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COMICS TIMELINE

Comics historians divide the history of American comic books into ages. These eras include the Golden Age (1938-1950), the Silver Age (1956-1970), the Bronze Age (1970-1985), and the Modern Age (1985-Present).

This timeline presents milestones, trends, and pivotal events that defined the comics medium during each of these eras.

The Golden Age (1938-1950)

- Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's Superman debuts in Action Comics #1, published by DC Comics predecessor Detective Comics, Inc., in 1938. Superhero comics subsequently take America by storm.
- Marvel Comics predecessor Timely Comics formed in 1939.
- Following Superman's wildly successful debut, Bob Kane and Bill Finger create Batman in 1941.
- Harvard-educated psychologist William Moulton Marston creates Wonder Woman in 1941. As one of the few strong female characters appearing in comic books, she becomes an icon of the liberated woman.
- Countless superhero tropes (alter ego, origin story, rogues gallery) are forged.
- DC Comics' Justice Society of America makes its first appearance in 1940, launching the superteam concept.
- Joe Simon and Jack Kirby create Captain America in 1941. The character fight's America's enemies, including Adolf Hitler, through World War II.
- Comics serve as a cheap source of entertainment during World War II. During the Golden Age, it is not uncommon for a single comic book issue to sell over one million copies.
- Sales decline after the war. A number of superhero titles are cancelled as publishers focus on genre comics (science fiction, horror, western, romance).
- As the Golden Age ends, fears of juvenile delinquency lead media critics and legislators to scrutinize the role of comic books in American life.

The Silver Age (1956-1970)

- DC Comics' Showcase issue #4, published in 1956, reintroduces Golden Age hero The Flash after a 5 year absence, sparking a superhero revival. Other Golden Age characters, including Green Lantern, are revived shortly thereafter.
- DC's Justice League of America makes its first appearance in 1961, reviving the Golden Age superteam concept.
- Atlas Comics (successor of Timely Comics) becomes Marvel Comics in 1961.
- Marvel first asserts itself as a modern industry force with the 1961 publication of Fantastic Four #1. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's characters prove to be incredibly popular.
- 1962 sees the debut of Spider-Man, Thor, and the Hulk.
- Iron Man and the X-Men make their first appearances in 1963.
- Marvel gets in on the superteam craze with The Avengers, first published in 1963. Iron Man and Thor join in the mid-60s. The team revives Captain America in 1964.
- Industry group the Comics Code Authority (formed in the early 1950s) restricts the content of Silver Age comic books. Publishers must follow strict content guidelines or risk their comics going undistributed.
- The underground comics scene begins to take shape as baby boomers become part of the counterculture.

The Bronze Age (1970-1985)

- The Comics Code Authority's influence begins its decline as mainstream titles begin to tackle social issues of the day.
- Stories grow darker as superheroes face higher stakes. Spider-Man's girlfriend Gwen Stacy is killed in the pages of The Amazing Spider-Man.
- Influence of the underground comics movement starts to be reflected in mainstream comics.
- Supernatural themes and horror stories begin to make a comeback.
- Black and female protagonists start to play larger roles in mainstream titles.
- As Star Wars and Jaws herald the era of the blockbuster, Hollywood studios turn to comic books for inspiration. 1978's Superman adaptation is a financial and critical smash.
- Licensed products such as t-shirts and action figures become an integral part of publishers' bottom lines.
- Alan Moore's Watchmen limited series features a deconstructionist take on superheroes and debuts to wide critical acclaim. The collected series goes on to be the only comic featured on Time magazine's list of the best books of all-time in 2005.
- Frank Miller's work on established superhero titles (Daredevil: Born Again, Batman: Year One, The Dark Knight Returns) define the "grim and gritty" aesthetic of mainstream comics.
- 1985's Crisis on Infinite Earths miniseries resets DC Comics continuity.
- Comics begin to see wide acceptance as a legitimate art form.

The Modern Age (1985-Present)

- Grim and gritty "realism" continues to be the trend du jour in superhero comics.

- A speculator boom takes place in the early 1990s. 1993's X-Men #1 sells over 7 million copies. The bubble bursts by the mid-90s, resulting in a steep decline in sales.
- Sales continue to decline for DC and Marvel titles through the 1990s and 2000s as the reader base for comic books shrinks. 2011's top selling comic book Justice League #1 moves 231,000 copies.
- Marvel almost collapses as a result of corporate brinksmanship.
- Colleges and universities widely begin offering courses in sequential art.
- Media consolidation reaches publishers as DC Comics is purchased by Warner Bros and Marvel by Disney.
- Big budget comic adaptations become a staple of the movie industry as auteurs Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan make multibillion dollar franchises out of Batman. Marvel launches the Marvel Cinematic Universe, resulting in the record breaking 2012 adaptation of The Avengers.
- In a bid to win new readers, the 2011 DC Comics relaunch resets the DC universe's continuity and restarts all titles at issue #1. This includes long-running titles such as Action Comics. At the time, the title, in which Superman debuted in 1938, was on issue #904.

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