

## When Superman died

**Level:** Intermediate upwards

**Timing:** 90 minutes plus

**Summary:** A lesson about the well-known comic figure, Superman, and the creators' daring decision to kill him off to improve sales. This lesson is based around an original article first published in Business Spotlight Issue 5/2014. In this lesson, students will:

1. study a text about Superman and the decision to kill him off;
2. discuss comic books, related merchandise and superpowers;
3. research a topic and give a presentation.

**Material needed:** One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the comic-book cover per class or per student, as you prefer

**Group size:** Any

### Warmer

Hand out the worksheet and direct students to the warmer task. The task introduces the theme of superheroes and allows students to pool their knowledge.

At this stage, you may want to show the students the front cover of the comic book to prompt some discussion about the image.

### Key words

Students read the definitions and match them to the key words. Then they should read the article to find the key words and see how they are used in context. The definitions are listed in the order that the words and phrases appear in the article.

**Key:**

1. revamp; 2. story arc; 3. Doomsday; 4. documentary; 5. issue; 6. tortured; 7. grieve; 8. gut; 9. obituary; 10. gimmick

### Understanding the article

Without referring back to the article, students answer the questions and, then, discuss their answers.

**Key:**

1. 1938
2. 1992

3. They tried to revamp the comic series in the 1980s and, later, they wanted Superman and Lois Lane to marry.
4. Lois Lane, his girlfriend and colleague
5. DC Comics, owned by Warner Brothers
6. They thought the world was taking him for granted and they wanted to show people what the world would be like without Superman. Also, they had no other ideas.
7. The result was record-breaking sales. People queued to buy it and six million copies were sold.
8. It included an obituary and a black armband.

### Expressions

a. Students put the words at the end of each sentence in the correct order to make expressions from the article and then talk about what the expressions mean. To extend this task, ask the students to use the expressions in sentences of their own.

b. In part b of the task, students look for the words that precede *sales* in the article and add them to the diagram. After doing this, they should add further words that make other commonly used collocations with *sales* – *annual sales*, *declining sales*, *global sales*, etc.

**Key:**

**a.**

1. lost some of its magic (no longer as special as it was; become mundane or boring)
2. taking Superman for granted (failing to appreciate Superman properly because they had become so used to him)
3. give the story a dramatic turn (give it an impressive or powerful twist or direction)
4. put on hold (postponed)
5. grieve at the hero's loss (feel extremely sad because he died)

**b. falling; improve; record-breaking**

### Teaching and learning strategy: vocabulary games

Did you know that students can practise and improve their word skills, as well as their reading and comprehension skills, by playing the free online games on the Macmillan Dictionary website? This link takes you directly to the games:

[www.macmillandictionary.com/language-games/](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/language-games/).

## When Superman died

### Discussion

Prompt the students to provide more than yes or no answers to the questions by asking further questions, such as "When?" or "Why?".

### Research tasks

Students choose one of the topics and research it before presenting their findings to the class. This could be done as a homework task, depending on the amount of time available.

### Extension

Students can read a follow-on story about the death of another comic book hero here:

[www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/03/x-man-wolverine-die-dead-marvel-comic](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/03/x-man-wolverine-die-dead-marvel-comic).

### Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

### Related topics on onestopenglish

The following methodology article gives suggestions on using comic strips in class:

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/support/ask-the-experts/methodology-questions/methodology-using-comic-strips-in-class/146395.article>

## When Superman died

### 1 Warmer

Draw / describe Superman's logo.

Do the same for any other comic book superheroes you know of.

In your opinion, which is the most universally recognizable? Why?

### 2 Key words

Read the definitions and match them to the key words. Then, find them in the article to read them in context.

story arc  
Doomsday

documentary  
tortured

grieve  
gimmick

gut  
issue

revamp  
obituary

1. to improve the way that something looks or operates by making major changes to it  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. an extended or continuing storyline \_\_\_\_\_
3. a time in the future when some people believe that the world will end, used here to mean *death*  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. a film or television programme about real people and events  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. a set of magazines published at a particular time \_\_\_\_\_
6. made to feel extremely worried or upset about something  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. to feel extremely sad because someone has died \_\_\_\_\_
8. an informal word for *stomach* \_\_\_\_\_
9. a report in a newspaper that announces someone's death and gives a short description of their life and achievements \_\_\_\_\_
10. something that is intended to impress and interest you (especially to make you buy something) but that is really not serious or useful \_\_\_\_\_

## When Superman died

### When Superman died

by Vicki Sussens



Superman had to die in order for him to be reborn and start his new life. Vicki Sussens reports on the marketing gag that made history.

#### 1 The background

The popular comic series *Superman*, introduced by DC Comics in 1938, had lost some of its magic by the 1990s. A revamp in the 1980s hadn't stopped falling sales. In 1992, DC editors decided to modernize the character. As writer Jerry Ordway said at the time: "People thought of Superman as their grandfathers' hero." To make him appear more human, the editors decided to give the story a dramatic turn: Clark Kent, both journalist and Superman, would tell Lois Lane, his colleague and love, his real identity and the two would marry.

#### 2 The problem

Warner Brothers, which owns DC Comics, had already decided to use the wedding idea in a new TV series called *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, so the comic version was put on hold. This meant that the DC team had to create a new story arc. In a brainstorming meeting, the team sat with arms folded, angry and with no ideas, says editor Mike Carlin in *Superman Doomsday: Requiem & Rebirth*, a

documentary on the death of the superhero. Ordway then famously said, "Let's kill him," a joke he made every time the team worked on a new story. Carlin realized they had found their idea.

#### 3 The solution

"The world was taking Superman for granted, so we said, 'Let's show what the world would be like without Superman'," explains Carlin. The superhero had been made to appear dead in other issues, so, this time, it had to seem real. He would come back to life, but only after the readers had been "tortured" long enough, as Editor-in-Chief Jenette Kahn says in the documentary. The team then wrote a story that would make both Superman characters and readers grieve at the hero's loss. Indeed, the writers themselves – including Carlin – fight tears in the documentary as they describe his death. Writer Karl Kesel says that, when Lois holds Superman in her arms while he is dying, it is like a "punch to the gut".

#### 4 What happened next

DC Comics announced the death of Superman before the first of the multi-issue story *The Death and Return of Superman* came out in November 1992. It created a media storm. One comic-book dealer wrote to Carlin that DC Comics had no more right to kill this "national figure" than Walt Disney had to kill Mickey Mouse. The issue of *Superman* in which the superhero died (vol 2, no 75) sold out on the first day, with people queuing to buy it. A special edition included an obituary and a black armband. All in all, six million copies were sold and the rest of the series enjoyed record-breaking sales. When Superman returned, DC Comics was accused of using a gimmick to improve sales. However, they certainly gave the superhero a spectacular rebirth – and made comic history.

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## When Superman died

### 3 Understanding the article

Answer the questions without referring to the article. Then, discuss your answers.

1. When was the first Superman comic published?
2. In what year did Superman 'die'?
3. What had the writers and editors tried to do before they took this dramatic step?
4. Who was with Superman when he died?
5. Who publishes the Superman comics and who owns the publisher?
6. Why did the team decide to kill Superman?
7. What effect did Superman's death have on the sales of the comics?
8. What was unique about the special edition?

### 4 Expressions

a. Put the words in brackets in the correct order to complete the sentences. What do the expressions mean?

1. By the 1990s, the Superman comic series had \_\_\_\_\_.  
(of lost magic some its)
2. The world was \_\_\_\_\_. (Superman granted for taking)
3. The editors decided to \_\_\_\_\_. (the give turn a dramatic story)
4. The comic book version of Superman's wedding was \_\_\_\_\_. (hold put on)
5. The team wrote a storyline that would make readers \_\_\_\_\_. (hero's at grieve loss the)

b. Which words come before sales in the article? Write them below. Add any other words that often come before sales.

### 5 Discussion

- In your opinion, was killing Superman a clever marketing decision or a mean trick to play on fans?
- Have you ever bought a Superman comic book?
- Have you ever bought or been given any Superman or other superhero merchandise?
- Have you ever watched a Superman film?
- What superpowers does Superman have?
- What superpower is the most useful? Why?

## When Superman died

### 6 Research and presentation

Find out more about one of the topics below and present your findings to the class.

- Superman
- DC Comics
- Marvel Comics
- comic-book conventions
- the popularity of superhero films
- sales figures for comic books
- the value of superhero merchandise and comic-book spin-offs

When Superman died

Vocabulary record: When Superman died

| verb  | noun  | adjective<br>(+ opposite) | adverb<br>(+ opposite) |
|-------|-------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| marry |       |                           |                        |
|       | death |                           |                        |
|       |       | dramatic                  |                        |
|       |       |                           | famously               |
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Vocabulary record

## When Superman died

Comic book cover: When Superman died



Comic book cover