

## Technology and Adult Learning

# Comic Life: Creatively Integrating Writing and Digital Skills with Adult Learners

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Years ago, as a part-time GED writing instructor for students ages 18-21 in a high school equivalency program in the Southwest Bronx, I found that learners felt constrained by writing assignments and frustrated by their inability to produce a cohesive essay from start to finish that would meet exam requirements. Open-ended writing prompts, while intended to elicit extended responses, often left learners feeling anxious and unsure about whether their responses were adequate or sufficient. They harped on how to say things in the right way. The prompts did not inspire them to think creatively or produce texts that felt authentic to their life experiences.

Rather than focus on writing as test preparation, my co-instructors and I designed activities to help learners get thinking, generate ideas, and experience the twists and turns of the writing process. We often asked learners to bring in an image or photograph (digital or print) that in some way visualized their personal journey or knowledge of a topic. The use of visual imagery provided a starting point for an essay and seemed to lessen the anxiety brought on by the blinking cursor on a blank page. It allowed learners to focus on arc of the narrative rather than get caught up on technical language or structure of the composition. The goal was to get learners to understand that writing was something they were fully—and already—capable of doing.

Writing skills, like any skills, need to be explicitly learned and practiced. In adult education settings, learners often experience a writing block, especially those who have been out of school for years (Pugh, 2021). Gruen (2018) found that the use of composition *makerspaces*—where people blend digital and physical technologies to explore ideas, learn technical skills, and create new products—improved adult learners' skills and practices in communication,

problem-solving, motivation, self-esteem, and technology. Gruen (2018) demonstrates how the iterative *process* of composing with new technology—such as podcasts or blogs—allowed adult learners to reframe failure as positive and necessary for honing critical skills.

The purpose of this article is to explore the use of Comic Life—an app designed to help users create original comic strips or graphic narratives on a variety of topics—to support the development of composition skills for adults. Comic Life can provide a valuable and low-stakes entry point for writing skills across subject areas, particularly for those who struggle with essay writing.

The act of creating digital comics can help adult learners synthesize and present information or arguments in a clear, concise, and fun way, while practicing language, vocabulary, and technology skills. Through visual imagery and storytelling, Comic Life makes writing a joyful learning experience and can help adult learners work through many of the *psychosocial* barriers that writing in a social setting brings up, such as beliefs, values, attitudes, or perceptions about learning (Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever, 2024). As adult learners play with the tool and construct their comics, educators can effectively assess diverse learner needs and explicitly support the development of digital, language, and writing skills that individual adult learners need to thrive in and out of academic settings.

## What Is Comic Life?

Comic Life (<http://comiclifecom.com>) is an app that allows users to transform images or photos from their life into an original comic. With access to a seemingly endless source of fonts, templates, and speech balloon

styles, users can arrange images to design and caption a compelling narrative. In an adult learning setting, Comic Life can be used to help learners organize and process new information, apply developing language and vocabulary skills, and demonstrate their understanding across content areas. Comic Life provides ample ideas for educators and learners to generate digital graphic stories across science, history, and Language Arts, for example.

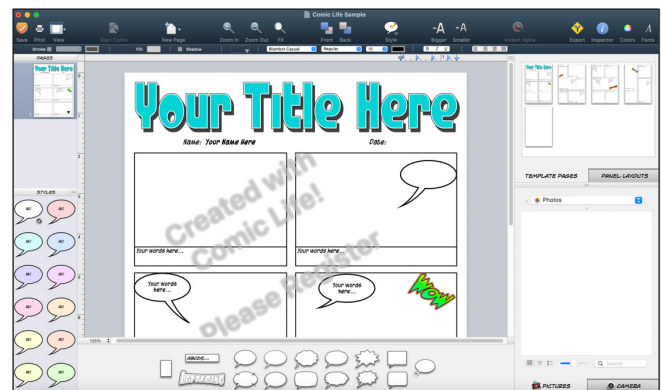
Educators can leverage Comic Life to support adult learners in practicing the critical writing skills needed to achieve their high school equivalency diploma, such as essay organization, sentence structure, and mechanics. At the same time, using the Comic Life software creates opportunities for adults to learn and immediately apply digital literacy skills that are transferable to other contexts, such as using google search for images or information on a topic, storing or sharing photos, dragging and dropping images, adjusting font style and size, and saving documents. Comic Life also allows learners to make strong connections to their background knowledge and lived experiences, from integrating personal photos from their smartphones to using humor and storytelling as strategies to share their knowledge.

## How to Use Comic Life

Comic Life is a paid application (\$19.99 per educator and learner license) but offers a free trial version of its software for mac and windows. Comic Life 3 offers multiple features such as new templates, script editor, advanced filters for photos, and new editing controls to bend and connect speech bubbles. Comic Life provides an immersive learning experience that allows adult learners to simultaneously organize ideas, practice foundational writing skills, and apply problem-solving skills. The skills used to create a digital comic are practical and transferable across learning contexts. Educators can download a free version and register for a 30-day trial to test the app. After 30 days, educators can then buy the software from Comic Life's plasq store and register the account or download from the Mac App Store.

Given the number of potential design features and applications, adult educators should provide clear instructions, examples, and vocabulary definitions to ensure that learners feel confident in their ability to try

out the tool and take creative risks throughout the graphic writing process. To design a comic, learners can start by selecting a template from several thematic templates, including a classic comic as shown in Figure 1. Depending on the theme or topic, educators can help learners create an outline of their essay or story using visuals only. Learners will then gather a set of images to craft their narrative, drawing from stock images or personal photos from their smartphone. Learners can transfer images from their smartphones to their computers using various methods such as USB cables, email, or cloud storage services, such as google photo or Dropbox. The more tech-savvy adult educators can also help learners generate original images that precisely capture a phrase or experience with AI-image generators, such as Canva Text-to-Image, to use in Comic Life narratives (Cacicio & Riggs, 2023). Once the images are added, learners can resize, reposition, and customize them within the comic frames. Next, they can caption the image with written text and add speech bubbles and other graphic elements to create their comic.



**FIGURE 1** shows an example of a blank classic template in Comic Life. Learners can drag and drop images and type content below each image. They can also add story bubbles to create a comic narrative.

After completing their comic, learners can save their work within the Comic Life application. They can export the final comic in various formats such as PDF, image files, or other compatible formats to be printed or shared digitally.

With Comic Life, learners apply the same writing skills as with standard essay writing, outlining a topic sentence,

providing supporting details, and/or crafting an argument or story. Re-ordering and revising ideas are essential components of the graphic writing process. In this way, all learners experience writing as a nonlinear, creative practice, while becoming comfortable with technology and multimedia tools. Ideally, using digital tools like Comic Life can reduce the anxiety that adults experience with writing, and enable adult learners to view writing as a creative process that improves with practice.

## Access a Free Trial

To access a free trial, you can take the following steps:

1. Visit the Comic Life website at <https://plasq.com/apps/comiclife/macwin/> and navigate to the download or free trial button on the home page. Select the “Try It For Free” button. This will prompt you to download the version of the software that suits your device.
2. Provide your email address and other information to confirm access to the free trial.
3. Follow the on-screen instructions to download and install the software on your computer. When it prompts you to register, click “Not Yet” to complete the request for a free trial. After 30 days, educators can purchase the software from <http://plasq.com/store/>.

## Opportunities to Strengthen Adult English Learning Through Comic Life

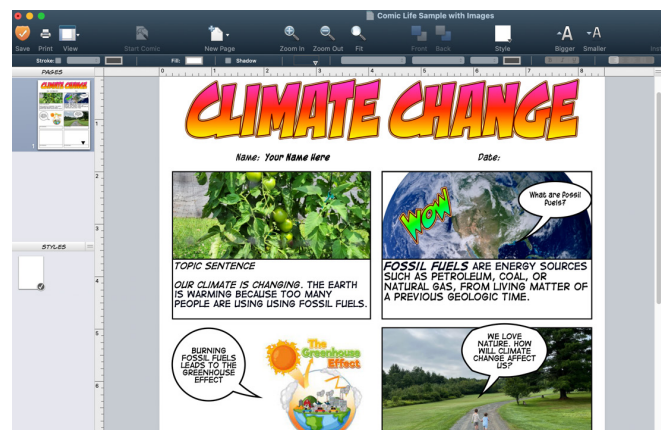
Comic Life can be a valuable and engaging tool for all adult learners. But for English learners, this tool can be especially effective as it offers a creative, low-stakes way to integrate language, vocabulary, and digital skills in real time. To effectively support writing skills using Comic Life, educators must provide clear guidelines, define key skills and terms, and model how to use key features, such as dropping an image into the template and adding captions or speech bubbles.

Here are several ways in which adult educators can use Comic Life with multilingual learners:

- **Assessment Tool:** Learner-created comics can be used to evaluate learners’ understanding of a topic

or language concept. It can serve as a formative assessment tool to determine language proficiency skills in English. In terms of content-area knowledge, educators can assign Comic Life tasks around specific themes or topics, such as the role of fossil fuels in global warming as exemplified in Figure B.

- **Digital Literacy:** Today, writing is largely a digital process. Using Comic Life is another opportunity to learn and apply digital literacy skills, such as working with images, using a search engine, saving a document in a digital folder, and typing.
- **Speaking and Listening:** The comics can involve dialogue between characters, integrating short, meaningful opportunities to practice descriptive text, vocabulary, and grammar skills. Adult learners can read their comics aloud or in pairs, helping them improve their pronunciation and intonation skills.
- **Vocabulary Building:** Comic Life allows students to integrate text with visual images from stock photos—or from their personal life—providing a visual context for new vocabulary or content-area knowledge.
- **Writing Practice:** English learners can create comic strips or short graphic stories to practice narrative or argumentative essay writing. Rather than start with a blank screen, Comic Life starts with visuals, aiding critical thinking and problem-solving to first visually construct a text, then add language to describe ideas in development.



**FIGURE B** shows an example of integrating personal and free stock images to explore the issue of climate change.

## Limitations of Comic Life

While Comic Life can be a useful tool for creating comics and visual storytelling, it does have some limitations for adult learning classrooms. Here are a few potential drawbacks to consider:

- **Access to visuals:** Comic Life requires some level of skill for working with digital images. While many adult learners know how to take, share, and upload images with a smartphone, Comic Life software can only be used on a laptop or desktop computer. Working with digital images on a computer is a distinct experience and may require explicit instruction or support.
- **Cost:** Comic Life is not a free software. Users may need to purchase a license to access the full range of features. While the cost is relatively affordable at \$19.99 per license, many adult educators are volunteers or do not have program budgets to purchase edtech tools for instruction.
- **Digital skills:** As described above, Comic Life requires a basic level of digital skills to use. This tool may not be suitable for adult learners who are novice computer users. It has the potential to overwhelm digital beginners and derail the focus on writing or other subject area content.
- **Individual activity:** While learners could work in pairs, there is not really an option to collaboratively create or edit Comic Life in real time. Comic Life is best used to support an individual graphic writing experience.
- **Learning curve:** This tool takes some getting used to for educators and learners and time is always

a consideration in adult learning contexts. When planning to use Comic Life, educators need to allot additional time for explicit instruction, modeling, and one-one support. A key focus of using Comic Life should be on the creative process, not the product. Educators should also consider teaching the key tech terms needed to effectively use Comic Life up front.

- **Platform limitations:** Comic Life is supported by Windows and macOS, but users of other operating systems may not have access to the software. It is not available on mobile devices.

## Conclusion

Adult learners need support in visualizing and structuring their thoughts to convey ideas to specific audiences. In addition to creativity, problem-solving, and language skills for example, writing often involves multiple digital literacy skills, from operating a computer and navigating digital resources to communicating in digital environments through word processing, email, and other formats (Digital Promise, n.d.). As part of the writing process, adult learners need to be able to “skillfully use digital tools and develop a discovery and risk-taking mindset toward navigating online” (Frank & Casek, 2017). The use of digital tools, such as Comic Life, can aid the development of writing skills and help learners experience the ebbs and flows of the writing and revision process. It can inspire learners to think creatively, organize ideas, process information, and most importantly, identify as capable writers, and potentially, artists.

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