UNDERDOGS

THE FLOW OF A PAGE, PART 1

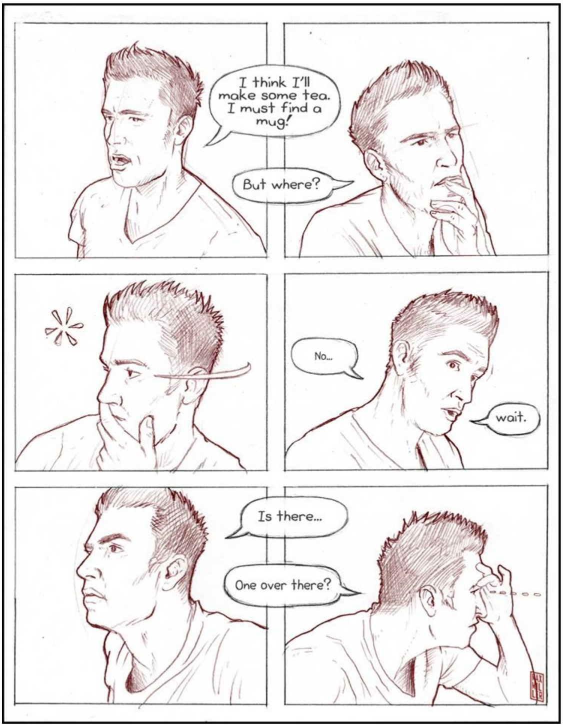
March 17, 2014 — Made by Max Miller Dowdle

Breaking up the Page: Pencils And Rulers At The Ready

Is something not jiving right with the flow of your panels? Welcome! Here is the first in a series of articles enumerating tips and pitfalls to avoid when constructing an effective page layout. You're standing at the ground level; your layout is the first and most essential consideration when it comes to creating your compositions, so it shouldn't be overlooked. Crafting well-made pages is the initial step toward effectively transmitting your story to the reader: many battles are won and lost right here.

So what is layout anyway? Just why is it important? Are there rules that dictate successful layouts? Well, just like anything else in the production of visual art, there are thousands of solutions, a myriad of ways to go about your specific task, but, there are guidelines that can help you find your way. This is an infinitely malleable medium. You, the creator, have complete control over this project, and it's important to be aware of every decision you make when fashioning your tale. Your panel layout is the fundamental tool for storytelling, it's the basket in which all your colorful characters and all your witty dialogue be carried across the page.

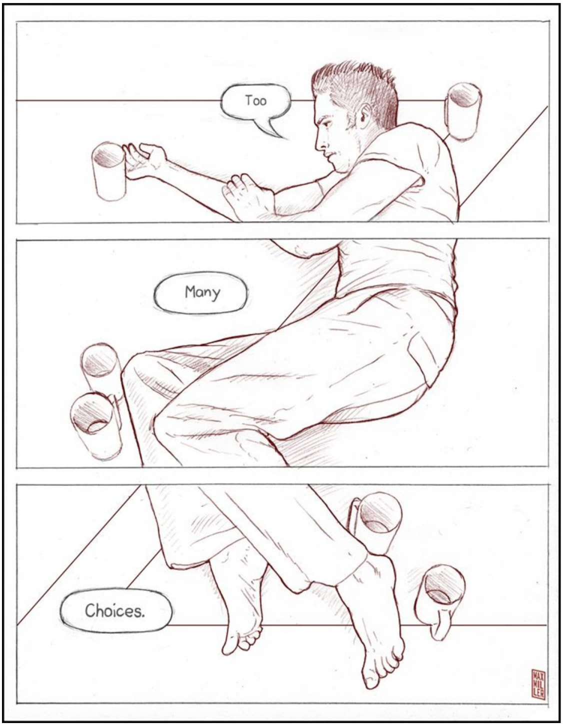
A successful layout is like good cinematography in a movie, it's there to boost the **mise-en-scène**, to tie it together, but it doesn't draw attention to itself. Everyone has experienced bad layout in a comic. When it happens you're immediately taken out of the story. Whether it's a dropped action, a strange focus that bounces you out the side of the page or a poor color pairing, the subtlest things can affect the flow of the comic, alternately fizzling the reader's interest, or leading the reader in the right direction, that is, deeper into the story.


I think I'll make some tea. I must find a mug!
But where?
No...
wait.
Is there...
One over there?

Pictured: The lack of focus, as well as omni-directional sightlines, can bounce a reader off the page.

In this series of articles I'll occasionally refer to what I call '**The Big Z**.' The Big Z is a reference to how you typically want the reader's eye to move over the page. In the West we read from left to right, top to bottom. When you stack panels on a page it results in the reader's eye moving across the top panel from left to right and then bouncing down to the top left of the next panel, and so on.

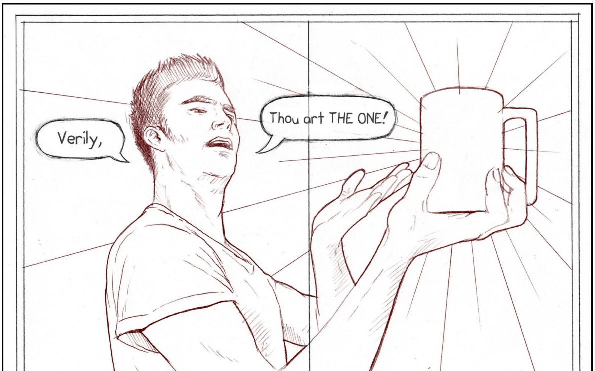
Remember, these are only guidelines I'm putting down and there are always exceptions. Successful pages have been built in circular layouts, chaotic starbursts, or any other strange fashion, but they are usually the exception and they tend to draw attention to themselves. Both Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* leap to mind as examples that successfully twist convention by shaking up the composition, and even forcing the reader to turn the comic in their hands from the horizontal to the vertical in order to follow the flow of the story. These are advanced techniques though. By and large the best way to keep someone in your story is to have them bouncing in a 'Z'-like fashion down your page, as that's what readers are already accustomed to. If you can keep someone comfortable, they're more likely to stay in the story. Of course there are always reasons to create an anxious atmosphere by upending traditional layouts, but that will be covered in a later article.

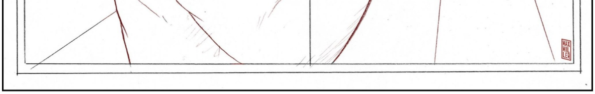


Pictured: Controlling the flow of the reader's eye to what's important.

To cut to the most basic structure in comics, we have **the page**. This is where all the action takes place, so to speak. With all this in mind, let's jump into the rudiments of layout: Breaking up the page. Of course you can have a full page taken up by one panel. The classic hero shot is one of the mainstays in superhero comics. A companion to this is the two-page spread. You could build your comic solely on full, single panel pages, but it's a sure-fire way to limit the dynamism that's achieved by taking control of the panel vocabulary.

Full page and two-page splashes are best used when you want to draw a lot of attention to one specific moment in your story. Remember, these are sequences of static images. If you, the creator, are choosing to focus on one particular instant by throwing a full-page image into the mix, then there must be a good reason for it. One panel, one page, that's about the simplest thing that can be thought of. So, what are some other simple panel layouts?

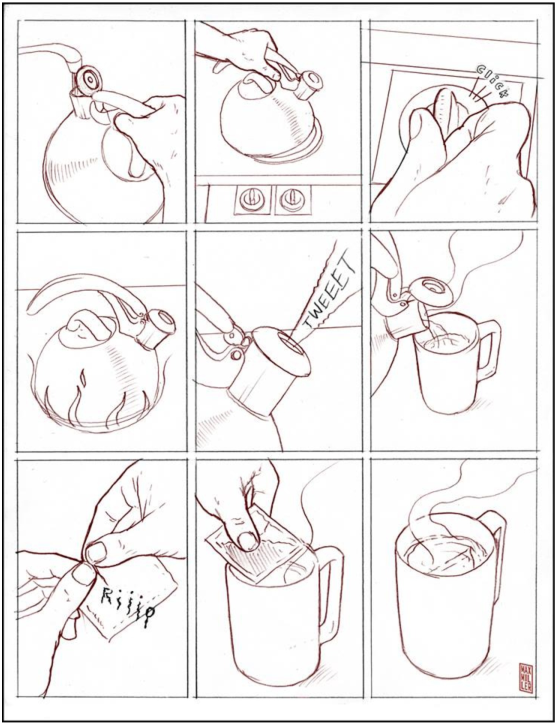




Pictured: A splash is best used to showcase a single, important instant.

The Grid: The grid is one of the most basic ways to partition a page. It can take many forms but at its most uncomplicated, you would divide the page into equal portions, say one line down the median vertical and one line on the median horizontal. Voilà! Four panels. You've just quadrupled your workspace. I know, it's not very inspired, but it's serviceable. You can take the grid in a lot of different directions, halving the space down infinitely in a comic form of Zeno's Arrow if you choose, but at some point you're going to be left with boxes that are too small to do anything with.

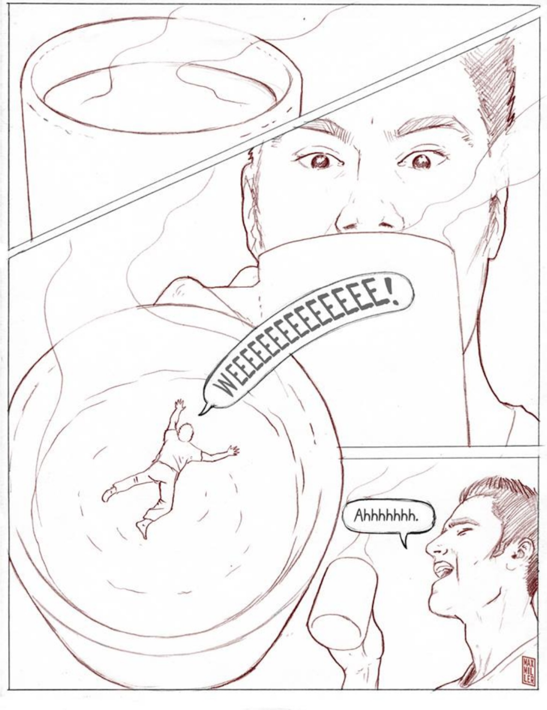
So how many panels are too many panels? It's generally considered that keeping a page in the four to seven panel range is the best measure for making an effective composition. The more panels there are, the simpler the page needs to be. Again, this is not a hard rule, but a general guideline built on a hundred years of comic production. If you consistently have too many panels you run the risk of cluttering up your story, and you'll be guilty of not giving the reader any space to breath.



Pictured: A nine-panel grid housing distinct slices of life.

The grid is a good, serviceable tool, but its major drawback is that it can tend to feel very static. So unless you're filling those regular boxes with very vibrant art or compelling dialogue, your reader may feel uninvolved when it comes to your story. This brings us to the other way to break up a page: **the Freeform approach**. Freeform is just what it says it is; it doesn't adhere to any constraints. The artwork is free to break the panel barriers, leaking into adjacent panels, or the gutters dividing the panels may be absent altogether.

What the grid lacks in vigor, freeform has in spades. The trap to watch out for here is that it can be easy to go *too wild* with your composition. The main thing to remember is to always keep the 'Z' pattern within the page. That should be the skeleton of your flow, from which you're always free to deviate.



Pictured: Freeform storytelling, a zippy route to the surreal.

There you have it, the beginner elements in layout construction. Join me next time when I'll get into how gutters, bleeds and time can affect the flow of your story.

See Max Miller's comics at **www.Artagem.com**

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Tags: comics, Flow of the Page, making comics, Max Miller, Underdog

5 Responses to "The Flow of a Page, Part 1"

Michael Freely March 17th, 2014

Fantastic. I really liked this one. Layout is something I did instinctively at first, but the more I draw, the more I wonder if I know what the hell I am doing. Thanks for the clear, well illustrated break down. And I liked the comic too… I just sat down to drink my first cup (graveyard shift) so i was totally there with the hero. I am glad he won in the end.

Reply

Ralf Singh March 22nd, 2014

Very good for beginners, especially the eyeflow part, something most beginners dont know.

Reply

Matt February 20th, 2017

Thanks so much for this helpful article!

Reply

Independent Research | jack hilder interactive media May 4th, 2016

[…] Miller Dowdle. (2014). The Flow of a Page, Part 1. Available: https://www.makingcomics.com/2014/03/17/flow-page-part-1/. Last accessed 2nd May […]

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UNDERDOGS

THE FLOW OF A PAGE, PART 2

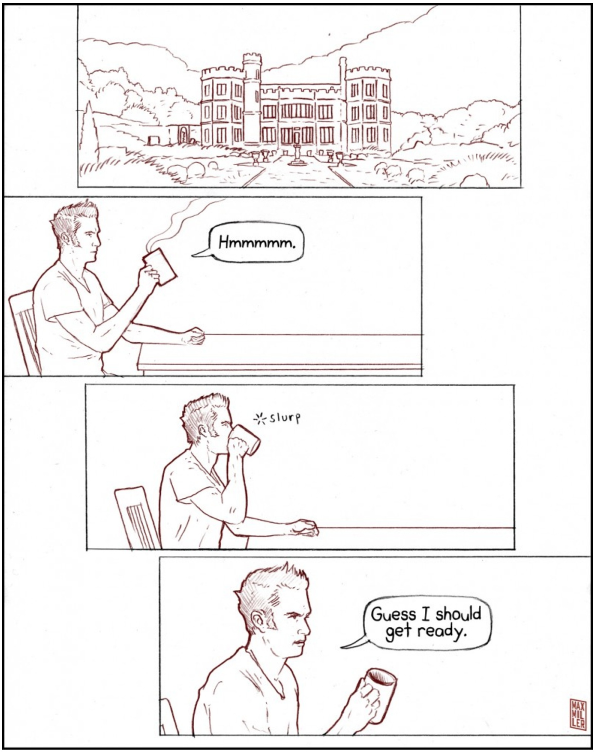
April 1, 2014 — Made by Max Miller Dowdle

Gutters and Borders: Where The Action Really Happens

So, here it is, the second installment in my series on 'The Flow Of A Page.' Last time we broke it down with panel layouts, both grid and free-form, and talked about 'The Big Z,' that is, bouncing the reader's eye exactly where you want it to go across the page. This is a medium that should strive for, above all other things, clarity. You as the artist/writer/creator are trying to convey a message (story) that should be able to be digested by the reader without confusion or chaos. That's not to say confusion and chaos can't be used as effective elements as well, but that's for another post. You've already learned some rudiments on panel layout, so now we will move on to the construction of panels, and that all-important space in between them, the gutter.

The artist has many subtle tools in the box for manipulation of time and space, even within the perceived limited confines of a simple comic page. By tweaking certain elements of the page such as gutter (the space between two panels), margin (the space at the edge of the page, usually buffered by some blank space), bleeds (breaking the margin and causing a panel to extend off of the page), and borders (the actual containment of a panel, traditionally a simple black line) the creator can remain in control of every element of that page, properly conveying their message to the reader.

Let's take as an example the reliable conceit of the establishing shot. Much like in the film medium, this is a shot right at the beginning of a new scene that places us in a new locale; think the exterior of a building, a forest glade, or a craggy mountain peak. One very effective trick is to bleed the establishing shot off the top of the page, opening up the scene and letting it breathe. Even if the reader doesn't notice it, this can be a clever way to bring the reader right into the action.

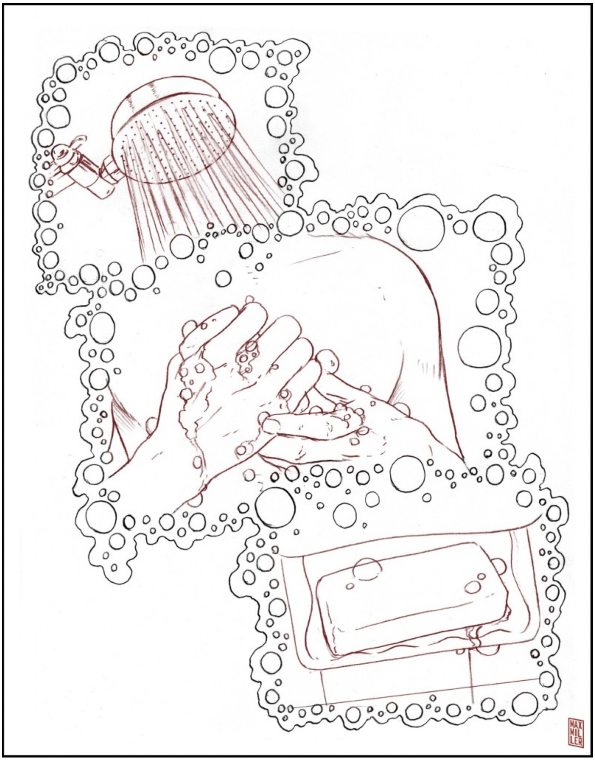


Pictured: Bleeds all 'round.

With a bleed you are extending the border right of the page. In fact, you could do this with every panel, leaving no margin at the edge. It's all about the feel you are trying to give the reader. These are techniques for influencing the atmosphere of your story, for every small decision you make, as the creator, has a great impact on the finished product.

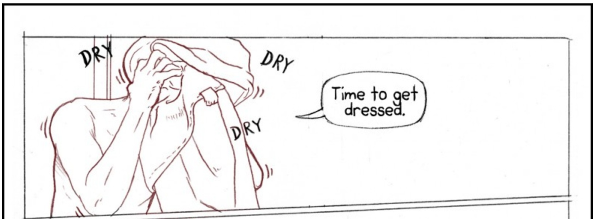
Small tweaks to the border itself can go a long way toward influencing how your work is read. Thickening, or coloring borders, especially in a page of simplified borders, can draw special attention to one particular area of the page. If you have a particular, key panel that you want to emphasize, setting the border shape at an angle, or giving it jagged edges will cause the reader's eye to be compelled toward it. Though, watch out. If this is overused it loses its effectiveness, and cause a page to look overly busy or chaotic.

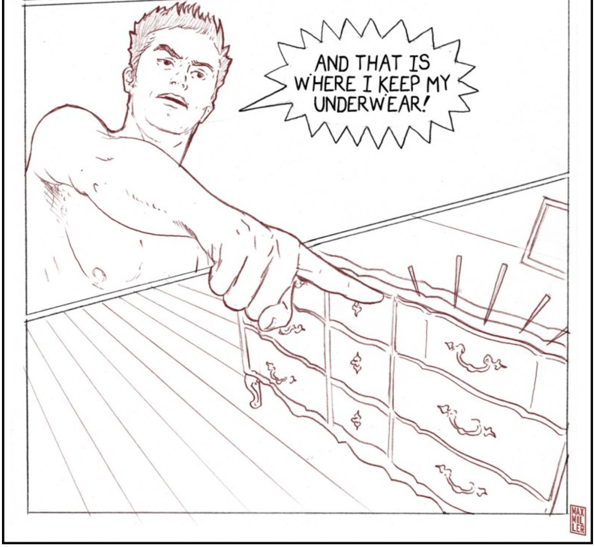
A note should be made about object borders as well. By 'object borders' I'm talking about actually creating a border out of some objects or motifs that reference the scene. For instance, you may have a scene set in a garden where the panels are framed by twists of ivy and roses. There are certain sequences in early the Alan Moore run of Swamp Thing where object borders are used to great effect to punctuate the atmosphere of a scene. The object border can be a crafty way to conduct the reader's eye around the page.



Pictured: Object borders can be sexy too.

Another, more blatant way to direct attention is with border breaks. Having an element break clear free from a panel, such as a character's arm, or weapon, can be an extremely useful way to draw attention to a certain sequence. Think of all the times you've seen a superhero's kick flying out the edge of a panel and you'll have a good idea of what I'm talking about. By using the border break you, as a creator, are acknowledging the fundamental mechanics of the medium (flat, two-dimensionality), and going a step beyond that, breaking the borders to really punch up the action. But, like when using creative borders, you have to be careful not to let things get too busy with border breaks or they'll lose their effectiveness.

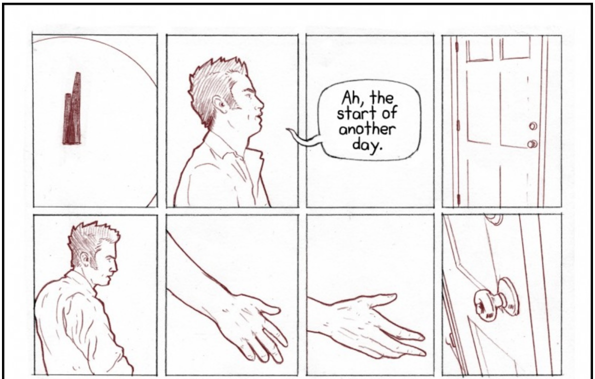


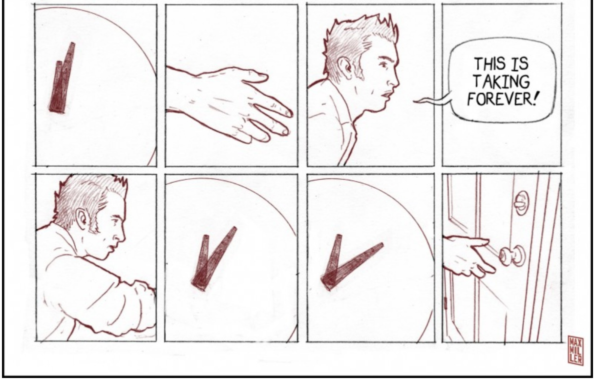

AND THAT IS WHERE I KEEP MY UNDERWEAR!
MAX MIL LER

Pictured: A border break used to punctuate something very important.

Between all of these panels is a very important element called the 'gutter.' And it should never be overlooked, for this is where Scott McCloud says 'the action takes place.' If you show two panels, one depicting the beginning of an action, and the second showing the action completed, then the gutter was where that action happened. Your mind filled in the blank. That space between two panels, and how you treat it goes a long way toward influencing how your story is perceived. Do you use white gutters? Black gutters? Colored gutters? Wide? Skinny? Never be afraid to experiment and find what works best with your particular story.

One final element to be considered in the construction of a page is the panel count. It's generally accepted that five to seven panels per page is a good balance, but of course you can chop a page into a hundred panels if you can find a way to pull it off. There are no hard rules, because someone will always find a way to make nearly anything work. But, an interesting phenomenon that occurs when ratcheting up the panel count, is that it serves to *slow time* in the comic format. This is the opposite of what happens in film format. Think about a film sequence where you see a lot of fast scenes cut together in quick succession, like the shower scene in Psycho. That's a very quick scene, but there are ninety shots from seventy different camera angles, all in forty-five seconds. Amazing right? Now think if those ninety shots were drawn out on comic pages. Whether you put ninety panels on one page, or spread them nine per page over ten pages, you're looking at a lot of drawings. Time will slow down with more panels because the reader's eye will typically linger over the panels at the same rate.


Ah, the start of another day.



Pictured: Draaaaaaging out the scene.

So, join me next time when I break down the deeper mechanics of page vocabulary, and until then, keep your pens to paper, whether you're drawing or writing.

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Tags: comics, Design, making, making comics, Max Miller, Page Design, Page flow, Underdog

3 Responses to "The Flow Of A Page, Part 2"

Fish April 2nd, 2014

The last idea about the panel count is very interesting, and it will give a solid framework to any artist. But I think it can be different when you decide to make every pages more "independent" : The action stop at the end of the page.
You often see that in Bandes Dessinées (European comics), where a particular action doesn't continue on many pages… As a result, a page with 8 or 9 panels isn't necessary slow (maybe less dynamic, but not slow).

In any case, the artist must be sure of what he wants to show, should it be an action scene whit a lot of suspense or a long dialogue while the characters are going somewhere. At the end, it require a lot of "movie-making technique" like said in https://www.makingcomics.com/rd/2014/02/08/anatomy-storyboard-part-2-continuity

Reply

cari July 27th, 2014

Thank you for this. It's really helpful and I would so read that comic.

Reply

Framing: Fancy, Focused, Fast, And Furious | Timothy G Cramer's Provocative Praise November 20th, 2014

[…] My discription of the self-adjusted reading speed effect is in disagreement with expert opinion: "Time will slow down with more panels because the reader's eye will typically linger over th… I think this disagreement is in degree rather than in absolutes, […]

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