

Comic Cons

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,824

Connections

Writing and Art

Create a comic strip featuring your favorite fictional character.

Math

Pretend that you spend \$20,000 to organize a comic con. You decide to charge a \$25 admission fee. How many people will have to attend to cover your expenses? Show your work two different ways.

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Comic Cons



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Focus Question

Why are comic cons popular in modern-day culture?

Words to Know

censorship	merchandise
controversy	panel
conventions	pop culture
critical	screenings
diversity	themes
memoirs	venues

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

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Ticket holders make their way through the line to enter Comic-Con International: San Diego.

Welcome to Comic Con

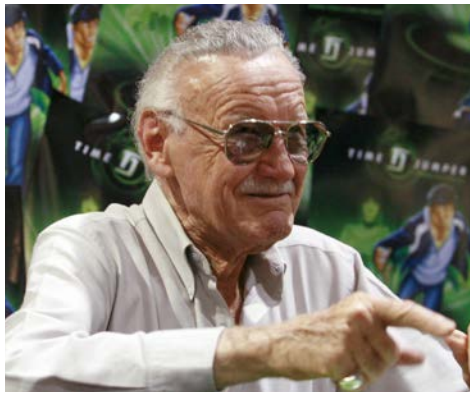
Packed with thousands of other fans in an auditorium, you wait impatiently for the stars to arrive onstage. It's warm in your Chewbacca costume, but it must be even warmer inside the helmet the guy two rows down is wearing. Who's he supposed to be, again? You crane your head to see better, but suddenly the audience is on its feet, cheering. You jump up just in time to see the Iron Man himself, Robert Downey Jr., stride out onstage. The *Avengers* **panel** has begun.

This is the world of comic cons: colorful, crowded, and built for fans of **pop culture**. If you collect comic books, watch cartoons, go to the movies, or play video games, there's something for you at a comic con.

These fan **conventions**, called *cons* for short, happen all over the country. Some are huge, with thousands of attendees and several days of events. Some are very small, lasting only a day or an afternoon. Comic cons have events and attractions for every kind of fan, from young children to adults, from hardcore gamers to obsessive readers, and everyone in between.

Origin Story

One of the first organizers of comic book conventions was Shel Dorf, a comic book artist. Dorf organized small gatherings of comic fans in Detroit in the 1960s. He went on to found the convention now known as Comic-Con International (CCI): San Diego in 1970. The San Diego convention



Legendary writer, editor, and publisher Stan Lee often appears at comic cons. Lee helped create many of Marvel Comics' most popular superheroes, including the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, Thor, Spider-Man, and the X-Men.

attracted about 100 fans in its first year. It has grown to become the largest comic con in the nation. Over 130,000 people have attended its events in recent years.

Hundreds of other comic cons have sprung up in San Diego's wake. There are cons with huge stars, huge **venues**, and huge attendance numbers in New York, Seattle, Denver, and Phoenix every year, to name a few. Tickets for these events sell out months in advance. Some fans camp at ticket booths for days to be sure they get in.

The Rise of an Art Form

What has spurred this explosive growth? First, comic books have become more popular in recent years. Comic books had many readers during the "Golden Age" of the 1930s and 1940s, but they became much less popular in the second half of the twentieth century. During that time, some



Superman was one of the most popular comic books of the "Golden Age."

people thought of comics as low-quality literature or as kid stuff. That perception is no longer true (if it ever was). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, comic book series such as *The Sandman* and *Watchmen* broke new ground for the art form, drawing devoted readers and **critical** acclaim.

Since then, interest in comic books has soared, and writers and artists continue to explore new topics and styles. Today, comic books have a wider range than ever. A modern comic might tell a traditional superhero story, a story about war, or a story about family drama. Graphic novels, a spin-off of comic books, are one of the most popular forms of young adult fiction at the moment.

Graphic **memoirs**, another popular spin-off of comic books, are at the cutting edge of adult nonfiction. For example, Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir/novel *Maus* is based on interviews with his father, a Holocaust survivor, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize—one of the highest literary awards in the country. As topics for comic books have expanded, so have audiences. Fans of every gender, color, age, and nationality can find something to relate to in comic books. As a result, comic con attendance is way, way up.



Art Spiegelman discusses *Maus* during the International Berlin Comic Festival.

Second, the enormous success of recent Hollywood movies based on comic book characters has brought many more people to comic cons. Movies such as the *Spider-Man* reboots of the 2000s, *Iron Man* (2008), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) were audience favorites and attracted new fans. Movies are now a big part of the programming at comic cons. Famous actors, writers, and directors from comic-book movies make regular appearances on panels and draw huge crowds.



Spider-Man first came to the big screen with a blockbuster film in 2002.

Movies are only the beginning, though. Comic cons around the world have expanded to include video games, novels, and television shows. The audience for comic cons has become so large that some fans have split off to form conventions focused on specific genres.

For example, many fans attend cons devoted to anime and manga (animated films and comic books from Japan). There are cons for fans and collectors of classic comics, cons for fans of sci-fi and fantasy fiction, and cons for fans of steampunk, horror, and humor, among many others.



Two fans show off their manga-style costumes.

Big Cons and Small

Comic cons happen in cities all over the country, too. Outside the huge conventions in San Diego and New York, you'll find smaller crowds but huge fan enthusiasm. Check online or in your local newspaper to find out if there's a comic con coming to a town near you. You might be surprised at what you'll find: local fans mingle with big-name cartoonists and movie stars at many smaller cons. At any comic con in the country, you might come across the star of your favorite show or the writer of your favorite books. You are also likely to meet local artists and make new friends.

Cosplay

Comic cons are places where many fans display their own creativity. Many do this through the comic con tradition of cosplay: fans dressing up in costumes as characters from comic books, anime, manga, and other fantasy genres. Cosplay is serious business for fans worldwide. Cosplay costumes can be bought from costume providers, custom-built, or handmade. Many cosplayers carry realistic reproductions of a character's weapons and accessories. Some cosplayers act like their favorite characters while they are in costume.



Cosplayers show off costumes inspired by the sci-fi computer and console game *Halo*.

Costumes can be simple or incredibly detailed. Figuring out how to make or build a costume is a big part of the fun for many fans. Cosplay is a major part of comic cons worldwide, with vendors selling costumes in the convention exhibit halls and hundreds of costumed fans in the audience. Many conventions also hold cosplay contests, where cosplayers can pose for photos and act in skits based on their characters.

Celebrity Appearances

At comic cons, fans can also interact with creators on a personal level. A huge part of comic cons' appeal comes from the panels of writers, artists, actors, and directors who appear on panels at the conventions. At these panels, audience members can hear their favorite stars speak about the experience of making comic books, films, and shows. Audience members can sometimes ask direct questions during panels, have their photos taken with celebrities, and get autographs. These personal interactions become treasured memories for many fans. Celebrities themselves frequently say they have positive memories about their comic con experiences. They often note how warm, friendly, and devoted the fans at conventions tend to be.



Isaac Hempstead-Wright and Elle Fanning appear at CCI: San Diego to promote their animated film *The Boxtrolls*.



Attendees flow through the giant exhibit hall at the New York Comic Con in New York City.

The Exhibit Hall

The center of most comic cons is the exhibit hall, where people mingle, talk, and shop. All kinds of material related to comic books, movies, TV, games, and other forms of pop culture is on display. Fans can buy and trade comic books here, along with other **merchandise** such as action figures and toys. Experienced collectors can find rare and unique editions of comic books, and beginning collectors can get a head start on their collections. There is often an author signing area in the exhibit hall where fans can meet artists and writers. Even if you're not looking to buy anything, there is always a great deal to see in the exhibit hall. Cosplayers wander by in colorful costumes; movies and movie trailers are shown regularly. Celebrity sightings are always possible, and there is an endless supply of colorful merchandise to browse through.

Between fan cosplay contests, panels, movie **screenings**, shopping, and conversation, comic cons are an enormous draw for audiences worldwide and are entertainment in their own right.

Growing Pains and Issues

The growth of comic cons has not come without some **controversy**, though. Some comic book fans feel that the bigger cons have become much too large and that the focus has moved too far away from comic books. With all the fans of movies, TV, books, and games, they argue, the original inspiration for comic cons can get lost. Many comic cons could indeed be more accurately described as pop culture conventions rather than comic book conventions. The audience for comic books and comic cons has changed as well. While comic book readers and comic con attendees used to be largely male, about forty percent of recent CCI: San Diego attendees are female. Some statistics show that among con attendees under thirty, about half are women. In fact, a whole generation of younger fans are discovering cons: more than half of the people attending recent cons are under twenty-nine. The increased **diversity** of the comic con audience brings larger crowds and is a welcome development for most fans.

Comic cons can also be a place to discuss larger controversies. With the recent comeback of the comic book form, authors have taken on serious and highly charged topics like race, gender, politics, and war. These comics are not to everyone's liking. Some comics can even become the subjects of "banned book" campaigns, in which a community asks a library or school to take a book off the shelves. *Spider-Man* and *Batman* comics, to use two familiar examples, have been challenged in some communities because of adult language or **themes**.

Readers, teachers, and librarians have discussed **censorship** on panels at several recent comic cons. One result of these discussions has been the rise of the labels "graphic novel" and "graphic memoir" to describe comic books that are intended for adult audiences. Some comics are still aimed at children, but comics as a whole are no longer "kids only." Some comics are fictional and some aren't; some are educational, and some are meant for entertainment. Some deal with adult themes, while others provide an escape into fantasy worlds. Since comics are diverse, should all comics be shelved together in libraries and schools? What role do comics have in our larger society? These questions are frequent topics at comic con panels.

Pushing the Boundaries

The expansion of the comic book landscape can be challenging, but overall it's an exciting time for comic cons.



A young girl shows off her pink *Star Wars* stormtrooper costume at CCI: San Diego.

The huge diversity of the comics available today has resulted in bigger, more diverse audiences for comics and conventions.

Fans of every age, gender, and

nationality can find themselves represented in a comic somewhere. Heroes might look like Superman, a young girl from Botswana, or a reporter on the ground in Bosnia. There is no limit to what can happen in a comic book or who can be its heroes. In the end, this is what draws people to comic cons. The cons (and the fictional stories that inspire them) create worlds where ordinary people can be transformed into heroes. People lose themselves in possibility every time they dress up as a favorite character, trade books and trivia questions with fellow fans, and shake hands with an artist at a comic con. Many people return to that experience over and over.

Glossary

censorship (<i>n.</i>)	the omission or suppression of all or part of a publication, play, or film (p. 14)
controversy (<i>n.</i>)	a disagreement over an issue (p. 13)
conventions (<i>n.</i>)	large gatherings where people discuss their work or a shared interest (p. 5)
critical (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to people who carefully judge for review (p. 6)
diversity (<i>n.</i>)	a wide variety of many things (p. 13)
memoirs (<i>n.</i>)	written retellings of people's experiences (p. 7)
merchandise (<i>n.</i>)	items that are bought or sold (p. 12)
panel (<i>n.</i>)	a group of people invited to knowledgeably discuss a subject in front of an audience (p. 4)
pop culture (<i>n.</i>)	popular ideas or entertainment communicated through mass media (p. 4)
screenings (<i>n.</i>)	organized showings of movies or television programs (p. 13)
themes (<i>n.</i>)	the main ideas of artistic works (p. 14)
venues (<i>n.</i>)	places where organized events are held (p. 6)