

Discover the basics of writing comic books!

Comics Writing (A Guide to Communicating with Comic Books)

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COMICS WRITING
(A Guide to Communicating with Comic Books)

by
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writing n. 1. the act of a person who writes 5. a book, poem, article, or other literary work 6. the profession or occupation of a writer 7. the art, style, etc. of literary composition

- *Webster's New World Dictionary (1972)*

There is no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape his course. He will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.

-*E.B. White*

I have been writing a long time and have learned that everybody is talented, original and has something important to say.

-*Brenda Ueland*

Writing, at least fiction writing, we must not forget, is nothing in the world but the most highly conventionalized form of picture painting.

-*William Foster-Harris*

INTRODUCTION: "STICK TO THE BASICS, PLEASE"

Admit it, you really do not want to learn how to write comics.

You want to know *what to do* so you can start writing comics *right now*.

Deny it if you want, but I know better. I know. I found out the hard way starting a few years ago when I was asked to teach ninth-grade students about writing comic books at a young writer's conference.

Somewhere along the line I decided to write a pamphlet called *The Comic Book Writer's Handbook* that the ninth-graders could take home to refer to later, and after the conference I printed some extra copies of this 35-page pamphlet to sell at comic book conventions I attended. A couple of years later I was at the Kansas City Comic Show when a friend, comics artist Rob Davis (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), asked if he could have a copy of my pamphlet. I was delighted to give him one because Rob is that rarest of talents: a good creator and a good teacher. Rob can look at an artist's portfolio and tell the artist in clear and simple terms what is good in the portfolio, what needs work,¹ and what the artist can do to strengthen any weaknesses. Rob is good enough at this that I have seen more popular (and therefore supposedly better) artists sitting near him at conventions strain their ears to listen to Rob's advice to try to pick up tips. So I was excited to hear whatever Rob thought about *The Comic Book Writer's Handbook*.

And that opinion was: "It's okay. Pretty much just covers the basics, doesn't it?"

As usual, Rob hit the nail on the head. I had written my pamphlet for junior high school students who wanted to learn about writing comic books, after all, so I should have been gratified by Rob's evaluation.

Instead, I was disappointed.

For some reason I had been hoping Rob would say, "Gee, Steve, this is one of the most perceptive and in-depth analysis of comic book communication I have ever read."

Yeah.

Right.

¹ Please notice I did not say "bad" but "what needs work."

In 35 pages no less.

Go figure.

Nevertheless, I was disappointed, and I inadvertently carried that disappointment over into the first time I taught an adult education class called *Introduction to Comic Book Writing*. I did not realize until too late that, instead of teaching my students what to do when it came to writing comic books, I found myself trying to teach them the sort of in-depth information that would impress a professional like Rob Davis.

That was one boneheaded move.

Sixteen students signed up for my first eight-week *Introduction to Comic Book Writing* class, and by the final week four students—25% of the total—had dropped out.

This is a mistake I do not want to make with this book, so let me tell you right up front that my goal with *Writing Comics* is to simply get you up to speed on the basics of writing comics so you can start writing as quickly as possible. Nothing more, but nothing less. And by “basics” I mean the nuts and bolts of comics and writing ... along with maybe one or two little tricks of the trade.

Now let me turn the tables for a moment and warn you about a mistake you might be making with this book.

Will reading *Writing Comics* turn you into a comic book writer?

No.

Reading a book about writing comics cannot make you a comics writer, so do not make the mistake of thinking that it can. All this book can do is tell you what to do. If you want to become a comics writer, then you are going to have to take the information and suggestions presented here and try them. And try them. And try them again.

You know what I am talking about: *practice!*

Of course no one can make you practice if you do not want to, but there is no getting around the fact that practice is still the only way to get to Carnegie Hall.

Now let me give you another warning.

Learning to become a comics writer, or a novelist, or a screenwriter, or a poet, or any kind of writer requires more than a person trying and trying and trying. A person can practice writing for years and never improve unless that person has something to say and has an unstoppable desire to try to say it. Please do not confuse having “something to say” with writing *Moby Dick*. I am not talking about anything so complicated. As I will discuss later in this book, most comics readers want entertainment. They are not looking for looking for philosophical insights into life's **BIG QUESTIONS**. If there is one secret shared by successful writers—and by successful I mean writers who sell their stories—it is that they write about things that delight or deject or outrage them. “How long has it been since you wrote a story where your real love or your real hatred somehow got onto the paper?” asks author and comics fan Ray Bradbury (*The Martian Chronicles, Something Wicked This Way Comes*). “When was the last time you dared release a cherished prejudice so it slammed the page like a lightning bolt? What are the best things and worst things in your life, and when are you going to get around to whispering or shouting them?”² Successful writers have fun when they write, even when they write about distasteful or tragic things. They have fun because they write with zest and gusto, and their stories transmit that fun to their readers. “If you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without fun, you are only half a writer,” insists Bradbury. “It means you are so busy

² “The Joy of Writing,” *Zen in the Art of Writing*, pp. 4-5

keeping one eye on the commercial market, or one ear peeled for the avant-garde coterie, that you are not being yourself. You don't even know yourself.”³

Speaking for myself, I can honestly tell you that the only reasons I write comic book stories are the only reasons you should write comic book stories: because I love to write and I love comics.

I do not write comics stories in hopes of making millions of dollars. (Rich comics writers are as rare as hen's teeth.) And I do not write comics stories to become the center of attention at comic book conventions. (I like my privacy just fine, thank you.) Do not get me wrong, fortune and fame are respectable goals,⁴ but there are a lot easier ways to reach them than being a writer, especially a comics writer. Ernest Hemingway (*The Old Man and the Sea, For Whom the Bell Tolls*) was one of the most influential and successful authors of the 20th Century, and when he delivered his acceptance speech for the Noble Prize for Literature in 1954 he made a point to stress that writing is difficult and lonely. So before reading any further, ask yourself, “Do I want to write? Or do I want to have written?” When you think about it, there is a very serious difference.⁵

Finally, one last warning. Even if you master the craft of comics writing, there is no guarantee that you will earn a living doing it.

Sorry.

You are going to have to take your chances like the rest of us.

³ “The Joy of Writing,” *Zen in the Art of Writing*, p. 4

⁴ Between the two, however, I'll take fortune. Fame is overrated. Look at Shakespeare, the most famous writer in Western literature. And what has it gotten him? He's been dead almost half a millennium! If you dug him up, poured his remains into a glass and added water, you wouldn't have enough to make a decent milk shake! Like the Romans used to say, “All glory is fleeting.” You can keep my share of fame. I'll take cash.

⁵ *Story Writing*, pg. 222.

Now, if my three warnings have not blunted your enthusiasm to learn the craft of comics writing but only encouraged you ... if you are willing to risk the time and effort to learn comics writing if only someone would tell you how to get started ... then congratulations! You have come to the right place, because that is what I intend to do.

And the best time for us to get started is right now.

PART I: COMICS

CHAPTER ONE: COMICS

What is Comics?

A comics writer does two things:

- Entertains readers by creating stories
- Communicates his stories so that collaborators can translate them into comics

There you go. What could be simpler?

Before we proceed, though, let me ask you a question.

What is “comics”?⁶

If this seems a strange question, it really is not. After all, how can you write comics if you don’t know what comics is?

Now you might be thinking, “Puh-leaze, fool! Comics are comic books, graphic novels, newspaper comic strips, and webcomics! Everyone knows that!”

That comes close to hitting the bull’s-eye, but close only counts in dancing and collateral damage. Frank Miller, the creator of *Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City*, puts steel on target when he states that “Comics is, foremost, a form of communication.”⁷

⁶ The definition for the word “comics” from *Nationmaster.com Encyclopedia* explains, “Although it takes the form of a plural noun, the common usage when referring to *comics* as a medium is to treat it as a singular.”

⁷ “Introduction,” *Lone Wolf & Cub #1* (First Comics)

Comics is a medium, which, by definition, is a unique form of communication.

Comics is narrative art that uses words and pictures to communicate.

And comics is a member of the cartoon family tree, with its own communication code called the grammar of comics. Comics writers and artists use the grammar of comics “to create a make-believe world, to create figures, to give them depth, to give them action, thought, and language.”⁸

Comics As a Medium

A **medium** conveys information. This is what Miller was getting at when he said that, foremost, comics is “a form of communication.” It is important to remember, however, that all media transmit news and ideas in a way that is not exactly the same as any other medium.

For example, comics is often compared to the film media because both are **verbal-visual media**, which means they use words and pictures to convey information. However, this is a flawed comparison because of the unique way that comics and film communicate. Film is an audio-visual medium. This means it uses sound and moving images to communicate its information. Comics has no soundtrack or moving images, but instead incorporates static printed words and images. So while comics is a verbal-visual medium like film it would be more accurate to compare comics to literary media like books, newspapers, and magazines.

Comics As Narrative Art

Narrative art is one of our oldest methods of communication. According to Randall P. Harrison, an expert in cartoon communication, “Cartoons, and even strip-like stories, can be

⁸ *The Cartoon*, pg. 65

found in Roman sculpture, on Greek vases, on early Japanese scrolls, and in the famous Bayeux tapestry.”⁹

The Pyramid of Khufu is the oldest of Egypt’s trademark pyramids, finished in 2530 B.C., but one of the earliest examples of narrative art is almost 200 years older than that. The *Standard of Ur* is an ancient box with shell-inlaid figures and images on its outside which depicts a Sumerian military action and subsequent victory. According to one popular art history book, these “figures are carefully arranged in superimposed strips, each strikingly suggestive of a film or ‘comic strip’; doubtless, the purpose is the same—to achieve a continuous narrative effect.”¹⁰ By combining words with images into narrative art, ancient people discovered that they could record historical events in greater detail than with art or writing alone.

Comics As Cartoon

The word **cartoon** is over 500 years old. It comes from the French and Italian words for “card” and “paper.” Until 1455 the word “cartoon” was used to describe a preliminary sketch for a painting or sculpture, but after the invention of movable type made printing presses all the rage in Western European “cartoon” was used to describe any sketch that could be mass-produced.¹¹

These early cartoons were very simple to make reproducing them on printing presses easier. They were also very simplistic in nature, but today any drawing is considered to be a cartoon despite its complexity so long as it encapsulates a complete thought. In plain English, this means that any illustration can be called a cartoon.

⁹ *The Cartoon*, pg. 73

¹⁰ *Art Through the Ages*, pg. 50

¹¹ *The Cartoon*, pp. 16-17

Two Definitions for Comics

Which brings us back to my original question: “What is comics?”

Believe it or not there is no single agreed-upon definition for comics, despite the best efforts of two of the most knowledgeable comics communicators of the last century to create one.

During the 1970s comics grandmaster Will Eisner (*The Spirit, A Contract With God*) coined the term “sequential art” to describe the medium. Sequential art is piquant and to the point, but it fails to describe the comics medium to anyone who has never seen anything like a comic book or a comic strip.¹² For this reason Scott McCloud attempted in 1993 to expand the term sequential art into a proper dictionary-style definition for his milestone text on comics communication, *Understanding Comics*. What he came up with was:

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.¹³

Intimidating, isn't it? I know it scares the heck out of me.

The problem with McCloud's definition, besides inducing brain cramps, is that it fails to mention **words** as an element of comics, even though comics is narrative art and a verbal-visual medium.¹⁴

¹² *Understanding Comics*, pg. 5

¹³ *Comic Book Rebels*, pg. 7

¹⁴ Anyone who has read more than a few comic books can attest that a comic book traditionally includes words in caption boxes and dialogue balloons. Everything has its exception, however, and there is no denying that there have been wordless comic books—John Byrne's *Critical Error*, for example—but most have been attempted as experiments. These experiments have incorporated the physical format of a comic book, but it is debatable whether the results were actually comics. Experiments like *Critical Error* are less reminiscent of narrative art and comics as they do *figurative art*, which was developed approximately 4500 years ago by the illiterate populace of ancient Sumer. During this period of Near Eastern history, the art of writing was a jealously guarded secret of a special social class called “scribes.” In response, the common masses developed figurative art, a form of pictorial communication that resembles narrative art without the words.

My Definition of Comics (Sort Of)

For this book I have cobbled together a more precise description of the comics medium than either Eisner's or McCloud's. The components come from one of the first critical examinations of the medium, Coulton Waugh's 1947 *The Cartoon*. Waugh argued that all comics had to include three criteria:

- A narrative told through a sequence of pictures
- A continuing cast of characters
- The inclusion of dialogue or text within the cartoon

Technically, you do need a continuing cast of characters to communicate anything in any medium, so I took the liberty of scrapping this criterion (sorry Mr. Waugh!) and connecting the remaining criteria to assemble the following:

Comics: a narrative told through a sequence of pictures
with the inclusion of dialogue or text within the cartoon

There is your answer. *This* is comics.¹⁵

¹⁵ *The Cartoon*, pg. 22

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