

# **Super Books!**

## **Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Enhance Literacy Instruction**

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Comic books helped me to define my world and myself in a way that made both far less frightening. I honestly cannot imagine how I would have navigated my way through childhood without them.

Bradford W. Wright

### **Overview**

Struggling and reluctant readers: they exist in classrooms across our nation, presenting seemingly insurmountable challenges for educators who attempt to engage them in the wonderful world of reading. Yet, despite the efforts of many of these educators, struggling and reluctant readers seem to lack an enthusiasm for the written word. For some, it is because they find traditional texts inaccessible; for others, the ever-persistent language barrier rears its ugly head yet again. Caught up in the system, many of these students are misunderstood and considered “lazy” or “unmotivated.” For these students, who have traditionally experienced failure with reading, using graphic novels as an instructional and motivational tool may prove fruitful for students and educators alike.

With the growing popularity of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and the series’ newest release, *The Ugly Truth*, graphic novels have become a staple in classrooms across the country—especially for those with struggling readers. Each month, as I distribute the Scholastic Book Orders in my own classes, I am met with enthusiastic exclamations as students tear open the pages to look for the most recent additions to the ever-growing graphic novel genre. Most of the students in my classes are unable to afford the novels, but they can rest assured that the classroom bookshelves will be stocked with the decadent titles within the following weeks.

As a Literacy teacher, it is not uncommon to hear the ever-painful utterance, “I hate to read.” In fact, one of my students (a male, struggling, reluctant reader) who upon entering my classroom at the beginning of the school year dismissively related, “I hate reading,” actually finished his first ever chapter book. Not surprisingly, his first book was a graphic novel, *Big Nate Strikes Again* by Lincoln Peirce. He related this new information to me with a look of pride and said he couldn’t wait to read the first book in the series. Watching him devouring the pages of the text each day filled me with pride and joy.

Super Books! was spawned from the graphic novel’s proven ability to entice disengaged readers and to increase the reading level of struggling readers in my classroom. In creating the unit, I determined rather than merely stocking classroom shelves with these high interest works, I would integrate the graphic novel and comics genre in the curriculum. Ultimately, this unit will examine the use of graphic novels and comics in the classroom as a vehicle for developing reading comprehension skills and fostering a love for reading and will provide lessons and activities that encourage struggling and reluctant readers to appreciate and gain a fresh perspective of the written word.

## **Rationale**

Struggling and disenfranchised readers face a variety of problems in the literacy classroom. They are often several reading levels behind their peers and tend to avoid written texts whenever possible. Throughout the middle and high school years, these students become progressively disengaged. When implemented into the literacy curriculum, graphic novels are accessible, relevant, high-interest reading materials that appeal to a variety of learning styles. Differentiation is inherent in the novels, which can be used for interdisciplinary studies as well, with the ever-increasing variety of texts available on the market today.

What is a graphic novel? In terms of this unit, graphic novels are defined as novel-length books written or illustrated in the manner of traditional comic books. Despite the adult connotations of the term “graphic,” these novels are created for all ages and audiences. The term, “graphic novel” was popularized in the late 1970s by Will Eisner, who coined the term in order to distinguish his book-length, *A Contract with God*, from popular newspaper comic strips. Graphic novels can be original fictional works or based on previously written works. Additionally, they can be derived from nonfiction and historical events. Their frames make up a series of illustrations, thus, making it easier for readers to recognize sequence and narrative development.

Despite its marginalized historical roots and notoriety among academics as a low-brow art form with little literary value, the comics genre has become increasingly diverse and has grown to include classic works ranging from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* to Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, historical accounts of the Holocaust (*Maus*), and graphic versions of international folk and fairy tales (most notably, *Trickster*

and the *Fables* series). While the use of graphic novels and comics does not replace the close reading of the original versions of these texts, it offers struggling and reluctant readers a gateway into the world of literature. And, with an appeal as far-reaching as the content within, comic books and graphic novels can be incorporated into a variety of units within the standardized curriculum.

Reading graphic novels and comics invites students to think critically and sequentially, analyze the connection between visual and print messages, and use deductive reasoning skills. Used as a vehicle to re-engage disengaged readers and empower struggling readers, graphic novels are invaluable resources in the modern literacy or language arts classroom.

While, as aforementioned, a vast array of graphic texts exists in today's publishing market, a few of those examined in this unit include:

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, by Jeff Kinney

In this realistic fiction graphic novel, protagonist Greg Heffley annotates the ludicrous situations that he finds himself in as he ventures through his days in middle school. From the constant bullying from his older brother, Rodrick, to the naiveté of his best friend, Rowley, to his struggle to make it into the "Favorites" section of the yearbook, and his denunciation and final face-to-face reconciliation with "the Cheese," Greg delivers a fantastic ride for readers.

*Smile*, by Raina Telgemeier

A graphic novel example of the classic middle school "struggle to fit in" theme, *Smile* follows the trials and tribulations of Telgemeier herself after she trips and knocks out her two front teeth. Readers are able to identify with her adolescent social struggles and the trauma she endures both physically and emotionally in this coming-of-age tale rife with colorful illustrations.

*Bone*, by Jeff Moss

The *Bone* series follows the protagonist, Fone Bone, on his epic journey to save his idyllic valley from forces of evil. Readers can identify with Fone Bone, an unlikely hero, as he embarks on his quest with an unknown destiny. The saga can be compared to classic epic journeys such as Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. Today, there are a total of nine graphic novels in the series.

*Big Nate: In a Class by Himself*, by Lincoln Pierce

The *Big Nate* series centers on the protagonist, Nate Wright, who is a rebellious seventh grader. The series began on a popular children's gaming and educational website, *Poptropica*. The novels follow Nate on his middle school adventures, which oftentimes, end up in the detention room. The title is especially popular among middle school boys who enjoy humorous, relatable tales.

*The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan

This wordless graphic novel tells the story of an immigrant family as they respond to the surroundings of their new country. The only words printed in the novel are nonsensical and made up entirely of a fictional alphabet created by Tan to mimic the isolation that many immigrants feel upon entering a new country. Readers must use imagery and inference to follow the course of the story.

Overall, *Super Books!* will be differentiated to address multiple levels and learning styles. It will align with district, state, and national education standards. Through this curriculum unit, students will use a variety of modalities to read, write, respond to, and create graphic novels.

## **Background**

I intend to teach this unit in all three of my sixth grade Literacy classes at Wagner Middle School. My students are divided into three sections—each section is inclusive and is comprised of Special Education students, Emotional Support students, Gifted Education students, and Regular Education students. The school itself is a comprehensive, neighborhood school in the West Oak Lane section of Northwest Philadelphia. Our school has seven QZAB labs (classrooms with seventeen laptops, a Promethean board and an LCD projector), and I am lucky to be in a classroom with one of them.

Nearly one hundred percent of the population comes from the immediate vicinity of the school, which is located at 18<sup>th</sup> Street and Chelton Avenue. The student body is comprised of approximately 600 students whose ethnic makeup is 97.1% African American and >3% Latino or Asian. Over 76% of students qualify for free lunches and 36% receive Special Education services.

This unit was written to accommodate all classrooms, regardless of access to technology or varying ethnic makeup. All of the lessons in *Super Books!* can be modified to meet the needs of educators in various circumstances, as long as a copier and reasonable access to the novels are attainable.

## Objectives

This unit is intended for use with students in an inclusive sixth grade Literacy classroom in a middle school setting. They spend 75-90 minutes daily in Literacy class, with one day per week reserved for Writing. The over-arching goal of this unit is to foster students' passion for reading, build their appreciation of both the written word and its graphic counterparts, and increase comprehension skills.

As aligned with the Pennsylvania State Standards for Reading, Writing and Speaking, and with the Sixth Grade Literacy Curriculum of the School District of Philadelphia, the unit will address the following objectives:

- interpret figurative language and traditional literary elements including plot, characterization, and theme in the graphic novel
- improve reading comprehension skills, with a specific focus on summarization and main idea
- analyze visual techniques and forms in the graphic novel, with a specific focus on examining the relationship between the written word and visual representation
- create an original multimedia text inspired by graphic novel and comic-based mentor texts
- gain a greater appreciation for literacy and the written and visual word

Beyond the technical level and development of foundational standards, students will also be encouraged to continue to read and to utilize the graphic novel genre as a gateway or introduction to works from other literary genres. They will use invention and the creative process to create their own graphic novel texts and to adapt a previous work into graphic form.

## Strategies

Throughout the unit, a variety of strategies will be employed to ensure that students are analyzing, internalizing, and fully comprehending the material presented in each lesson. The strategies are used to support all types of learners in the development of their reading, writing, thinking, and listening skills as they relate in Literacy and across the curriculum.

*Before, During and After (BDA)*: BDA strategies will be incorporated in each lesson. The BDA strategy is a variation of the “I Do, We Do, You Do” model of classroom instruction. The strategy allows readers to interact with the text on a level that would not be reached if the teacher merely provided students with answers and explanations of the text. In the *Before* segment of the lesson, the instructor briefly introduces new materials and models how to perform activities. In the *During* segment of the lesson, students

interact with the text by creating marginalia and asking questions of the text. In the *After* segment, students respond to the text in a variety of ways including analysis of the text in both written response or through the completion of comprehension questions.

*Do Now:* The *Do Now* functions tri-fold in my classroom. It occurs as part of the *Before* segment of the lesson. The *Do Now* is used to grab the students' attention at the beginning of class, access prior knowledge about the topic at hand, and prepare them to consider the day's objectives and material. Each day, the *Do Now* occurs as soon as students enter the classroom. Each *Do Now* lasts five minutes and is awarded five points for completion and participation. Because it happens as soon as students enter the classroom and is immediately awarded points, it holds students accountable for their class work and participation from the onset of the class period. The *Do Now* will be used throughout the unit in all three ways described above.

*Text Rendering:* Text rendering occurs during the *During* portion of the lesson. To complete text-rendering tasks, students underline, highlight and create marginalia for a given text. Text rendering is particularly useful for teaching students to interact with a text and to practice meta-cognition. In my class, students highlight key phrases and ideas, underline new vocabulary terms, and circle items that they have a question about. Text rendering is a skill that must be modeled by the educator in order to have students practice it effectively.

*Choice Boards:* Choice Boards are a differentiation tool that give students options as to which activities they would like to complete during a given class duration. The boards are set up to include skill sets that the students have learned and are currently being assessed in. Each board is set up like a Tic-Tac-Toe board from which students complete three tasks. These three tasks should encompass a variety of learning modalities and skill sets. Each set of three tasks selected by an individual student must complete a Tic-Tac-Toe row. (See Appendix B)

*Tiered Activity Lists:* Tiered activity lists are also useful tools for differentiated instruction. In brief, tiered activity lists are lists of lesson activities that are tiered in terms of difficulty level for students who are performing at different achievement levels. They are designed to allow more advanced students to go further in-depth with a concept, as well as to ensure that lower level learners are able to be assessed on the concepts as well without lowering the standard of a performance product.

*Mentor Texts:* Mentor texts can be used by educators to model a certain structure or idea. These texts are valuable in aiding students in developing higher-level sentence structures or in using the writing process to create original pieces. Mentor texts can also be used by an educator to create templates for student use for various writing assignments.

*Templates:* I create templates for use in my classroom to aid students in developing structure in their writing or to emulate a particularly effective or creative text. Templates can be used to create a “writing experiment” such as the example shown in Appendix C. They are an invaluable differentiation tool for Writer’s Workshop and can be adapted based on an individual student’s skill level. Oftentimes, I begin a writing piece with students using a template and then gradually as we move through the writing process, I take sections of the template away and ask students to revise to use their own forms inspired by the mentor text. (See Appendix C)

### **Classroom Activities / Sample Lesson Plan**

Sample Lesson: Diary of a “ \_\_\_\_\_ ” Kid

*Description:* This five-day lesson serves as a culminating activity for a unit on the first book in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kinney. It involves a familiarization with vocabulary and techniques associated with the graphic novel and comic genre, a character study of each student, a creative, narrative writing activity, and the creation of an original 1-2 page, well-structured comic based on each student’s characterization. Students will examine the language and techniques of graphic novels in order to improve their comprehension of the novel. They will then apply their knowledge of genre to create a comic about a day in their own lives. Sections from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* will be used as mentor texts to guide student writing which will begin with the writing of a brief narrative anecdote. The narration will then be edited to suit the creation of a comic in *Comic Life*.

*Learning Goals:* Students will read and analyze the novel, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney. They will apply their knowledge of cartooning vocabulary and strategies to improve reading comprehension. Students will demonstrate understanding of characterization and apply this strategy in the creation of a caricature of him or her self. Finally, students will create an original narrative, plot-based comic in *Comic Life* using their knowledge of the graphic novel genre, traditional plot structure, and fictional literary elements.

*Objectives:* By the end of the five-day lesson, students will be able to:

- read and analyze fictional works in the graphic novel genre
- gain knowledge of basic vocabulary and techniques associated with comics and graphic novels
- demonstrate understanding of sequencing, plot structure, onomatopoeia and characterization
- write a first-person narrative piece about a day in their lives at school
- practice using the writing process to edit and revise drafts
- apply knowledge of graphic novel genre to create an original comic in *Comic Life*

*Materials:*

- Class Set of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney
- Class Set of Laptops with *Comic Life* Software
- Promethean Presentation
- Do Now Materials (for Days 2, 3 and 4)
- Graphic Novel Vocabulary and Techniques Reference Handouts
- Plot Structure and Brainstorming Graphic Organizer Handouts
- Mentor Text: Pages 11-14 from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*
- *Comic Life* Assignment Check List Handouts

*Learning Plan (Five Day Lesson)*

Day 1

*Opening Activity:*

For the “Do Now,” students will choose a favorite scene from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. They will write about why this is their favorite scene, and then, they will connect the scene to an event that has happened in their own lives. Students will then share “Do Now” responses with group. Educator will use these responses to transition into a discussion of the culminating unit project.

*Mini-Lesson:*

Using an interactive Promethean presentation, the educator will introduce the basic vocabulary and techniques associated with graphic novels and comics. Vocabulary and techniques covered in the overview are: frame, panel, gutter, captions, speech balloons, figures, and faces. Using their reference handouts, students will label each concept appropriately on the Promethean board.

*Independent Activities:*

Students will use their “Do Now” responses and their copies of the novel to brainstorm ideas for the topic of their comic life. Students will complete a “Brainstorming Graphic Organizer” and begin an outline of their narratives.

Day 2

*Opening Activity:*

For the “Do Now,” students will use prior knowledge to label the parts of a comic strip on a sample comic. They will then choose one concept and write a brief analysis that explains how this concept functions in a comic strip. Answers will be reviewed via the Promethean Board using student volunteers. (Assignment may or may not be used as a mini-assessment grade).



*Mini-Lesson:*

Educator will review plot structure with students using an interactive Promethean presentation. Then, using ideas brainstormed during the previous lesson's writing workshop, educator will model how to write an effective narrative anecdote using traditional plot structure.

*Independent Activities:*

Students will use their Brainstorming Guides and outlines to complete a Plot Structure graphic organizer. They will then use the organizer to write their rough drafts of the narratives.

Day 3

*Opening Activity:*

For the "Do Now," students will work with their partners to arrange comic frames that have been segmented into sequential order. They will have to use clues from captions, speech bubbles, and figures to determine the proper order of the clippings. Then, students will write a brief explanation of they determined their chosen order. Volunteers will share their findings and the proper sequence will be displayed using the LCD projector.

*Mini-Lesson:*

Educator will use pages 11-14 of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as mentor text to assist students in creating higher-level sentence structures and to help them in creating more concise narratives that will be readily transferable to the comic format. Educator will use previously written model narrative to model how to use the mentor text as a guide for revising writing pieces.

*Independent Activities:*

Students will use mentor text and accompanying template to rework their narrative drafts into a comic-friendly format. They will then transfer their revised editions to a paper template printed from *Comic Life*. This template will serve as a guide for their comic creation during the following two lessons.

Day 4

*Opening Activity:*

For the "Do Now," students will use a list of character traits to choose a character trait which best describes his or her personality. They will then describe how this trait represents them. The trait will be used to create a title of their comic assignment: "Diary of \_\_\_\_\_ Kid." Volunteers will share their responses with the class.

*Mini-Lesson:*

Educator will introduce the *Comic Life* program and demonstrate how to use it to create a comic strip. Educator will then model how to transfer narratives from the previous lesson's template to *Comic Life*.

*Independent Activities:*

Students will use template and *Comic Life* Basics reference sheet to transfer their comics to the *Comic Life* program. (This activity may take more than one class period. If time permits, allow for students to take their time with this portion of the assignment. Because the program is new to most students, they may need time to figure out its workings. Students who may prove more adept with the program and finish early can choose from Choice Board activities.)

Day 5

*Opening Activity:*

For the “Do Now,” students will review *Comic Life* creations from previous lesson. Then, they will add at least two examples of onomatopoeia and one simile where appropriate. Volunteers can share their progress with the class via the LCD projector (if time permits).

*Mini-Lesson:*

Educator will briefly discuss *Comic Life* Assignment Checklist and model how to apply it to evaluating the final product of the assignment.

*Independent Activities:*

Students will use *Comic Life* Assignment Checklist to evaluate their final products and ensure that they have included all necessary elements. Students will also use spell check and an editing partner to make final editions to text. Students will save and publish their final works for assessment and classroom website display.

**Bibliography**

*Unit Bibliography*

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## **Appendices / Standards**

### *Appendix A – Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking*

These standards are taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s State Standards.

**R8.A.1.1:** Identify and apply the meaning of vocabulary.

**R8.A.1.3:** Make inferences, draw conclusions, and make generalizations based on text.

**R8.A.1.4:** Identify and explain main ideas and relevant details.

**R8.A.1.6:** Identify, describe, and analyze genre of text.

**R8.A.1.5:** Summarize a fictional text as a whole.

**R8.A.2:** Understand nonfiction appropriate to grade level.

**R8.A.2.5:** Summarize a nonfictional text as a whole.

**R6.B.3.3.1:** Identify, explain, and/or interpret text organization, including sequence, question/answer, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, or problem/solution.

**R6.B.3.3.3:** Interpret graphics and charts and/or make connections between text and content of graphics and charts.

**R6.B.1.1.1:** Identify, explain, interpret, compare, describe, and/or analyze components of fiction and literary nonfiction.

**R6.B.2.1:** Identify, interpret, and describe figurative language in fiction and nonfiction.

**1.4.6.A:** Write poems, short stories, and plays.

**1.4.6.B:** Write multi-paragraph informational pieces (e.g., letters, descriptions, reports, instructions, essays, articles, interviews); Use relevant graphics (e.g., maps, charts, graphs, tables, illustrations, photographs).

*Appendix B – Sample Choice Board for Diary of a Wimpy Kid*

***The Diary of a Wimpy Kid Choice Board***

*Instructions:* Choose three activities from the board below. Your choices must make a straight line and include one activity focused on each of the three topics (character analysis, plot, and figurative language). Each box is worth 10 points for a total of 30 points for the assignment. You will have one week to complete all three boxes during Independent Practice. Good luck!

<p><b>Character Analysis</b> Create a Character Web in Inspiration 8 for one of the characters in the diary (Greg, Rowley, or Rodrick).</p>	<p><b>Plot</b> Choose a major scene from the novel. Depict its events in a comic created on Comic Life (at least 6 boxes with captions and dialogue).</p>	<p><b>Figurative Language</b> Write a poem about your first days of middle school. Include at least one example of simile, metaphor, alliteration, and personification.</p>
<p><b>Plot</b> Create a book cover with a synopsis of the novel. Include only the major points of the plot in your novel, and be sure not to reveal the ending.</p>	<p><b>Figurative Language</b> Write a simile or metaphor to describe one of the events or characters in the novel. Use ArtPad to create a graphic representation of your simile/metaphor.</p>	<p><b>Character Analysis</b> Create a Facebook page or Twitter account for Greg, Rowley, or Rodrick. Use evidence from the text to create their profiles, tweets/posts from other characters, etc.</p>
<p><b>Figurative Language</b> Write a blog post to review the text. Use figurative language in your review (you must have at least 3 examples).</p>	<p><b>Character Analysis</b> Write a diary entry about one of the major events of the novel from the perspective of Rodrick. Use evidence from the text to support Rodrick’s opinion of the situation.</p>	<p><b>Plot</b> Use the Plot Analysis template on Inspiration 8 to analyze the plot of the novel. Be sure to choose symbols that relate to each event.</p>

Appendix C – Emotion Poem Template (before being converted to Comic Life)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Section: \_\_\_\_\_

**Emotion Poem Template: An Experiment with Gwendolyn Brooks' "Aloneness"**

**Template** (Fill-in this template to create your emotion poem. When you are finished, type your lines in a Microsoft Word document).



Title: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ is different than \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion Synonym (for your emotion)

\_\_\_\_\_ means \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion What it means

\_\_\_\_\_ means \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion Another meaning

\_\_\_\_\_ does not have a \_\_\_\_\_ sound.  
Your emotion Adjective (what it doesn't sound like)

It has a \_\_\_\_\_ sound.  
Onomatopoeia

\_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion Adjective

Almost like \_\_\_\_\_  
Similar to describe something that your emotion reminds you of

Or like \_\_\_\_\_  
Another simile to describe something that your emotion reminds you of

\_\_\_\_\_ makes you feel \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion Adjective (how does it make you feel?)

It looks \_\_\_\_\_  
An image in nature (that reminds you of your emotion)

\_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion A color to describe your emotion

It is as \_\_\_\_\_ as a \_\_\_\_\_  
Adjective Object (that reminds you of your emotion)

\_\_\_\_\_ is like that. Sometimes.

When you feel \_\_\_\_\_, you \_\_\_\_\_  
Your emotion (What do you do when you feel this way?)

Appendix D – Sample Student-Created Comic Life Assignment (Narrative Poetry)

**"A DAY AT SCHOOL"**

BY: MS. BLOOM'S STUDENT

**"BOOM"**

I'M WALKING DOWN THE HALL AND "BOOM" MY BOOKS FALL. I GOT DOWN TO CRAWL TO PICK UP THEM ALL. THE BOYS PLAY BALL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HALL WHILE THE GIRLS TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY GOT FROM THE MALL.

I WALK INTO MATH AND I SEE MY CLASS, ALL THE KIDS TALK AND LAUGH WHILE MS. SEIDNER GETS MAD. I SIT DOWN IN MY SEAT AND GET BOOK TO READ WHILE MS. SEIDNER YELLS "BE QUIET PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE."

ONCE THE BELL RINGS, EVERY BODY SCREAMS. SHE SAYS SIT DOWN YOUR STAYING WITH ME! SHE LET SOME PEOPLE GO NOT EVERYBODY THOUGH. WHEN THEY ASK SHE SAY NO, THEY SHRUG THEIR SHOULDERS SAYING "SO".

ON MY WAY TO LUNCH, I HEAR A BIG "CRUNCH. SOME BOY IS EATING APPLES AND ALL I HEAR IS MUNCH. MR. DARTY SAYS SIT, PUTS HIS HANDS ON HIS HIPS AND SAID I GOT SOME PINK SLIPS AND I CAN USE IT.

I AM IN THE LINE IN THE MIDDLE AND I HEAR A LOUD SIZZLE TOOK THE PIZZA IN THE MIDDLE IT WAS BURNT BUT JUST A LITTLE

**"CRUNCH"**

**"SIZZLE"**

I LEFT THE BUILDING FAST AND I HEARD A LOUD CRASH AND TWO CARS WAS SMASHED AND BOY WAS IT BAD.

SOME PEOPLE WAS FOOLS, SOME BROKE THE RULES BUT I HAD A PRETTY COOL, DAY AT SCHOOL.

**"CRASH"**