because, "When children embrace a theme and invest in a journey, they may become better readers". (Zingher 2006) My own experience as a teacher tells be that with good readers become good writers.

Building Animated Flip Books

We will be learning about animated flips books. We will learn about how they are made, why you might want to make one, and eventually make one as a class.

Animated flip books take a lot of time, work, and paper. You must make the same picture many times with just a very little movement on each page. If done properly, when you put all the pages together and flip through the pages you get an optical illusion that the character or picture is moving. This is how the original movies where created.

Building Image

To help my students start using their imaginations I will ask students to close their eyes and I will read a poem or short exert from out graphic novels, when I am finished I will ask students to draw a picture of what they thought the scene might look like. You could also read part of a chapter in a story and ask student to draw what they see. I think it would be best if this is done with either picture less books or not show the pictures from the book to the students, that way there is no right or wrong pictures.

This would be a good time to connect our vision with what it would look like in a comic book. Have I learned a special technique to help my readers understand what I am thinking?

Finding Character Traits

Character traits is a very hard subject to teach and learn in first grade. We will begin by reading a short story or a chapter out of our graphic novels and then discussing the characters. What did that character do that made you think they felt that way? We will then discuss who the main character is and discuss what kind of person they are. We will make a list of some different character traits and a list of character emotions. These are easily confused in first grade. A character trait is how a person acts and a character emotion is how they feel. Connect this to our comics, is there something we have learned that can help our readers know what kind of characters we are writing about?

Activities for Cross Circular Connections

We will be tying our science standards into this unit. My students will keep a Guinea Pig observation notebook where they will write about something we have learned or saw this week through our observations or a book we have read. They can also use their observations in their comic book stories they are working on during writers workshop.

Activities

Animal Investigations

Students will go on a web quest to learn about the classifications and needs of animals. Students will go to SeaWorld Website and pick an animal from the animals info books section. Here they will click through and learn about the animals eating habits, adaptations, physical characteristics, habitats, how they reproduce and how they care for their babies.

Supplies needed: Construction paper, markers, computers. Website:
<https://seaworld.org/en/animal-info/animal-infobooks>.

Students will make a report in a comic book form about their animals. Students will work in groups of two. Students will draw pictures and make text bubbles with sentences that explains what their chosen animal's habitat looks like, what they need to survive, what their animal looks like or sounds like, and what kind of adaptations their animal has, if any.

Books with no Words

Students will pick a book with no words in it and work with a partner to create words and sentences that will go along with the illustrations in the book. Students will need to look at all of the pictures and discuss what is going on in the story. Once they have made a plan of what their story will be about, they will create their own book by recreating the illustrations and the new words that go along with their book. Students will be encouraged to make additional illustrations if needed to make their story more interesting.

As an extension to this activity students will make a 3D art project that represents the main character or habitat of their new story.

Fact Paper Plates

Students will make a pictorial using a paper plate to explain about guinea pigs or an animal they investigated. They will make a picture of their animal on the paper plate in the middle. They will then hang facts about their animal with string. Students must have at least five true facts about the animal they chose. Facts will be pictures, words, or sentences on construction paper. Students may need adult help to make holes in their plates and construction paper. Then they will attach with string to the paper plate.

Supplies needed: thin paper plates, string, hole puncher, construction paper, glue, scissors, markers, and crayons.

Bibliography for Teachers

McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006.

This book is easy to understand and is broken down into small sections that describe everything you need to know to make a comic book or graphic novel.

McCloud, Scott. *The Creator's Bill of Rights*. <http://www.scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/bill/> (accessed July 18, 2016).

This resource describes in detail the Bill of Rights that was created to help prevent comic book author's art from being used without their consent.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

This book explains everything you could possibly need to know about reading, writing, or understanding comic books and graphic novels.

Oklahoma Department of Education. *Oklahoma Academic Standards*. July 13, 2016.
<http://sde.ok.gov/sde/oklahoma-academic-standards> (accessed July 31, 2016).

I included this website to help other teachers understand about the Oklahoma Education Standards.

Talks, Ted. *The Visual Magic of Comics*. 2005.

This is an interview that I found very interesting because it talks about his family and why he became a comic book writer.

Vartanian, Oshin. "Review of Your Creative Brain; Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity, and Innovation in Your Life." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 2011: 389-390.

I included this article because it explains about how creativity and the brain are connected and it gave some ideas of how to use that to your advantage to help students build imagination.

Zingher, Gary. *Exciting Young Imaginations*. Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2006.

This book includes some great ideas of how to help students acquire and use their imaginations.

Graphic Novels for Students

Pet Shop Series by Colleen AF Venable

Hamster and Cheese

The Ferret's a Foot

And Then There Were Gnomes

Going, Going, Dragon

Raining Cat's and Detectives

The Badger and Mrs. Fox Series by Brigitte Luciani and Eve Tharlet

A Meeting

A Hubbub

What a Team

Peace and Quiet

The Carnival

Academic Standards

1.3.W.1 NARRATIVE Students will begin to write narratives incorporating characters, plot (i.e., beginning, middle, end), and a basic setting (i.e., time, place) with guidance and support.

1.3.W.2 INFORMATIVE Students will begin to write facts about a subject in response to a text read aloud to demonstrate understanding with guidance and support.

1.2.R.3 Students will sequence the events/plot (i.e., beginning, middle, and end) of a story or text.

1.1.R.1 Students will actively listen and speak using agreed-upon rules for discussion.

1.1.R.2 Students will ask and answer questions to seek help, get information, or clarify about information presented orally through text or other media, to confirm understanding.

1.1.R.3 Students will engage in collaborative discussions about appropriate topics and texts with peers and adults in small and large groups.

Notes

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<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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