

Writing Lines: Blurring the Boundaries between Visual and Written Genres

Karoline Kniss

In this article, Karoline Kniss explores her process for creating political cartoons using a framework she developed through her experiences as an artist and student of genres studies. She focuses on a cartoon she created criticizing the No Child Left Behind Act and examines how the model she created for drawing cartoons is also useful for other kinds of creative activity.

Introduction

My formal training in political cartoons comes from high school art classes where my cartoons were carefully analyzed and critiqued by my instructor—over and over again. “Draw this smaller. Think of your colors. Design, design, design!” were all reinforced religiously. So, I drew and redrew, followed general and somewhat unspecific standards that were sometimes taught and sometimes learned through error, and used my creative skills to produce the best work I could. After four years of drafting and redrafting, I found that art was still my strong suit, favorite past-time, and personal release from the world, even if it meant I had a teacher yelling at me.

So, when I’m feeling antsy, bored, and somewhat controversial, I like to draw political cartoons. I consider it a stress reliever and a way to get my mind off things; it’s like exercise but with a little more thought and creativity. Practicing in my sketchbook has helped me develop and detail my own routine for creating cartoons, and thanks to my English 101 class, I’ve learned the logistics of looking into a genre and finding what standards are needed to make an example of it. During class, I developed a process while

thoroughly examining a few genres that I now use to help me work in all types of genres. Because of this work, I'm confident that I can use my creative skills to produce excellent work, and I want to share my experience with you.

I want to start by showing you my process for making my cartoons. The basics of this process are choosing and developing a form, finding an audience, picking a specific topic, and planning the purpose I want to accomplish in my work. Obviously, form (political cartoon) was easy for me to choose because I know the genre well. For audience, I chose my age group because I know how we think, act, and feel about most stuff. Topic was another easy choice for me because I have always felt very strongly about the No Child Left Behind Act. My purpose was to show my feelings about NCLB as a creative release from built-up political and educational stress.

Form: Why a Cartoon?

The good thing about art is that there are lots of different types you can work in. Based on your particular taste, the message you're trying to convey, and how you want the piece to look, you can choose the medium that works for you. While I do consider myself an artist, I'm still not great in all areas. The material I struggle with most is watercolor. For some reason, I have a hard time getting my technique perfected. Watercolor begins with accurate drawing where your hand can't smudge the work, and since I was taught to write by a lefty, I always rest my right hand on the paper and drag it across my work. And once I finish the initial sketch, using watercolors is very demanding because I have to constantly change water, clean brushes, and keep puddles off of the paper to prevent muddy colors.

Unlike watercolor, cartooning lets me make use of my strengths; I can use my lack of precision to my advantage. Recognizing who a person is based on a few key features of their face, body, etc. is all that is required for a cartoon to work, and for the rest of the details, I can get away with less because cartoons are expected to be simple. The simplicity of this form makes it easier for me to jot down the image in my head without worrying about more difficult and time consuming technicalities that come with other forms of art. While some genres require you to make a mini-model of your work, cartooning is essentially just a sketch.

Audience: Who's Going to Care about This?

My age group was as easy audience for me to pick because I'm a part of it and I understand how we work. Also, I figured that since I didn't keep up with politics, there had to be a good portion of my audience that didn't either. Adults pay attention to the news and new legislation more than college students do, but it's still important that college students think about these things. Political cartoons are a good method for getting young adults to think about current news because summarizing the effects of an important piece of legislation into a hilarious cartoon is more appealing and comprehensible than the politics section of a CNN news broadcast.

Young adults are one of the age groups that politicians need the most support from. If we believe in them, politicians have the chance of capturing our votes for their entire careers. If not, well, they lose out on some critical votes as well as influence on the next generation. Yet, a majority of us don't vote because we don't *believe in* what our country is doing, don't *understand* what our country is doing, and don't *feel* that our votes or participation in the government will influence a decision. Nevertheless, we are a powerful age group, and one of the main goals of my cartooning is helping young people understand their importance in politics. Young adults will become the new America, and we have the ability to learn from the mistakes of today and, hopefully, create a better tomorrow.

Topic and Purpose: Why NCLB?

The piece of legislation that I felt would fit my audience best is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. NCLB doesn't just affect schools and faculty, but students as well. For example, all students have to deal with long, boring, and often pointless preparation for standardized tests, the standardized tests themselves, and the effects that come from not reaching the mandated goals on those tests, whether it's their own fault or simply the poor education their school provides.

NCLB is one of the laws that has impacted me the most (a.k.a., frustrated me the most) so far in my life. It was designed and enacted under George W. Bush's presidency to get all children in America to 100% proficiency in reading and math by 2014. The problem with NCLB is that it has proven *impossible* to get every child proficient in reading and math in that time frame. Besides that problem, the bill also cuts funding to schools who don't meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), an improvement in standardized test scores each year. My school district had met AYP every year since the law was enacted, but

last year our ACT scores decreased slightly and my district lost funding as a result. My school district is not the only one having problems; many school districts across the nation are facing similar issues. When funding is decreased as a result of these test scores, schools are forced to give less money to or completely remove useful services, extracurricular programs such as art and music, and other educational resources for students.

Through my cartoon, I wanted to show how the NCLB Act has not improved our nation's schools and has not reached most of its goals, even under the Obama Administration. Only some improvements have been made on overall test scores, schools are losing funding, and 100% proficiency won't be attainable by 2014. So, why is this law still in effect?

Model: How Do I Know What a Good Cartoon Is?

After I had decided all of this, I had a pretty good idea for my cartoon, but I also did a bit of artistic research to help myself out. I've listed some of the URL's that I used as reference at the end of the article. I first looked at more recent examples of Barack Obama and NCLB to help me get a feel for representations of Obama and how other artists like to depict him. I also looked at older cartoons that were produced during the Bush administration, which helped me understand how people thought of Bush and NCLB. Once I had the art references I needed, I sat down and drew it.

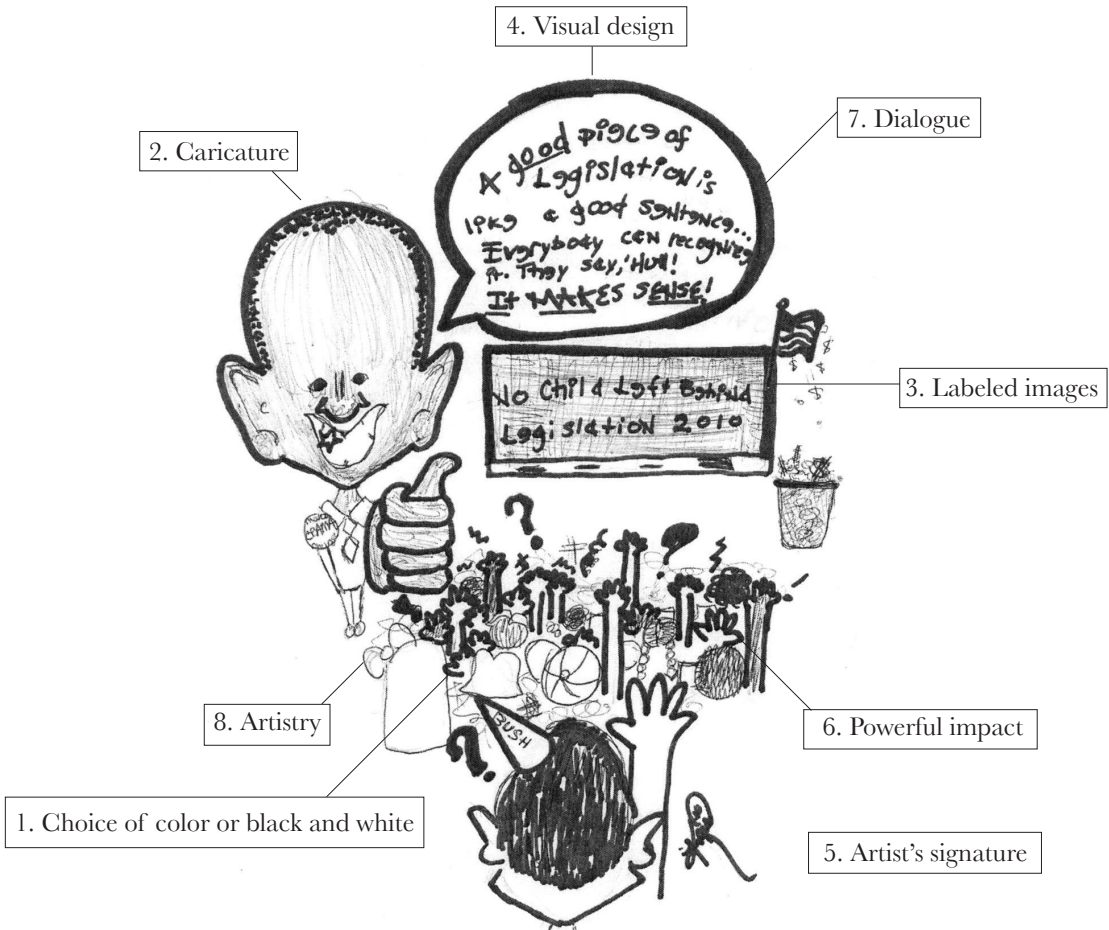
My cartoon is a good example of the genre of political cartoons, but to prove to you I know my stuff I've made a list of standards that are necessary to create a successful cartoon and then pointed them out in my finished cartoon.

- 1.) *Choice of color or black and white:* Color allows more details to be shown and is more pleasing and noticeable for viewers but requires more technical skill. I chose black and white because it is less time consuming.
- 2.) *Caricatures:* Caricatures exaggerate certain traits to make a joke or get a point across. This helped me create a bit of humor (cartoons are meant to be somewhat funny) as well as to emphasize the important points I was trying to make. My Obama caricature consists of a shining smile, happy attitude, and reassurance of well-being because of the thumbs up. This emphasizes that Obama doesn't seem too worried about the problem that NCLB is creating. George Bush is caricatured as a "dunce," someone who doesn't quite understand what's going on. His large ears, caricatured by many artists, suggest that he has a personality like "Dumbo," the elephant who has a reputation of being the odd man out or not fully aware. I drew him that way because I

wanted to make the point that Bush wasn't aware of the improvements (or lack thereof) that resulted from NCLB.

- 3.) *Labeled images*: Labels clarify possibly confusing or unrecognizable visuals and set up the setting for the cartoon. I used the Obama Pin as a label to be sure my audience would know who the drawing was supposed to represent, and I put “No Child Left Behind” on the chalkboard to make sure my audience knew what Obama was discussing.
- 4.) *Visual design*: I am a big fan of visual irony in political cartoons because it adds to the hilarity of the cartoon and creates a shock that can help get your audience's attention. The words “spoken” by Obama were a quote of his I found (used out of context, but effective for my cartoon). The quote is ironic because the No Child Left Behind Act is not making sense to everyone in the classroom (Finnegan 27). I chose the scrawling, almost illegible font because I wanted to show that, hey, even Obama is “left behind” by the government's educational legislation. Bush's dunce cap and raised hand emphasized that he wasn't exactly wise in some of his decisions, *ahem* NCLB. The children with their hands raised demonstrate my view that kids are confused about Obama's words, his actual opinion on the NCLB legislation, and his continuing support for a piece of legislation that isn't working. It could also point out that test scores aren't improving as dramatically as hoped under NCLB and that no one (parents, teachers, Congress) understands or sees progress from the NCLB legislation. Point being: why should we have children, faculty, and schools suffer from a law that hasn't been proved beneficial?
- 5.) *Artist's signature*: All political cartoon artists sign their work to show who deserves credit for the work and as a way to prove they did the work.
- 6.) *Powerful impact*: The purpose of a political cartoon is to emphasize an interesting view of a problem, the need for change in a law or other aspect of public policy, or the artist's opinion of some issue. I feel that my cartoon, through what I included and how I chose to draw it, does exactly that. With my opinion clearly shown through my art, the cartoon is easily understood, makes a strong impression, and the image's details help me prove my point.
- 7.) *Dialogue*: Dialogue generally explains what's happening in the cartoon. Real quotes are often used, sometimes out of context, to get a point across. Obama's quote was originally used in the *New Yorker* on May 31, 2004 in the article “The Candidate,” which discussed the early part of Obama's race against Jack Ryan for one of the Illinois Senate Seats in Congress (Finnegan 25).

8.) *Artistry*: Basic art concepts are needed to make a cartoon art (duh). Some of the technical terms for what I used are depth (shading, differing thicknesses of lines), perception (shading and sizing of figures), and detail (added dots, lines, and shapes used to make an object look more realistic).



Reflection: What Are the Lines We Are Writing Within?

What I hope I've shown through my creative process for political cartoons is that it makes use of some of the same processes as creating a text. While the genre you're working in may be quite different in some ways, the process that I outline here is an example that you can consider as you start your own work. As Courtney Schoolmaster stated in her article from the 2010 *Writing Research Annual*, "Follow the Breadcrumbs: Adhering to the Conventions of a Genre":

I know the steps. Well, they aren't really steps, they're conventions: loose guidelines that direct how the genre looks, sounds, acts and interacts using the elements of writing. The problem is that while most writing uses the same elements, thesis, introduction, conclusion, etc., the way in which they are used differs. (58–59)

Courtney's point holds for my own work. Like the conventions for a paper, I'm following the set of conventions I listed above that govern political cartoons. Basically, although not necessarily paper, every genre has an audience, form, purpose, and topic, as well as conventions that establish how those features should work together effectively.

Writing jargon aside, it's important that visual and written genres can do the same work in different ways. Visuals can work just as well or better than texts in many situations. For example, the comparison papers I did in high school could be summed up with a simple Venn diagram. There's no need for the extraneous information (introduction, conclusion, transitions, etc.) found in a comparative essay when the important points being compared can be summarized in diagram form. While descriptive wording can create pictures in readers' minds in a story, pictures can emphasize and make clear specific details in an analysis paper. Beyond papers and school stuff, advertising genres like fliers and posters need interesting visuals, like bright contrasting colors, to grab a viewer's attention.

Here's a thought: if a routine like mine is useful for art and writing, is it possible to use it for both? In my opinion, yes. Visuals aren't used as much as they should be. Visual learners like me find it harder to retain information in boring typed text because it's just that—*boring*. With pictures, lists, charts, and diagrams, text can be broken up, which holds a reader's attention *and* helps explain information. Sometimes visual texts just work better than written texts. Easy viewing/minimal reading genres like websites, posters, and fliers are used all of the time to display crucial information in a way that is fast and easy for the reader to understand. If this information was just typed out on the page, it would make reading inefficient and slow. Don't get stuck turning everything into a paper; think about all of the options that you have available to you.

So, how can you use all these different ideas that I've talked about? Well, I started by working in something I like doing (cartooning). Through it, I practiced and learned and worked to create a process that I've found works for all kinds of creating. Try that out yourself. Look into a genre, understand what the importance of the genre is, and create standards to work by. Do some research to help build a routine. This will not only help you with your current work; it will help you work in other genres in the future. It's funny to think

my drawing experience helped me improve my writing skills, but nonetheless, I am a better artist in both visual and text genres. The skills I developed through personal exploration have improved all of my work. So, do what I did. Just find your genre, your anything, that drives you to understand how it works and build your own foundation for creating better work.

Websites for Cartoon Examples

<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/politicalcartoons/ig/Education-Cartoons/No-Child-Left-Behind.htm>

<http://www.scriptedspontaneity.com/2008/01/teachers-new-years-resolutions-part-2/>

Works Cited

Finnegan, William. "The Candidate." *The New Yorker*. 31 May 2004: 25-31. Print.

Schoolmaster, Courtney S. "Adhering to the Conventions of a Genre." *The ISU Writing Research Annual*. Plymouth, MI: Hayden-McNeil, 2010. 57-61. Print.



Karoline Kniss is a sophomore Insurance major at Illinois State University who would enjoy candle lit dinners and long walks along the beach, but due to her upbringing, she settles for eating in front of the TV and walking down the country roads. Her latest goal is to get a fulfilling student job at Watterson Dining Center so her parents can finally shut up about her expensive education, but is fully aware they'll complain no matter what she gets. Karoline hopes to graduate with a degree in either Insurance or International Business and a minor in Spanish in 2014.

