Create your own graphic novel:
A book project for *The Complete Maus* by Art Spiegelman

Art Spiegelman’s *The Complete Maus* depicts the Holocaust in graphic form. It uses images and words to convey Art’s father’s experience as a Polish Jew during World War II, as well as Art’s own difficult relationship with his father. Within *Maus* is another comic, “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” that tells of Art’s struggle after his mother commits suicide. The novel and the comic within it are examples of how comics can be used not only to portray humor, but also to tell serious and often painful stories.

Your job is to create your own comic depicting a serious or perhaps painful story from your own life or from your family’s history. While the comic should be about a difficult event or circumstance, rather than a humorous one, do not feel pressured to write about anything you do not feel comfortable sharing.

This 40-point project will have two parts:

1. A comic strip at least 6 panels long (25 points)
   a. Comic should tell a serious story from your own life or family history
   b. Must use words and images to tell your story
   c. Images can be hand drawn, sourced from clip-art, or created on a computer
   d. You are required to create and turn in a first draft as well as a final draft

2. A 2 page (typed, double spaced) reflection (15 points) addressing the following four prompts:
   a. Why did you choose this story to tell?
   b. Compare the comic format with a traditional text format: what were you able to convey in your comic that would have been difficult to do with just text? What would have been easier to convey in writing?
   c. If you were going to publish this story, do you think a comic would be the best medium for telling it, or would a different format work better—and why?
   d. Using specific examples from *The Complete Maus* and your own experience, analyze Spiegelman’s decision to use the graphic novel format: What does the graphic novel format add to his story? How does it increase our understanding of the Holocaust?

You will need:
- Writing journal for brainstorming
- 8 ½” by 11” white paper OR comic template (page 4)
- Pencil and eraser for first draft
- Pen, colored pencils, or markers for illustrations and final draft
- Microsoft Word (if using clip-art) or Microsoft Paint (if creating graphics on computer)
- Comic rubric (page 5)
- Scoring rubric (page 6)
Directions:

1. In your writing journal, respond to these questions: What events in my own life have made me who I am? What events in my family history have made me who I am?

2. Choose the event that feels most important or interesting to you. Please do not choose an event you do not feel comfortable sharing with the public. Write a paragraph or two describing the event. What happened? Who was involved? Where did it happen? What were the sights, sounds, or smells you remember? Think of as many details as you can so that you can form a picture of the event in your head. How has this event shaped you?

3. Make a timeline of what happened. Break the story down into the little things that occurred and put them in chronological order. This can help you organize your story into frames.

4. Now, you are ready to start planning your comic strip. Think about how to depict each of the pieces of the timeline you created in step 4. How can you show what happened using pictures? What details can you include in each frame that help your reader understand what is going on? Sketch a few ideas. Don’t worry if you aren’t confident in your artistic ability—this project is about becoming familiar with this way of telling stories, not about how well you can draw!

5. Create a first draft of your comic. This step is important so you can make any necessary changes and finalize your design so that your final copy that is clean and easy to read. I have included another example of a serious comic on page 3 if you need additional guidance. You will turn this in with your final project.

6. Re-read your comic and fill out the first Comic Editing Rubric. Find a classmate to fill out the second Comic Editing Rubric and give it back to you. I will be using this same rubric to determine part of your final grade, so use it to figure out how much progress you have made toward the goal. You will need to turn in both rubrics (peer and self-assessments) with your final project.

7. Keeping your classmate’s suggestions in mind, as well as your own, make any necessary changes to your comic. Last, check it for spelling or grammar errors.

8. Create your final copy of your comic. You should be proud of all of your hard work, and I can’t wait to read it!

9. Finally, look over the 4 reflection prompts and write a 2 page, double-spaced with 12-point font reflection that addresses each one. Page 5 includes the complete rubric I will use to determine your grade and the requirements I expect the reflection to fulfill.

10. Make sure your name is on your comics and your reflection. Paperclip the two comic editing rubrics to your first draft. Your project packet should include, in this order: scoring rubric with name on top, final copy of comic, reflection, and first draft comic with editing rubrics.
Sample comic, from Rapunzel’s Revenge by Dean Hale, Shannon Hale, and Nathan Hale:
**Author:** __________________________________________________________________________

**COMIC EDITING SELF-ASSESSMENT RUBRIC:** Choose the box which best describes this comic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Unsatisfactory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comic Story Structure</strong></td>
<td>The story is very well organized. One idea or scene follows another in a logical sequence with clear transitions.</td>
<td>The story is pretty well organized. One idea or scene may seem out of place. Clear transitions are used.</td>
<td>The story is a little hard to follow. The transitions are sometimes not clear.</td>
<td>Ideas and scenes seem to be randomly arranged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of images</strong></td>
<td>Carefully chosen images help the reader understand the action/emotions in the story.</td>
<td>Most of the images help the reader understand the story. One or two are unrelated or confusing.</td>
<td>Comic includes many images that do not relate to the story and confuse readers.</td>
<td>Comic does not use images and relies too heavily on text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One thing I did well:

One thing that I should improve:

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**Reader:** __________________________________________________________________________

**COMIC EDITING RUBRIC:** Choose the box which best describes this comic.

<table>
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<th>Unsatisfactory</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
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<td><strong>Comic Story Structure</strong></td>
<td>The story is very well organized. One idea or scene follows another in a logical sequence with clear transitions.</td>
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<td>Most of the images help the reader understand the story. One or two are unrelated or confusing.</td>
<td>Comic includes many images that do not relate to the story and confuse readers.</td>
<td>Comic does not use images and relies too heavily on text.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

One great thing about this comic:

One suggestion for improvement:
Scoring Rubric:

Name: ___________________________________

This rubric describes what you need to include in your comic and reflection so they are quality pieces that demonstrate the skills and knowledge you have gained. Use them to check if you are including the required elements and if you need to make any changes. The first rubric describes the requirements for the comic, which is worth 25 points. The second describes the requirements for the reflection, which is worth 15 points.

### Comic (25 points)

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Draft</td>
<td>Writer created a first draft. Comic rubrics are attached from writer and one reader.</td>
<td>Writer created a first draft. Only one comic rubric is attached.</td>
<td>Writer created a first draft. No comic rubrics are attached.</td>
<td>Writer did not create or turn in a first draft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the story.</td>
<td>Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the story.</td>
<td>Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the story.</td>
<td>Writer makes 4+ errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic Story Structure</td>
<td>The story is very well organized. One idea or scene follows another in a logical sequence with clear transitions.</td>
<td>The story is pretty well organized. One idea or scene may seem out of place. Clear transitions are used.</td>
<td>The story is hard to follow. The transitions are sometimes not clear.</td>
<td>Ideas and scenes seem to be randomly arranged.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Carefully chosen images help the reader understand the action/emotions in the story.</td>
<td>Most of the images help the reader understand the story. One or two are unrelated or confusing.</td>
<td>Comic includes many images that do not relate to the story and confuse readers.</td>
<td>Comic does not use images and relies too heavily on text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic Quality</td>
<td>Comic has at least 6 panels that are neatly done. Words, characters, and action are easy to read.</td>
<td>Comic has at least 6 panels but some panels are messy or difficult to read</td>
<td>Comic has fewer than 6 panels, but all are neatly done and easy to read.</td>
<td>Comic has fewer than 6 panels and some are messy or difficult to read.</td>
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</table>

**Comic Score: ____/25**

### Reflection (15 points)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer only makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
<td>Writer 4+ errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Reflection</td>
<td>Every prompt is addressed completely</td>
<td>Most prompts are addressed completely</td>
<td>Writer skipped, or did not completely answer, 2 prompts</td>
<td>Writer skipped, or did not completely answer, 3-4 prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection Content</td>
<td>Reflection demonstrates full understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the graphic novel format</td>
<td>Reflection demonstrates identification of strengths/weaknesses of graphic novel format, but author may have had trouble applying them in assignment</td>
<td>Reflection demonstrates an emerging understanding of graphic novels, but many aspects are still unclear</td>
<td>Reflection demonstrates that writer is struggling to understand the graphic novel format</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflection score: ____/15**

**TOTAL POINTS (Comic + Reflection): ____/40**
Rationale

_The Complete Maus_ is a graphic novel depicting one family’s experiences as Jews in Poland during World War II. This edition is actually the combination of _Maus I_, first published in 1973, and _Maus II_, published in 1986. The graphic novel not only provides an alternate view of the tragedies of WWII, but it also exposes the lasting effects they had on their survivors and the children of survivors. I chose this book because of its unique format—many books have been written about Nazi Germany, but none in such a visual and accessible form as the graphic novel.

My hope is that by including this book in my future classroom, my students would come to realize several things. First, issues raised by the story itself: How do the tragedies of war affect the next generation? Why was genocide allowed to continue for so long? What does it mean to be a survivor? However, I also hope my students come to understand the power that images have to tell a story. I want them to examine this text and other novels about the Holocaust and determine the strengths and weaknesses of each. I believe that images can tell stories in ways that words sometimes cannot, and as a result, comics and graphic novels are legitimate and powerful forms of literature that students should be familiar with. I also chose this novel because many students who are reluctant readers may find graphic novels more approachable. As my sister’s boyfriend once told me, when you read graphic novels, you don’t really realize how much you are actually reading. As a result, including this book in the curriculum will help me draw in students who may be hesitant to read a textbook or print-heavy novel.

Because of its heavy subject matter and the complex issues it raises, I would use this book with eighth grade students and older, although I would feel most comfortable using it with high school students. However, this book project should be used with ninth or tenth graders, because the higher-order thinking skills required to answer the reflection questions are more
developed in high school students than in eighth graders. I created the project to fit in a language arts classroom or, ideally, a combined language arts/social studies class. *The Complete Maus* would be a great text to teach the elements of story or the genre of graphic novels within the context of a unit on World War II or the Holocaust. The project encourages students to examine storytelling through comic and helps them to see comics as vehicles for more than just humor or superheroes.

The focus of this book project is on creating a mini graphic novel or comic. In doing so, students will explore the power of images and how they can enhance a story. They will also be challenged to break down a story into its most important events and focus on details and mood, strengthening their storytelling skills. Throughout our study of this book, we have focused on learning the important aspects of graphic novels and have viewed other examples of comics that depict serious stories, so students are familiar with the general parameters of the genre. We have also spent time talking about mood and theme and identifying them in graphic novels using images. All materials students will need to make their comics will be provided in the classroom, including computers and necessary software. Art supplies will also be provided in the classroom, and students will be given part of three class periods a week for two weeks to complete the project. Students needing additional help or the use of school supplies beyond those class periods can utilize lunchtime, before school, or after school, when I will be available to them.

After students create their graphic novel, they will reflect on their experience, evaluating the graphic novel format and its suitability for their particular story. Applying their new understanding of graphic novels to *The Complete Maus*, students must infer why the author may have chosen that format, what it adds to the story, and how telling the story in such a visual way can add to our understanding of the Holocaust. By reflecting, students will have the opportunity
to pull together what they have learned about graphic novels and the Holocaust to determine both
the value of *The Complete Maus* and the genre of graphic novels.

This project will show students that stories are not only told with words—images can be
used to relate serious stories as well as funny ones. Students should come to understand why an
art form like the comic, which we know best for humor and superheroes, is an effective vehicle
for all types of stories and can bring a new level of understanding to familiar concepts. By
completing their own graphic novel, students will gain insights into the decisions made by
authors and be able to speculate why Art Spiegelman made the decision to package such a
painful and heartbreaking story in a comic. If time permitted, I would love to use this book to
teach an extended unit on graphic novels and comics, including an in-depth analysis of required
elements and how to create characters or show action. In learning how to create graphic novels,
students would also have to learn how create story scenes that flow together smoothly and how
to include details that explain the action—all vital skills for written storytelling, as well. Students
who know how to tell stories know how to organize and communicate their ideas in any medium.