

Tips for Writing your Own Graphic Novel

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.

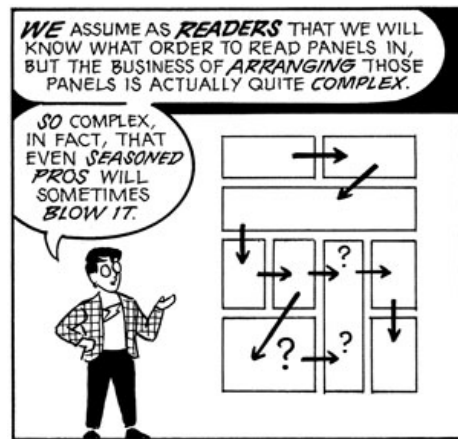
To work out your story structure, write an outline that at least covers your opening, turning points, climax, and resolution, focusing on characters as well as events. Try to keep the plot loose at this stage, since it'll likely change as you write your script. Start by getting to know your main character(s). Where are these characters, physically and psychologically, at the story's beginning and at its end? What must they do— 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. 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.

Begin to Visualize

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: 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?

Page layout: The visual composition of each page is determined by a combination 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.

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. 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. 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.

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, suspenseful or emotional moments are shown. Dialogue and other text are best kept to a minimum and used as a counterpoint to or commentary on the action.

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. 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.

There are five basic categories of panel-to-panel transitions (see attachments):

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

Temporal Mechanics

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. There are five main 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.

