How Do You Define “Comic Book”?  

Many people, especially in the U.S., equate comic books with the superhero genre or dismiss them as kiddie fare. In fact, comics are not a genre, but a medium of expression — like movies or prose — that can communicate a wealth of ideas and emotions spanning all genres. If you want to write mysteries, science fiction, autobiography, or even surrealist montages, you can do it in comic book form. Your stories can be verbose or wordless, serialized or self-contained, funny or tragic, color or black-and-white. In this workshop we’ll concentrate on writing for linear, narrative comic books.

Scott McCloud spends the first nine pages of his groundbreaking work *Understanding Comics* developing a definition of comics as a medium. What it boils down to is that all comics employ **sequential art**: a series of static images arranged in sequence to tell a story or express thoughts and feelings.

Know the Biz

It may seem odd to jump from an aesthetic discussion to hard, cold business facts. But the reality is that before you start writing a comic book story, you should know a little something about the comics industry and community. The publishing scene is in the midst of a sea change. Currently, comics publishers come in about six flavors:

- Self-publishers with widely varying quality, styles, and sales.
- Small-press and “indie” publishers (Top Shelf, Slave Labor, Fantagraphics).
- Midsized to large publishers (Dark Horse, DC, Marvel).
- Book and educational publishers branching out into graphic novels (Pantheon, Henry Holt, Scholastic).
- Electronic publishers focusing on Internet and mobile-phone comics (mostly self-publishers or big publishers looking for new venues).

This means there are more options in terms of format and genre — though not necessarily in terms of how to make a living. Monthly, serialized comics from major publishers are, at least for now, still the best bet for steady income.

Speaking of format, there are essentially two types, one of which allows for more variation:

- Stapled or **saddle-stitched** comics, which are almost always the same size and page count.
- Square-bound or **perfect-bound** comics, which come in many different sizes and page counts. Self-contained stories in square-bound form are usually called **graphic novels**.

Another side of the business you’ll need to understand is the three varieties of intellectual property ownership:

- Creator-owned.
- Company-owned.
- Licensed (owned by a third party that licenses publishing rights to the publisher).

The first two are occasionally blended together. If you’re expecting to own the characters and stories you create, watch out for contracts that give you only partial ownership. For example, owning the copyright to a story without owning the trademark to the main character is almost useless, because you can’t use the character without your publisher’s permission — but your publisher can use the character without your permission. If you don’t own either the character or the story, you’re doing **work for hire**.
There are also different pay structures in comics, usually depending on the type of ownership and publisher:

- **Page rate**, or a fixed amount per comic book page. The page rate may be either an advance against royalties or in addition to royalties. Relatively few comics earn royalties.

- **Flat fee** per issue or book.

- **Profit split**, with specified percentages of net profit going to the publisher and the creator(s).

If you’re earning a page rate or flat fee, pay close attention to the payment period when you sign your contract. Some publishers pay within 30 days of publication, but others wait as long as 90 days. If the deal is a profit split, make sure you understand how the net profit will be calculated and when the publisher will send you statements and payments. And if you plan to give away or sell copies of your own book, see if the publisher will agree to sell you books at cost instead of at the “standard” discount.

Whew! I’m glad the business section is out of the way. On to the fun stuff.

**Practice Visual Thinking**

Like good screenwriters, good comic book writers think in pictures as well as words. They visualize the images in their stories, then describe them to artists via scripts. Unlike most screenwriters, though, comics writers usually give the illustrator a fair amount of direction about how to portray each scene.

These are core skills that are useful in other types of writing too. To hone your visual thinking, write concise descriptions of familiar people, scenery, or events, as if you were describing them for an illustrator to draw. Read comics with a critical eye, thinking about the visual choices made by writers and artists — what’s shown and not shown, and how it’s depicted. Try to imagine how the writer described each image in his or her script. Writing your own panel descriptions of published comics may help too.

**Learn the Lingo**

Now let’s consider the basic components and terminology of comic books. Campy sound effects like the old *Batman* TV show’s “Biff! Bang! Pow!” are only a tiny (and trite) part of the picture.

The essential elements of a comic book page are:

1. **Panel**: One still image in a sequence of juxtaposed images. A comics writer can call for panels of any shape or size that’ll fit on a page: square, round, triangular, narrow vertical, shallow horizontal, diagonal, etc.

   There are specialized terms for different types of panels:

   - An **inset** is a panel contained within a larger panel.
   - In a **bleed** panel, the art extends or “bleeds” off the edge of the page on one or more sides.
   - A **splash** is a very large or full-page panel; the latter is usually called a full-page splash.
   - A **double-page spread** is a giant splash panel covering two facing pages.

   Although panels are usually bounded by heavy lines called **borders**, parts of the art sometimes **pop** outside panel borders for dramatic or ironic effect. Borderless images can also qualify as panels.

2. **Lettering**: Any text on a comics page. Bold lettering is used to emphasize words, large letters in dialogue represent shouting, and small dialogue lettering usually stands for whispering. Dialogue and caption lettering is usually all uppercase. **Display lettering** includes sound effects and any other text that is not contained in a balloon or caption (store signage, license plates, words on a computer screen, etc.).

3. **Word balloon**: A bordered shape containing dialogue, usually with a **tail** that points to the speaker. Tailless balloons sometimes denote “voice-over” or off-panel dialogue. As with panels, balloons come in various shapes, the most common being ovoid. You can use different shapes for different characters or moods. To avoid distanc[ing your readers, though, it’s best not to mix balloon shapes and styles willy-nilly. And to avoid sounding like an amateur, don’t call balloons “bubbles.”
4. **Thought balloon**: A bordered shape containing a character’s unspoken thoughts. Thought balloons almost always have bumpy, cloudlike borders and tails that look like trails of bubbles. Do not overuse them, especially not for lengthy internal monologues — that’s a terrible cliché in comics. As in movies, the maxim is “show, don’t tell.”

5. **Caption**: A tool often used for narration, transitional text (“Meanwhile…”), or off-panel dialogue. Captions usually have rectangular borders, but can also be borderless or *floating* letters.

6. **Sound effects (SFX)**: Stylized lettering that represents noises within a scene. Most SFX are floating letters, and sometimes they’re an integral part of the imagery. As with many other elements of comics, overuse of sound effects is distracting. They should be reserved for significant sounds, whether large (explosions) or small (a door softly closing on a lonely room).

7. **Borders**: The lines that enclose panels, balloons, and captions. Various styles and *line weights* can be used to evoke different effects or moods. Typical examples include rough or jagged borders for anger or distress; thin, wavy borders for weakness or spookiness; “electric” balloons and tails for radio, TV, or telephone dialogue; *burst* or double-bordered balloons for very loud shouting, and rounded panel corners or uneven borders for flashbacks. In some comics, such as *Sandman* (DC/Vertigo), major characters have their own distinctive balloon border and lettering styles. Different background colors or borders can also be used to denote different characters or types of dialogue/narration.

8. **Gutter**: The space, usually white, between and around panels. Colored or shaded gutters can help establish mood, denote flashbacks, or be used purely for aesthetic effect. Gutters are an almost subliminal part of the comic book reading process, since they represent the events between panels and pages.

However you combine these elements, always keep in mind that each comics panel and page should read in the same order as a page of text: from left to right and top to bottom. For example, when two characters are speaking to each other in the same panel, whoever talks first should be on the left side.

In some cultures, comics are read from right to left. Traditional manga, for example, are read in what looks to most Westerners (hard-core manga fans excepted) like back-to-front order. You probably won’t need to worry about writing comics that are read this way, but you should be aware that reading order is a primary determinant of certain visual storytelling techniques.
VARIATIONS IN BALLOON SHAPE ARE MANY AND NEW ONES ARE BEING INVENTED EVERY DAY.

WHILE INSIDE THOSE BALLOONS, SYMBOLS ARE CONSTANTLY BEING APPROPRIATED OR EVEN INVENTED TO COVER THE NON-VERBAL.

I WILL BE--

IT'S SO QUIET!

OH, IT'S YOU.

TIMBER!!

ZACHA

ZZZZ

@#*$@?!

....

EVEN THE VARIATIONS OF LETTERING STYLES, BOTH IN AND OUT OF BALLOONS, SPEAK OF AN ONGOING STRUGGLE TO CAPTURE THE VERY ESSENCE OF SOUND.

CRASH!

HA-HA!

MAAY-BEE I DON'T EVEN WANT SHRIMP FOR DINNER!

WHUMP!

KRAK!

La Dee Dee Dee Da...

KLIIIIK!!

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS...
Between the Panels

Obviously, the main action in comics is portrayed within panels. But gutters play a crucial role by connecting sequential panels into a coherent story. Whether two seconds or two years elapse between consecutive panels, the gutter is where that unseen action occurs.

Through the phenomenon Scott McCloud calls “closure” (Understanding Comics, Chapter 3), readers imagine some of what happens in the gutters — thus they experience sequential art as a unified narrative rather than a series of isolated, disconnected panels. Abrupt or unclear shifts between panels can confuse readers and distance them from a story, so most comic book creators strive to create smooth transitions.

This is especially true for comics that have a potential bookstore, as opposed to comic book shop, audience. Believe it or not, reading comics is something of a learned skill. People who rarely read comic strips or comic books may have a hard time perceiving sequential art as anything more than a series of disconnected images. Or they may simply ignore the images in favor of the words if the layout is confusing.

McCloud identifies six categories of panel-to-panel transitions (see attachments):

1. **Moment to moment**: Consecutive panels portraying the same subject (e.g., a person or thing) during a sequence of different moments, with little time elapsing between panels.

2. **Action to action**: Panels showing the same subject in a sequence of different yet connected actions, with more time between panels than in moment-to-moment transitions.

3. **Subject to subject**: Panels depicting different subjects within the same scene, such as two people conversing and elements of their surroundings.

4. **Scene to scene**: As you might guess, panels that show completely different scenes. In such transitions, the gutter usually represents a substantial distance across time, space, or both. Captions, dialogue, and panel composition are good tools for bridging scene changes between panels.

5. **Aspect to aspect**: Panels depicting different elements of a place, mood, or concept. Evoking feelings or thoughts takes primacy, while time and space between panels tend to be highly variable. This type of transition is unusual in genre stories in the U.S. but more common in manga.

6. **Non sequitur**: You might call this a surrealist leap, with no obvious connection between the imagery in consecutive panels. Non-sequitur transitions are extremely rare in narrative comics.

Temporal Mechanics

If you’ve ever sat through an Andy Warhol film, you know just how boring “realtime” looks on screen. Showing every single action in continuous sequence is the least efficient (and often dullest) way of staging a scene and telling a story.

One means by which both movies and comic books make fiction more dramatic than real life is the manipulation of time. They show certain significant moments within their stories, while omitting others. Comics, unlike cinema, do so through still images, absorbed by different readers at their own speeds. Reading comics is a more interactive process than watching films, relying partly on the reader’s actions and partly on the writer’s and artist’s control of pacing.

Because of this interactivity, there are two interrelated types of pacing in comics: The pace at which time seems to move within the story, and the pace at which your audience reads the story. Factors that influence the reader’s pace include panel size and shape, dialogue and caption length, page layout and pagination, the type of scene being depicted, and the level of visual detail within each panel. Wordy panels almost always slow down the reader, for example.

However, because these elements all work in combination, any one technique can have different effects depending on context. For example, a large, silent panel in a contemplative scene may slow the reader. But a large, sparsely worded panel in an action scene may quicken the reader’s pace. This is another aspect of visual storytelling that deserves close attention when you’re reading comics critically.
Your primary tool for controlling the pace of time within the story is panel arrangement. You can heighten the impact of certain moments either by telescoping them into a sequence that seems slower than realtime, or by compressing them into a quicker sequence with more time elapsing between panels.

In Chapter 4 of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud shows five different ways of slowing down time during a conversation (see attachments):

1. Insert a “pause” panel.
2. Lengthen the pause by devoting several panels to it.
3. Lengthen the pause by widening the gutters between panels.
4. Lengthen the pause by widening the panel.
5. Lengthen the pause by removing borders, suspending the panel in time and space.

And in Chapter 3, he shows how a story can be increasingly compressed by removing entire sequences and individual panels, even to the point of paring it down to two simple yet clearly sequential and interrelated panels.

A longer version of the same tale might include the main character (Carl) buying beer, getting in his car, veering off the road, in an ambulance, and at the hospital. Note the efficient use of subject-to-subject and action-to-action transitions to show only the moments most crucial to this brief narrative. The final scene-to-scene jump in the two-panel version transports the reader seamlessly from the story’s beginning to its end.
HERE'S A STORY.

I PROMISE.

I PROMISE.

BRUM!

Here I am!

HERE'S A STORY.

Hi, Carl! Hi, Daisy!

I'm sorry, Carl, but I can't go out with you tonight.

Aww!

What'll I do now?

I'll buy some beers.

GLUG! GLUG! GLUG!

CRASH!

RIP, Carl. END

RIP, Carl. END

THE ART OF COMICS IS AS SUBTRACTIVE AS IT IS ADDITIVE.

AND FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN TOO MUCH AND TOO LITTLE IS CRUCIAL TO COMICS CREATORS THE WORLD OVER.
Time within individual panels is also malleable. One panel can depict a single moment in time, several moments, or a longer sequence of interdependent moments such as a back-and-forth conversation.

However, avoid writing panel descriptions containing multiple sequential actions that are impossible to depict in one image (“The Hulk uproots a tree, turns, and throws it at the Humvee”). This can sometimes be achieved by showing multiple or blurred images of a character or object in the same panel (the Flash superspeeding from one action to the next), but such tricks should be used only when necessary to the story.

**Outline Your Plot and Characters**

Have you ever gone to a movie, then later described the story to a friend? Well, that was a plot summary, and you probably even focused on the film’s dramatic turning points — moments at which the main character undergoes the significant changes that define his/her arc.

To work out your story structure, write an outline that at least covers your opening, turning points, climax, and resolution, focusing on characters as well as events. Try to keep the plot loose at this stage, since it’ll likely change as you write your script. Start by getting to know your main character(s). Write brief personality profiles or bios of them. Then ask yourself: Where are these characters, physically and psychologically, at the story’s beginning and at its end? What must they do to make that journey — face their fears? Forgive someone? Commit a crime? Make a sacrifice or compromise? Suffer a loss? Seek help?

The characters’ goals and actions are the skeleton of your story, its crucial support structure. Once you’ve got a handle on them, you can flesh things out with specific events, settings, and relationships that help propel your characters along their arcs.

Here’s an example of a bare-bones plot synopsis:

A young boy and his parents are walking home in the city one night. They’re a happy, wealthy-looking family. But everything changes when a mugger accosts them, then panics and shoots the parents. The boy, devastated, watches his mother and father die in the street. He vows vengeance.

The boy grows into a driven young man. For years he trains in martial arts and hones his skills as a detective, all the while building his inherited fortune into a commercial empire. He adopts the public persona of a flighty playboy to mask his inner obsession with justice.

At last, as an adult, he deems himself ready to exact his revenge on the criminal underworld. Inspired by a creature glimpsed flying past his window, he dons a dark costume and sets out to fight crime... as the Batman.

Now pretend you don’t know that Batman’s been a famous superhero for decades. From the simple plot outlined above, you could spin your story in several different directions.

1. Expand on his training period, adding emotional and physical obstacles:
   - one of the young man’s teachers turns out to be evil;
   - he falls in love, then must choose between romance and vengeance; or
   - he questions his own need for revenge, but is re-inspired by another tragic event.

2. Condense his backstory and show his early crime-fighting career. For instance, what would happen if:
   - he initially fails as Batman;
   - Batman’s actions cause the death of an innocent bystander;
   - his secret identity is revealed; or
   - Batman comes into conflict with the police or government?

Under any of these what-if scenarios, would Bruce Wayne become more callous or more caring? Would he give up being Batman and seek other ways of pursuing justice, or is he fated to wear the cape and cowl? As you ask and answer questions such as these, write as much as you need to — then strip your story down to its essentials. Focus on turning points and on making every scene contribute to the progression of plot as well as characters.
Many narrative comics, like movies, follow a classic three-act structure that, at its most basic, is divided into beginning, middle, and end:

1. Introduction and establishment of the central characters, setting, and problem or conflict.
2. Development of the same, including complications, setbacks, reversals, suspense, and interim resolutions ("rising action"), leading to a climactic resolution.
3. "Falling action" or "denouement," in which we see the post-climactic major resolution and learn what/who has changed, and why it matters. Don't short-shift the third act, or you’ll leave your audience unsatisfied and possibly angry.

Some writers follow a general formula when structuring their plots in three acts and breaking each act into pages: 1. 25% first act, 65% second act, and 10% third act. You needn’t adhere to this if it doesn’t work for your story, but it’s a good guideline to start with.

Test out your outline on someone who’s unfamiliar with your story. If it holds their interest and makes them want to read more, you’ve done a bang-up job! Whatever their reaction is, be sure to ask for feedback on your plot’s clarity, plausibility, pacing, and emotional impact. There’s always room for improvement.

For a handy guide to developing character profiles, see Chapter 3 of Making a Winning Short by Edmond Levy. And for an excellent discussion and critique of narrative structures, see Alternative Scriptwriting by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush.

**Length and Format**

One piece of good news for budding writers and artists is that comics come in many formats these days. You can aim for anything from a one-page short story (Carol Lay’s Story Minute strips), to a paperback-sized graphic novel (Craig Thompson’s Blankets), to an ongoing monthly series (DC’s Wonder Woman). You can even publish comics in chapters on the Web, building up an audience, then collect them in print.

Thanks to the popularization of manga, which are typically published as a series of small graphic novels, you now also have the option of writing longer tales broken down into large chapters. (In addition, manga offer another form of paying gig: rewriting translated scripts. The translations can be stiff, so manga publishers often hire writers to polish the dialogue and captions.)

In some cases, the plot dictates the format. In others, usually when you’ve already established a relationship with an editor or publisher and are doing work for hire, the format controls the plot structure.

The not-so-good news is that you need to consider your story’s marketability and your professional goals even at this early stage. If you want to make a living by writing comics, concentrate on serial titles published by big companies, as mentioned in “Know the Biz.” Don’t be overambitious in this arena — you may want to write an epic 24-issue series, but publishers are unlikely to take such a gamble on a beginning comics writer.

If, on the other hand, you want to either (1) just get published and possibly make a few bucks on the back end or (2) work your way up to the big leagues, try small press or self-publishing. Indie publishers tend to offer a wider range of content and book formats. They can also be a good way to break in, giving you a chance to cut your teeth and gradually get noticed by fans, trade press, and other publishers. You’d better truly love writing and/or comics, though — if you don’t, your work probably won’t earn you any emotional or financial rewards, and it may become sheer drudgery.

The book publishers that are dabbling in graphic novels may be worth pitching to, but are probably a long shot for novices. So far they’re busy picking up established small-press creators, and they seem particularly interested in writer-artist auteurs. Keep an eye on them nonetheless, and check out educational publishers too.

In a nutshell: Examine what’s being published by various companies, think about your writing goals and your story’s needs, then choose your preferred page count and format. Combine that with your character profiles and plot outline, and you should be ready to do a page breakdown (see samples), then start on your script.
Break It Down

As you work on your plot, imagine how it’ll play out visually. Try doing rough sketches of some scenes at first, to help yourself visualize panel and page layouts. Estimate how many pages you’ll need for each scene. Consider factors such as: Is there a built-in limit on the total number of pages? Which scenes are turning points that may require extra space and emphasis? What kind of mood(s) and pace do you want to establish? Can any scenes be cut or condensed to improve the pacing? Will the story be serialized or self-contained?

Now estimate the total page count of your story — and be generous. Allow extra room for elements such as establishing shots, action sequences, crowd scenes, sweeping vistas, and text-heavy pages. If the story will be serialized, add chapter breaks at appropriately suspenseful points. Always bear in mind the left-hand/right-hand pagination described in “Learn the Lingo.”

One way to help practice doing page breakdowns is to analyze published comics that are similar in genre and format to your story. Pick a comic, write a summary of its plot and action, then compare that to the comic. Break down each scene in your summary according to how many pages are devoted to it in the printed comic. You can also use this technique to get a feel for how many panels per page are used for different types of scenes, how the panel size and page layout affect pacing, and how much visual information you can comfortably fit into different sizes of panels.

If you’re writing for monthly, serialized comics (which I call “floppies” because they’re, well, floppy), be aware that the page count of each issue is almost always inflexible. Most floppy comics are saddle-stitched and 32 pages long, but contain only 22 to 26 pages of story. You won’t usually be given the option of departing from the standard page count.

Even in serialized comics and manga, each issue or book should end with a resolution of some sort (character arc, subplot, and/or major plot thread) as well as an element of mystery or suspense. The trick is to both satisfy the reader and leave her wanting more, which can be a difficult balancing act.

Script Your Story

Creating comic books, like filmmaking, is largely a collaborative process, excepting those few talented auteurs who can write, draw, letter, and color their own comics. The usual sequence of creation is writing, pencilling, lettering, inking, then coloring, with variations depending on the creative team, schedule, and publishing model. Monthly comics usually follow this process in assembly-line fashion to stay on schedule as much as possible. If the writer blows a script deadline, it puts pressure on everyone else down the line to catch up.

There are two basic methods of writer/artist collaboration in comics:

1. **Plot first or “Marvel style”:** This method is typically used by Marvel Comics (based on Stan Lee’s working relationships with artists such as Jack Kirby), writer/artist teams who have a strong collaborative rapport (me and my husband, Paul Guinan), and solo creators who both write and draw their own stories (Paul Pope). The plot and page breakdown can be generated by the writer alone, or by the writer and artist together. Then the artist pencils the story, after which the writer scripts the in-panel text — everything but the panel descriptions — to fit the art. The advantage is that the writer knows exactly what the art looks like, and how much room there is for text, when scripting. The disadvantage is that the writer gives up some control over pacing and composition, and may get undesired results from the artist. You can’t use this method unless you have an existing relationship with the artist and editor.

2. **Full script:** This more common method involves the writer producing a complete script with panel descriptions, based on which the artist then pencils the story. Although you never know exactly how the artist will interpret your descriptions, this method gives the writer more control over layout and pacing. The disadvantage is that you may need to trim or otherwise revise your dialogue and captions after seeing the art. No matter which method you use, sometimes you’ll be surprised by what the artist draws.

We’ll focus on the full-script method. Comic book scripts are somewhat similar to screenplays in format, except that there’s no single standard format (see samples). The most important thing is to make your script format clear and easy to follow. It should have clearly labeled page and panel numbers, with indented paragraphs for all balloons, captions, sound effects, and display lettering. Once you’ve settled on a format,
create a template, styles, and auto-text in your word-processing software if possible, so you won’t have to constantly reformat text and type “Panel” over and over.

**Page layout:** The visual composition of each page is determined by a combo of the individual panel compositions and how the panels all work together. One of your goals is to lead the reader smoothly through the page, with no jarring transitions or discontinuity. In addition, each panel should advance the story or character arc, and/or contain important information about character, setting, or mood. This all means you’ve got a lot to think about when writing a single comic book page.

For the most part, especially when you’re just starting out, it’s best to stick with some variation on a basic grid of rectangular panels, using wider and taller panels to suit the demands of your story. It’s okay to toss other panel shapes into the mix occasionally, but don’t go hog wild with them (unless your intent is to confuse or challenge the reader). Unusual page layouts and panel shapes make it harder for you to control pacing and visual flow. And if the visual flow is unclear, your reader will be frustrated, distracted, and less involved in your story.

Also be judicious in your use of splashes and double-page spreads. Save them for establishing shots, climactic action, or significant turning points. Like many storytelling techniques, big panels lose impact when overused.

Conversely, don’t try to cram too many panels into a page. The average number of panels per page is usually five. Using more panels per page tends to compress time, whereas using fewer panels per page tends to telescope time, as in action scenes. This is one of your main methods of shaping a story’s pacing and rhythm. If you have a specific reason for employing scads of tiny panels, give it a shot — after you consider the pacing effects and the fact that it’ll probably alienate plenty of people who would otherwise have read your comic.

**Panel descriptions:** There’s a certain tension in the way comics writers think and write. You must show visual information to the reader, but verbally tell the artist how to draw that information. And you need to do it as efficiently as possible, giving complete direction while still allowing room for the illustrator’s own interpretation and imagination. Try to strike a balance between directing, inspiring, and entertaining the artist. A script that’s fun to read is also more saleable to editors.

Panel descriptions are similar to, but usually more detailed than, shot descriptions in screenplays. Comics writers often use cinematic directions such as “establishing shot,” “close-up,” “up angle,” “background,” and the like, while avoiding motion-related terms such as “pan” or “track.” Don’t overload your descriptions with meaningless detail, but don’t make them too sparse either. And, as with page layouts, don’t clutter up your panels with too much text or visual information.

Important visual elements — such as objects or characters that will play a significant role in a later panel or scene, or even what time of day it is — should always be mentioned in establishing shots so the artist knows about them from the start. Even if an element isn’t seen in the establishing shot, it’s a good idea to mention it so the artist has a complete mental image from the start. One sure way to make your artist mad is to wait until the end of a scene, then finally announce that it’s sunrise, or there’s a blood stain on the wall, or the coffee table is floating in mid-air, or one of the characters is wearing a hideous necktie that’ll later serve as a crucial clue.

When visualizing panels, you also need to keep track of the left-to-right composition and try not to reverse it unexpectedly. In other words, don’t move your mental “camera” to the opposite side of the subject. On the comic book page, this will look like the scene has been abruptly rotated 180 degrees, which can be very
WE ASSUME AS READERS THAT WE WILL KNOW WHAT ORDER TO READ PANELS IN, BUT THE BUSINESS OF ARRANGING THOSE PANELS IS ACTUALLY QUITE COMPLEX.

SO COMPLEX, IN FACT, THAT EVEN SEASONED PROS WILL SOMETIMES BLOW IT.
disorienting for the reader, especially if there’s motion in the panels. Sometimes the effect is unintentionally comical too.

**Dialogue and other text:** Ideally, the words and images in a panel should be interdependent. Avoid verbiage that merely echoes the visual information in a panel (sometimes called “Mickey-Mousing”), unless you’re intentionally going for a repetitive effect. For example, if we can see in the art that it’s raining, you don’t need to waste space by telling us the same thing in words — but you might want to tell us that it’s been raining for 40 days, or that the hero hates rain. Chapter 6 of *Understanding Comics* demonstrates the effects of several different types of word/image interplay for the same scene (see attachments).

Write your dialogue, captions, and SFX in the order in which they should appear in the panel. Remember that characters must always appear in speaking order. If character A talks first, she should be on the left side of the panel, and character B should be to her right. Violating this rule will result in awkward balloon placement and probably confuse your readers.

Dialogue scenes in comics often employ one of the following visual layouts:

- “Cutting” back and forth between close shots of the speaking characters, with brief dialogue in each panel.
- Splash panels or pages that show only one visual “moment,” yet include lengthy back-and-forth dialogue.
- Repeating a similar image multiple times, focusing on changes in expression, posture, or environment.

Here comes the mantra again: Don’t overuse any one of these techniques. Vary them according to your story’s needs, along with different shot sizes and word/image juxtapositions (e.g., dialogue from off-panel, voice-over captions, SFX, or thought balloons).

Steer clear of “talking heads” scenes that merely show characters conversing and nothing else. There are many ways around this: give your characters something visually interesting to do while they’re talking, put them in a visually compelling environment, focus on symbolic details in their environment, etc.

If you have specific lettering effects in mind, give the letterer some direction in your script. For example, for a mortally wounded character, you might write “NELSON (weak letters): Kiss me, Hardy.” Boldface any words that you want to be emphasized in the lettering, based on natural speech rhythms. And (all together now) don’t overuse bold emphasis or it will be distracting and less effective.

To get a grasp on how much text you can comfortably fit into each panel, use a technique similar to the one described earlier for plot breakdowns: grab a published comic and type all the dialogue and captions in the same format you’ll use for your script, omitting panel descriptions. This will help give you a visual sense of how much room your typed text takes up in a lettered comic book panel, and you’ll soon be able to “eyeball” your own scripts to determine whether you’ve overwritten the in-panel text.

**Action:** Whether they involve clashing superheroes, runaway baby carriages, or dogs chasing cats, comic book action sequences usually have one thing in common: they’re primarily visual, not verbal. They also tend to telescope time, often spending several pages on an event that might only last two minutes in realtime. Significant moments are usually depicted in large splash panels, and only the most visually exciting, dynamic, or suspenseful moments are shown. Dialogue and other text are best kept to a minimum and used as a counterpoint to or commentary on the action.

**Rewriting:** You probably already know that “writing is in the rewriting.” If you have time, get a little distance on your work by setting it aside for a few weeks, so you can read it with a fresh eye. Don’t get so attached to your script that you can’t bear to delete dialogue, panels, characters, or whole scenes if necessary. Strong scripts tend to be very economical in their storytelling, conveying a great deal of information and emotional impact in deceptively simple form.

Before revising your script, try these evaluation methods:

- Read dialogue aloud to hear how it flows and whether it really sounds like people talking.
- Review panel descriptions without dialogue, to assess visual pacing and check for overcrowding.
- Write a new plot outline based on your script, then analyze the story structure and character arcs.
• Ask people whose opinion you respect to read your script and give you specific feedback. Finally, always watch out for some of the common weaknesses mentioned in various sections above:
• Too much text, visual information, or sequential action in a panel.
• Too many panels on a page.
• Confusing or awkward panel and scene transitions.
• Giving too much, too little, or unclear direction to the artist.
• Needlessly long speeches or internal monologues.
• Redundant text that gives the same information as the images in a panel.

Preexisting Characters
Many comics scribes have the itch to write stories about their favorite characters, or about fascinating historical figures. Research is especially important when you’re writing existing characters, be they fictional or factual. Don’t think of research as a chore, though — it’s a great opportunity to read, cogitate, and discover new story ideas.

For fictional people, whether company-owned (Spider-Man) or licensed (Princess Leia), first find out if the publisher has a “bible”; if so, get your hands on a copy of it. The bible will give you necessary info on the character, her world, and editorial preferences. Don’t ignore the bible or try to radically re-invent a character, unless you’re working with an editor who specifically suggests a new approach.

If you plan to send in a blind submission, check to see if the publisher has submission guidelines; if so, acquire a copy and follow them. The guidelines should tell you whether or not the publisher accepts unsolicited writing submissions for company-owned or licensed characters. Many publishers do not. Even if they do, unsolicited submissions to the larger publishers are rarely successful and may not even get a response. Smaller publishers are sometimes more receptive. In any case, it’s usually best if you can make personal contact with an editor — at a comic book convention, through a mutual acquaintance, or via correspondence or an online forum — then ask if she’ll look at your proposal.

Once you’ve found a publisher or editor who’s willing to accept your submission, read the bible (if any) and published stories featuring the character(s) you want to write. Again, read the stories critically. Ask yourself if there are facets of this person that haven’t been fully explored, or new situations in which you could reexamine familiar facets. Keep a sharp eye out for unresolved plot threads from previous stories, as well as minor characters who may be worth resurrecting. Examine work by your favorite authors on every level. Think about why characters act or react as they do, how stories are structured, and what storytelling techniques the writer used that really got you involved.

Factual people can be more difficult to write, since their lives often don’t conform to the dramatic structures of fiction. You can take one of two general approaches to writing real-life characters:
1. Structure your plot around the true history, condensing or omitting facts without altering them.
2. Fictionalize their story, changing certain facts to make events or relationships more dramatic.

If you choose the latter route, consider cluing your readers in as to which parts of the story are true, maybe in endnotes or an introductory or concluding essay. In either case, do extensive research on the people involved, and ask the same kinds of questions you would while creating fictional characters.

Another way to add depth to your characters is by drawing on your own experiences and observations. Think of yourself and everyone you meet as characters, each with their own backstory, arc, and subplot. What motivates you? How does your past affect your actions in the present? What circumstances form and change your personality? Exaggerate the patterns you notice in reality and apply them to fiction, and your characters’ lives will resonate with those of your readers.
**Sell Your Story**

Comics publishers range in size from self-publishing artists to large bureaucracies, each with its own methods and priorities. Target your proposal at companies that publish the genre and format you’re working in.

As noted in the previous section, a good approach is to make contact with editors of works you admire, then arrange to send your proposal directly to them. You probably shouldn’t attempt to pitch your story to an editor at a convention, though, because (1) she will probably be far too stressed out to listen to you for more than a few minutes, and (2) editors need time and privacy to read and properly evaluate writing submissions. When you meet an editor in person, find out a little about what she’s looking for and determine whether she’ll accept a submission. Then ask for the editor’s business card so you can follow up by sending a copy of your proposal.

Your proposal package should include:
- An introductory cover letter (if you’ve met or contacted the editor, mention when and where/how).
- Plot teaser (think of this as the “elevator pitch” for your story).
- Estimated story length and format.
- Plot outline.
- Character bios.
- A brief description of the setting, with added detail if your story is not set on present-day Earth.
- Sample script pages or full script.
- Illustrations, if at all possible.
- Appropriate copyright and trademark notices.
- Your name and contact information on every page.

The proposal, excluding the script pages and illustrations, should be about two pages long for a short or single-issue story, or five pages for a graphic novel or multi-issue tale.

If you’re sending it to a submissions editor, consult the publisher’s guidelines to find out whether or not you should follow up on the submission. Most publishers get reams of unsolicited submissions and won’t reply to subsequent pestering.

If you’re sending your proposal to an editor you’ve made personal contact with, wait about a month, then call or write to inquire about the status of your pitch. You may need to do this multiple times, as most comics editors are woefully overworked.

And once your proposal is accepted... then the *really* hard work begins!
Bibliography

*Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud; HarperCollins Publishers

The definitive work on the structural and conceptual underpinnings of comic books. No other book discusses the medium in such depth, in such an entertaining format.

*Comics & Sequential Art* by Will Eisner; Poorhouse Press

Eisner’s *film noir*-influenced drawing style and compositions in *The Spirit* influenced countless aspiring artists. His exploration of comics storytelling is geared toward illustrators, but is highly recommended for writers too.

*Alan Moore’s Writing for Comics* by Alan Moore; Avatar Press

A short collection of essays about writing comics, by one of the medium’s most respected, talented, and quirky writers.

*Write Now!* magazine, edited by Danny Fingeroth; TwoMorrows Publishing

A quarterly magazine about comics writing, featuring how-to articles, interviews, and script samples.


A wide-ranging examination of story structures, genres, character arcs, themes, irony, symbolism, and more, using many cinematic examples. Concise and accessible.

*Making a Winning Short* by Edmond Levy; 1994, Henry Holt & Co.

Contains a very useful guide to developing character profiles.

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PANEL TRANSITIONS
MOST PANEL-TO-PANEL TRANSITIONS IN COMICS CAN BE PLACED IN ONE OF SEVERAL DISTINCT CATEGORIES. THE FIRST CATEGORY—WHICH WE'LL CALL "MOMENT-TO-MOMENT"—REQUIRES VERY LITTLE CLOSURE.

NEXT ARE THOSE TRANSITIONS FEATURING A SINGLE SUBJECT IN DISTINCT ACTION-TO-ACTION PROGRESSIONS.
The next type takes us from subject-to-subject while staying within a scene or idea. Note the degree of reader involvement necessary to render these transitions meaningful.

Deductive reasoning is often required in reading comics such as in these scene-to-scene transitions, which transport us across significant distances of time and space.

3.

NOW YOU DIE!!
NO!
NO!
EEYAA!!

He can't outrun us forever.
Ten years later...

4.

What more could go wrong?!
Well, at least Jerry never called!

Bombay! Paris! New York!

No one could have survived that crash!
Meanwhile...

FINISH!
CLIK!
A FIFTH TYPE OF TRANSITION, WHICH WE'LL CALL ASPECT-TO-ASPECT, BYPASSES TIME FOR THE MOST PART AND SETS A WANDERING EYE ON DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF A PLACE, IDEA OR MOOD.

AND FINALLY, THERE'S THE NON-SEQUITUR, WHICH OFFERS NO LOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PANELS WHATSOEVER!
THE PAUSE PANEL
IN LEARNING TO READ COMICS WE ALL LEARNED TO PERCEIVE TIME SPATIALLY, FOR IN THE WORLD OF COMICS, TIME AND SPACE ARE ONE AND THE SAME.

THE PROBLEM IS THERE'S NO CONVERSION CHART!

THE FEW CENTIMETERS WHICH TRANSPORT US FROM SECOND TO SECOND IN ONE SEQUENCE COULD TAKE US A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS IN ANOTHER.

SO, AS READERS, WE'RE LEFT WITH ONLY A VAGUE SENSE THAT AS OUR EYES ARE MOVING THROUGH SPACE, THEY'RE ALSO MOVING THROUGH TIME--WE JUST DON'T KNOW BY HOW MUCH!

IN MOST CASES IT'S NOT HARD TO MAKE AN EDUCATED GUESS AS TO THE DURATION OF A GIVEN SEQUENCE, SO LONG AS THE ELEMENTS OF THAT SEQUENCE ARE FAMILIAR TO US.

I ALWAYS FIGURED MARY-ANNE WOULD GO FOR GILLIGAN.

I GUESS.
BUT IF THE CREATOR OF THIS SCENE WANTED TO LENGTHEN THAT PAUSE, HOW COULD HE OR SHE DO SO? ONE OBVIOUS SOLUTION WOULD BE TO ADD MORE PANELS, BUT IS THAT THE ONLY WAY?

IS THERE ANY WAY TO MAKE A SINGLE SILENT PANEL LIKE THIS ONE SEEM LONGER? HOW ABOUT WIDENING THE SPACE BETWEEN PANELS? ANY DIFFERENCE?

WE'VE SEEN HOW TIME CAN BE CONTROLLED THROUGH THE CONTENT OF PANELS, THE NUMBER OF PANELS AND CLOSURE BETWEEN PANELS, BUT THERE'S STILL ONE MORE.

AS UNLIKELY AS IT SOUNDS, THE PANEL SHAPE CAN ACTUALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN OUR PERCEPTION OF TIME. EVEN THOUGH THIS LONG PANEL HAS THE SAME BASIC "MEANING" AS ITS SHORTER VERSIONS, STILL IT HAS THE FEELING OF GREATER LENGTH!
EVER noticed how the words "short" or "long" can refer either to the first dimension or to the fourth? In a medium where time and space merge completely, the distinction often vanishes!

As mentioned, panels come in many shapes and sizes, though the classic rectangle is used most often.

Most of us are so used to the standard rectangular format that a "borderless" panel such as this can take on a timeless quality.

Hey, are you even listening to me? I guess.

When the content of a silent panel offers no clues as to its duration, it can also produce a sense of timelessness.

Because of its unresolved nature, such a panel may linger in the reader's mind.

And its presence may be felt in the panels which follow it.
When "bleeds" are used — i.e., when a panel runs off the edge of the page — this effect is compounded.

Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead, hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space.

Such images can set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timeless presence.

Once again, this is a technique used most often in Japan and only recently adopted here in the West.
WORD/IMAGE INTERPLAY
WHEN PICTURES CARRY THE WEIGHT OF CLARITY IN A SCENE, THEY FREE WORDS TO EXPLORE A WIDER AREA.

LET'S SAY I SHOW YOU A WOMAN WALKING ACROSS THE STREET IN THE RAIN, BUYING A PINT OF ICE CREAM AND EATING IT IN HER APARTMENT--

---ALL IN PICTURES.
WHEN A SCENE SHOWS YOU ALL YOU "NEED" TO KNOW, LIKE THIS ONE, THE LATITUDE FOR SCRIPTING GROWS ENORMOUSLY.

I MAY BE ALONE LIKE THIS FOR A VERY LONG TIME.

IT COULD BECOME AN INTERNAL MONOLOGUE.

(INTERDEPENDENT)

PERHAPS SOMETHING WILDLY INCONGRUOUS

"MISSION CONTROL, MISSION CONTROL, DO YOU READ ME?"

(PARALLEL)

MAYBE IT'S ALL JUST A BIG ADVERTISEMENT!

YOU'LLE LOVE THE TASTE!

(INTERDEPENDENT)

OR A CHANCE TO RUMINATE ON BROADER TOPICS:

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS...

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS...

(INTERDEPENDENT)
ON THE OTHER HAND, IF THE WORDS LOCK IN THE "MEANING" OF A SEQUENCE, THEN THE PICTURES CAN REALLY TAKE OFF.

SAME SCENE NOW, BUT THIS TIME ALL IN WORDS!

I CROSSED THE STREET TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE. THE RAIN SOAKED INTO MY BOOTS.

I FOUND THE LAST PINT OF CHOCOLATE CHOCOLATE CHIP IN THE FREEZER.

THE CLERK TRIED TO PICK ME UP. I SAID NO THANKS. HE GAVE ME THIS CREEPY LOOK...

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT--

--AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

ALONE AT LAST.
NOW, ONE COULD JUST COMBINE THE PICTURES FROM PAGE 157 WITH THE WORDS FROM PAGE 159 --

--BUT WHAT ARE SOME OTHER OPTIONS?

I CROSSED THE STREET TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE. THE RAIN SOAKED INTO MY BOOTS.

IF THE ARTIST WANTS TO, HE/SHE CAN NOW SHOW ONLY FRAGMENTS OF A SCENE.

(word specific)

THE CLERK TRIED TO PICK ME UP. I SAID NO THANKS. HE GAVE ME THIS CREEPY LOOK...

(amplification)

Perhaps the artist can give us some important emotional information.

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT--

(interdependent)

Or shift ahead or backwards in time.

--AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

(word specific)