Zub Tales
The official blog of Jim Zub

Rambling About How I Write Comics – Part One

Posted by Jim Zub on July 4, 2012   Go to comments   Leave a comment (15)

While blabbing away on Twitter last night the conversation organically moved into comic writing. Explaining my process in short 140 character tweets was kind of a pain, and I realized it was worthy of a few blog posts, so here goes.

Comic writing is pretty free form in that there's no standard format. Some writers do broad outlines of what's happening in the issue and then let the artist draw the story, coming back in the end to add dialogue to the pages (this is the original 'Marvel Method') but that's pretty rare nowadays. The stories being written now are way more intricate and most artists aren't used to winging it quite so much.

The norm at this point is 'full script', which is just what it sounds like – writing out page by page and panel by panel descriptions of the action and dialogue so the artist can plan and illustrate the entire issue. It's more time consuming, but also a lot more focused. Even within that full script approach, unlike movies and TV, there's no standard for script format, terminology, spacing or anything. Each writer kind of kit-bashes a script format together that works for them and goes from there. If the format is clear and the artist gets the information they need, that's the most important part. Everything else is just personal preference and a general professional look to the work. I previously posted up a copy of my **script for Skullkickers #1** you can check out **HERE** if you want to see my particular scripting style.

I'm a story planning junkie. I know there are people who just dive in and start writing 'page 1' without any idea where things will go, letting the muses kiss their fingertips clattering along the keyboard, but I'm not one of those people. I plan a lot of the story structure up front and it's time consuming, but once that idea and pacing phase is done I write fearlessly because I know the overall plan and won't lose my way. I can clearly visualize scenes and anticipate how they're going to play out, driving me to get to them. If I come up with better ideas along the way or inspiration strikes a scene, I can work it into the structure and adapt. I rarely need to cut or heavily revise material because I've built a solid story foundation to work from.

So, how does that work?

The first thing I do is brainstorm a series of point form 'things' – facts that need to be relayed to the reader so the story makes sense – character traits, settings, antagonists, goals, character changes or revelations. It's a giant jumble of story ideas, characters and key moments – the raw story ingredients all piled up.

Then, I look at the length of my story. If it's a work-for-hire comic story then the format is probably a set number of pages. If it's my own project then I rough out how much space I think I'll need to make it work (number of issues or number of pages for a self-contained graphic novel). Once I know the number of issues/chapters I can start to plug in my jumbled pile of elements and get a sense of **story flow**.

The classic approach to story flow is called the **'3 Act Play'** and it's one constantly used for movies, sitcoms, short films, novels... you name it. If you don't know what it is and you're shown it, you won't be able to un-see it, but that's not a bad thing. It's a very logical way of building a story and isn't as rigid as it may sound.

In simplest terms:

ACT 1 – INTRODUCTION: Who, What, Where and When ('Why' may not be answered in this stage). Who are the main characters? What are their initial goals? Where are we? When does this take place? Giving your audience this information in an entertaining way engages them and preps them for the larger

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story to come. Even in a mystery you need to impart enough of the above for people to feel grounded in the story and ready for act 2.

TRANSITION – THE CHOICE: In the classic version of the 3 Act Play the transition between Act 1 and Act 2 is the main character(s) really diving in to the challenges before them in a way they can't go back from. If they could just back away without consequence, then the threat level doesn't seem so bad. Once they've agreed to the mission, told that person they want to date or picked up the cursed artifact, they're pulled in and can't go back to their old life. They have to work through the resulting conflict.

ACT 2 – CONFLICT: Conflict can take on many forms and most stories have multiple types of conflict woven together. Physical, mental, emotional conflict. This is where all those classic concepts of Man VS Man, Man VS Nature, Man VS Technology, Man VS Society, Man VS Himself, Man VS Wo-Man comes into it. Your characters need something to rail against. Epic or mundane, there's something to overcome. When it comes to classic Hollywood blockbusters this tends to be once-in-a-lifetime kind of conflict where people are saving the kingdom, the world, the universe kind of stuff, but conflicts can be as quiet or bombastic as you want. Romantic comedies have the exact same structure, just with a different set of goals and outcomes.

This act is the real meat of your story. Ideally, the audience wants to enjoy the shifting threats, victories, failures and unexpected twists that come from the conflict. There's usually 'callbacks' to the things we learned about the characters from the introduction, but not so obviously that the audience can see exactly where the story is going. Creating unexpected but appropriate conflict is one of the toughest elements of storytelling, especially with a media culture that's inundated with stories and has 'seen it all'. If you can surprise them, that's ideal. If not, at the very least make them care about the characters so they want to see it through to the end.

TRANSITION – CLIMAX: The biggest action, the most important decision, the most intense outcome is almost always saved for the end of act 2. It's the payoff for everything we've built and is called 'climax' for a reason. This is where people admit their love for one another, the world is saved or the most ridiculous special effects money is spent. After this, it's a steep downhill finish as things are resolved.

ACT 3 – RESOLUTION: Did they live "happily ever after"? Are their lives an echo of who they were at the start? Has everything changed after conflict? This act tends to be the shortest since the audience has been given almost everything and we're emotionally winding down. Medals are given out, things are learned (or ignored) and credits are rolled. If this is just one part of a larger story then there may be a lot of unanswered questions, but that's okay as long as we're keeping them in mind for the future, things moved forward and felt relevant to the whole.

An even shorter way of explaining it is the old stage magic credo:

"First I tell 'em what I'm gonna do, then I do it, then I tell 'em what I done."

That's a weird part of working on **Skullkickers**. Even if it feels ridiculous and random (because that's how I want it to come across), the structure underneath isn't. I've created a story that reads like it's out of control and can't possibly all work, but after the original short stories it was actually tightly built to feel that way. Underneath that chaotic mass is a larger structured story I'm chipping away at that, if I do my job correctly, will pay off in exciting ways, surprising the audience while still feeling appropriate. That's the plan, anyways.

Whew. Okay, I went into a bit more depth then I'd originally planned. In another blog post I'll talk about how I take my idea pile and use aspects of the 3 Act Play to make it all work together.

Click here to read Part 2

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Rambling About How I Write Comics – Part Two

Posted by Jim Zub on July 5, 2012   Go to comments   Leave a comment (7)

In **part one** I talked a lot about story flow and initial brainstorming. This time I'm going to go more in-depth with the planning process.

As I mentioned before, I'm a story structure nut. I rarely write my comic scripts without previously breaking down the story into point form notes that act as a guide for the main 'beats'.

This is how I do it.

After brainstorming a jumble of ideas – possible set pieces, action scenes, motivations, characters, themes, jokes, sometimes even snippets of dialogue I think might be important, I start putting them in a rough sequence.

• In order for this 'thing' to work/happen, what needs to come before it?
• What information does the reader need in order for this next part to make sense?
• How do we get from this part to the next one?
• Most important – Is this entertaining?

Assembled in rough order, what seemed like a lot of 'stuff' when I began opens up into chunks of content with gaps in between that need to be filled – Gaps of logic, gaps of motivation, gaps of time, you name it. Before I tighten all that up, I start separating the story into issues or chapters.

I'll use **Skullkickers** as my major example here. In Skullkickers, I have 5 issues for each story arc, and each one of those arcs builds towards the master story (which, at this point, looks like it's going to encompass 6 arcs). Based on the type of story Skullkickers is (unapologetically over-the-top action-comedy sword & sorcery), it feeds on action, and lots of it. Each issue needs to open in an entertaining way and end with some kind of cliffhanger or surprise. That kind of storytelling fits Skulkickers very well, so when I start separating my brainstormed bits into 5 'parts' I start to see if certain issues are overloaded or skimpy in terms of content:

• Have we given the characters proper motivation to do what they're going to do?
• Is there enough action?
• Do we open strong and end strong?
• Are the stakes being raised in each issue of the arc with bigger/badder threats leading to the climax?
• Am I avoiding repetition in the types of conflict being shown and how our characters deal with them?
• Most important – Is this fun? Does it 'feel' like a Skullkickers story?

The above questions are specific to the pacing of Skullkickers. A lot of them carry over to other stories but that list isn't perfect. Each project I work on has different story flow parameters and different questions core to how I think they should work. Quite a few people have told me that **Makeshift Miracle** reads like a completely different person wrote it, and I'm proud of that. It was built to read very differently.

Scenes get trimmed or expanded to fit. Threats are added, moved or taken away. I double check my master story plan (the 6 arc plan) to make sure the overplot that needs to be addressed in this arc is included. At every stage I need to be able to ask myself *"Why are the characters doing this?"* and have a valid answer that fits the plot and their personalities. It has an internal logic. It can take quite a bit of time, but the exercise of doing the story breakdown helps generate a lot of new ideas for me. If any parts I came up with aren't used, I put them away for possible future use.

The original idea for the first story arc of Skullkickers was *"by the end of the story these two idiots have to literally kick the skull of a gigantic creature"*. That was the climax. I had to figure out how to get them there. I worked out the ending and then put a bunch of lesser, but increasing, threats in the way. Knowing where it was headed helped me brainstorm the assassinated noble, the zombie attack in the morgue, the necromancer, the possessed leg – all the rest. I varied the types of action, the location and the motivations along the way so it kept the reader wondering where it would all lead. You can read the whole story arc online for **FREE starting right here**, if you want.

My story breakdown reminds me of all the important plot points I need to cover so I don't waste space. It keeps me from writing material that might get cut. Over 17 issues of Skullkickers (300+ pages), I've only cut/majorly rewritten 5-6 pages. I think that's a good ratio. I don't expect that the exact same methodical story building technique will work for everyone, but it works for me.

In my next post I'll talk about page-by-page notes I use before I start scripting. From there, I'll probably do a post about dialogue and timing. I hope you find my ramblings useful. If so, feel free to let me know here (or on **Twitter**) and share the posts with your friends.

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← Skullkickers Kitten Variant Cover at SDCC! Jim Zub at San Diego Comicon 2012! →

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Chris Lewis July 6, 2012 at 3:32 pm Reply

Hi, Jim. I learned a lot from the fantastic book club you did on Comics Experience and the in-depth review you did of my script for Drones #1. These posts provide another great resource for aspiring writers, and I thank you for that!

admin July 6, 2012 at 4:33 pm Reply

You're welcome, Chris. Glad you're finding them useful!

Jim

Adam Davis July 8, 2012 at 1:26 am Reply

I find your ramblings useful. Look forward to reading more of them. Thanks for the post.

Oz Durose May 16, 2014 at 6:09 am Reply

Hi Jim, first off I love the Skullkickers world you have created, and have recently found these blog entries very insightful. My question, however, is about the six parts of your story arc as you mentioned above, and how much effort/detail you put into each of those arcs before running with the story into production. I suppose I have always thought a full story script should be written, like the novel version, before jumping into comic production, rather than an organic idea of exploring the story in the comic form.

Jim Zub May 16, 2014 at 8:17 am Reply

Everyone's methods are different, so I can explain how detailed my version was but it isn't any kind of hard and fast rule.

The original Skullkickers story was pitched as a self-contained adventure that would take 5 issues. Once the series started selling well I was asked if I wanted to keep it going by Image and at that point I sat down and started building up ideas for the other five story arcs. The 2nd and 3rd arc were pretty detailed while the 4th to 6th were more vague and would evolve as I went along, incorporating the broad concepts and main ideas. I'd like to think that I'm a better writer now than I was four years ago, so I want to allow new elements to find their way into the story as I go along.

Damon Griffith January 25, 2016 at 9:54 pm Reply

I've been trying for so long to get myself started on writing and your blog posts are the reason I've finally started!! I love the super, duper planning method and am very excited to give it a shot

Luke Cro April 22, 2019 at 11:13 am Reply

Do you have to immediately start off with a new story arc after the one before that ended?

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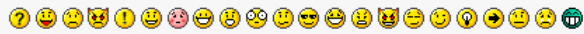Archives

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Rambling About How I Write Comics – Part Three

Posted by Jim Zub on July 9, 2012   Go to comments   Leave a comment (2)

I've talked about **initial brainstorming, story progression** and **segmenting a comic story into issues/chapters**. In this post I cover page-by-page pacing. It's not a technique I hear much about, but I've found it invaluable for comic writing and hope you find it useful too.

Working with an artist who understands how to enhance and communicate a story makes a huge difference, but as the writer it's your job to make that as easy and clear for them as possible. Comic writers need to think a bit like artists and comic artists need to think a bit like writers. The easiest way for me to understand where the visuals are all going to go and how they fit together is to create a quick page-by-page pacing list. It's nothing fancy, but it is quite helpful.

I take a text file and create a row of page numbers and then go through my issue by issue breakdown to figure out how many pages each part of the issue will need. It gives me a simple way of measuring how much emphasis (page time, if you will) is being used for each scene. I can double check that it all fits and is well balanced before I start scripting. In an action-oriented series like **Skullkickers** I can make sure there's enough ass kicking. It's the main thrust of the series and I don't want to get so caught up in talking scenes that I lose track of that emphasis on combat. The last two issues of each story arc are usually wall-to-wall action. For my other comic stories I have quite different plot/mood goals and adjust the pacing accordingly.

A page-by-page pacing list also gives me an easy way to 'see' where 'page turners' will go. Assuming my story starts on page 1, then each even-numbered page (2, 4, 6, 8, etc.) causes the reader to flip to a new spread. If I want to subtly encourage them to keep reading or reveal a big surprise, using the page count to my advantage helps a lot. If a character turns to look behind them because they think they're being followed on the last panel of an odd-numbered page, we want to turn the page and find out who they see. That's a cliché example of a page turner, but it works. If I put that reveal on the odd numbered page instead, then the reader would already have the surprise ruined for them as their peripheral vision picked it up.

Okay, so hopefully I've convinced you that a page-by-page pacing sheet has merit. Let me assure you, it's not complex. It's a point form list. Here's an example of a pacing sheet from Skullkickers issue 3:

SKULLKICKERS #3
—

01 **Camped out under the stars – full page**
02 **Banter/poison**
03 **Merchants prepping to attack**
04 **More banter/eat the stew**
05 **Peyote dream begins**
06-08 **DREAM and PROPHECY? – 3 page spread**
09 **Wake up/barf/revelation**
10 **Merchants fail**
11 **Travel to the tower. Dwarf sick.**
12 **Arrive at the fortress. Guards.**
13 **Sneak by first wave of skeletons**
14 **Sneak quietly inside**
15 **Exploration**

16 Reveal the necromancer's 'lab'
17 Mistake
18 Fight breaks out
19 Fight
20 Fight
21 Fight/human hides
22 Dwarf captured by necromancer – full page

Yup. That's it. Just a simple list justifying the existence of each page.

Want to see how it all played out in the comic? You can read the whole issue starting right **HERE**.

In Skullkickers the pacing list is usually quite simple. On more complex stories I'll have more points per line, but the overall approach is similar. The page-by-page pacing gives me a clear sense of how much time is being given to each scene, where the page turners will be and ensures that all the plot points I need covered in the issue will fit.

I still have tons of creative flexibility in how all of the above is presented when I do my actual scripting, but it's a crucial map. When I start scripting I have clear goals about where it's headed and don't waste time writing material that isn't relevant. If I come up with a better way to pace things as I script, I'll usually go back to my page-by-page list and adjust it, so when I stop mid-script my plan accurately reflects what I've already completed.

The issue breakdown and page pacing also act as an important reminder and inspiration point for me. When I'm juggling multiple (often, very different) projects at the same time it can be tough to get 'back into the groove' on writing. Having a plan puts me back in the right head space to keep working. It's far easier for me to write at odd times or in strange places because the story plan solidifies my productivity. I've written at airports, on trans-Atlantic flights, in hotel rooms… anywhere I can get my laptop up and running. Even when things are crazy-busy I can find time to write one or two pages inbetween a hundred other things that need to get done. I can walk away and, when I come back, that outline and pacing sheet reminds me of where I was and where I need to go.

My comic writing method front loads most of the story building at the start, developing the road map. By the time I sit down to actually script, almost all of those technical/plot issues are solved so I'm free to concentrate fully on describing really cool places, brainstorming wild action or coming up with catchy/ interesting dialogue. I'm no longer worried about whether or not the page I'm working on at that moment is going to be relevant or pace properly – it does and it will because I already figured it out, issue-by-issue and then page-by-page.

In my next post I'll talk about the actual scripting process. I hope you find my ramblings useful. If so, feel free to let me know here (or on **Twitter**) and share the posts with your friends.

Click here to read Part 4

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steven pinto September 10, 2013 at 6:05 pm   Reply

Hi, my names Steven and reading your tips and guidelines have really helped me and inspired me to make my own stories. for me it is really tough getting a story going along. But with these tips I can more understand which direction I am supposed to be heading with my own action story.
I'm only fifteen with a lot of drawing experience but i feel there more to it than just drawing. I feel that to actually knowing what our drawing or to know what the character is feeling is to write the script and story yourself. I know that it will be tough but i believe that I can actually do it. Thanks for all the amazing advice you are truly great. 🙂

Alex November 30, 2015 at 7:44 pm   Reply

Very helpful post, this happens to be quite challenging to me

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Zub Tales
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Rambling About How I Write Comics – Part Four

Posted by Jim Zub on July 24, 2012   Go to comments   Leave a comment (7)

In the previous parts of this run through/tutorial, I've covered **initial brainstorming**, **story pacing** and **issue by issue/page by page planning** as a way to structure my writing work and make sure I'm delivering everything I need. Finally, we're at scripting. For a lot of people, the other planning stuff I covered isn't actually writing, the scripting is. I think it's all part of the process but, either way, here we are finally at the script.

Comics are quite a unique medium. If you're reading this I'm sure you already know that. The ability to structure a story with words and pictures in tandem brings a lot of strengths from both prose writing and illustration, while adding a lot of new elements to the mix by combining the two. Placement of text, composition of imagery and size/shape of panels can vastly change how a reader perceives the story.

Some writers leave panel size/shape/focus up to the artist, while others get ridiculously specific. I usually steer towards the "anal" half of that balancing act, but I'm always open to hearing from the artist I'm working with. If they have a better way to present the page and can enhance the impact, that's awesome. The longer I work with a specific artist, the more comfortable I get in letting them decide. At the start of most new projects I'm quite detailed as I try to establish a baseline for the artist in terms of how the story should feel.

I've heard that there are writers who generalize their dialogue and put final speech text in after the art arrives. I'm not one of those people. I want the characters to have an established voice that inspires the artist and, if I need to edit things a bit once the art is done to make it fit better, that's fine.

Here's a sample page of script from **Skullkickers** along with the finished page from issue 13:
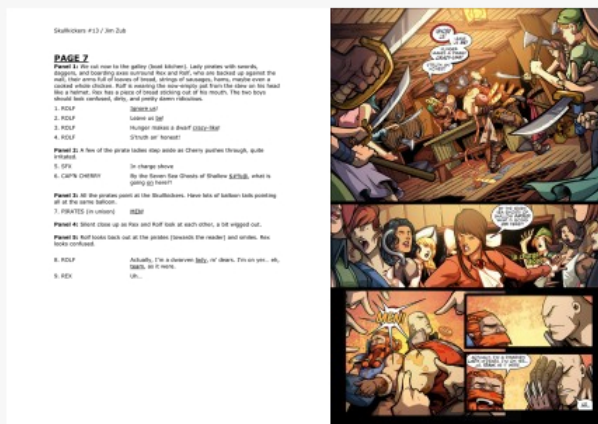
And here's a sample script page from **Makeshift Miracle** along with the finished page from chapter 5:

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Creator-Owned Economics: July 2016
Creator-Owned Economics: Oct 2017
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You can also check out the complete script for Skullkickers #1 right **HERE**.

October 2013 Update: Since this post was originally put up I've switched my script format to the one used by Fred Van Lente and several other industry writers. It's a compact template that imparts all the required information with clear caption/balloon/sound effect numbering to make the letterer's job easier. I've updated the samples above to reflect that change and recommend you visit **Fred's website** to snag the template for yourself.

The key, for me anyways, is to set each scene as clearly as I can in terms of focus. Quite simply – what needs to be shown in order for a particular page/panel to work? Sometimes I'll get specific about the panel size or angle if I need a certain effect, but when I'm in the groove I'll just as often explain the main focus of a panel (the information that needs to be imparted) and let the artist pick an angle that works for them.

One of the strangest parts of writing Skullkickers is explaining what's supposed to be funny in the script. It's probably the least funny thing I can do, deconstructing a joke that way, but it's important that Edwin knows what the reader is supposed to see and why we're stressing that part so the humor comes through loud and clear. If a reader can't tell where they're supposed to be looking or what the focal point is, they're not going to be amused. The pacing and joke will be lost.

Script cadence and detail is different for every writer. Some use point form notes, others describe in depth. Some people keep it formatted like a movie script, while other comic scripts read like a conversational letter casually written to the artist. Any of those approaches can work if the communication is clear and the artist has all the relevant information they need to illustrate the story.

The script format I've grown comfortable with has dialogue inset with underlined words indicating bolded/emphasized words for the letterer. I list each page and the number of panels so it's really clear to the artist what the pacing is when they're thumbnailing out their page roughs. Action scenes are rocked out with simple indications of where characters are and what they're doing. During 'talking head' scenes I try to give indication about what characters are doing as well so it's easier for the artist to think about body language and how that will affect the dialogue.

Coming from an art background, I find it very helpful to imagine how the whole scene plays out in my mind, even though I know the artist will have a different version of it in the end. Visualizing it for myself as I'm scripting helps me think about panel pacing and any setting notes I need to add to the script so the artist has a clear picture in their mind too.

After doing a first draft, when deadlines allow, I let the script sit for a few hours or (ideally) overnight. That way I have time to step away and take a fresh look at it. I re-read through each part to make sure I haven't missed crucial information or didn't skip words while typing.

Once I have my story plan and page-by-page pacing list, the scripting process can go quite quick. Since the panel description text only gets read by the editor, artist and letterer I'm less concerned about making it 'perfect'. The artist is going to bring their own visual ideas into the collaboration and will let me know if something isn't quite as clear as I imagined it. The most important part of the script is the actual dialogue because that's what the reader is going to see directly from me on the finished page.

In my next post I'll go over my dialogue process and some little tricks I use to try and create natural sounding character speech in my scripts.

I hope you find my ramblings useful. If so, feel free to let me know here (or on **Twitter**) and share the posts with your friends.

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7 Comments.

ElliotDwennen July 24, 2012 at 2:46 pm

Reply

Fantastic post Jim! I look forward to reading the next post on dialogue

Steven July 24, 2012 at 7:56 pm

Reply

Thanks for this! I'm about to try my hand at writing comics for the first time, and these write-ups have been very helpful. Looking forward to the next one.

Javier Martinez May 28, 2013 at 12:19 pm

Reply

hi
thanks for this, am a comicbook artist who´s triying to get in the bussines here is a link of my work
http://deltagrone.deviantart.com/
http://www.behance.net/deltagrone
i was hopping to get the skull kickers script but the link is broken, i really apreciate if you could take a look at my work
thanks
thanks

Jim Zub May 28, 2013 at 1:24 pm

Reply

I fixed the link for the full script from Skullkickers #1. You can find it right here:
http://www.skullkickers.com/skullkickers-script-skullkickers-1/

TK Watkins March 2, 2014 at 3:49 pm

Reply

Hi Jim, thanks so much for these articles. I know I'm late to this article but I'm hoping you could help me…

I'm curious if, with these templates, can you auto-insert or auto-complete names? Like, assign names to particular hotkeys? An example might be, if I'm writing an X-Men script- if I type ALT+W, it automatically pastes in Wolverine. ALT+X would be X-Men, and ALT+P+X would be Professor Xavier. That type of idea…?
I'm hoping to not have to, for example, type out "Professor Charles Xavier" when I could just type ALT+P+C+X or some such.

…I'm not actually writing an X-Men script, just using that for an example….

Thanks for any help on this!

Jim Zub March 2, 2014 at 4:10 pm

Reply

I didn't actually make the templates, so you'd need to check with Rob Marland to see how that would work:
http://oscarwildecomics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/comic-script-template.html

TK Watkins March 4, 2014 at 12:21 pm

Reply

Thanks, Jim, got my answer from Rob. And thanks much for all these great articles, your site has great info. And thanks for Skullkickers, it's a great book!

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Zub Tales
The official blog of Jim Zub

Rambling About How I Write Comics – Part Five

Posted by Jim Zub on July 30, 2012   Go to comments   Leave a comment (6)

In the previous parts of this tutorial series, I've covered **brainstorming**, **story pacing**, **page planning** and **scripting**. I wanted to get down some of my thoughts on dialogue before I wrap it all up.

Dialogue writing is a unique challenge. In a medium like comics where you rarely have the luxury of using prose to paint a scene, dialogue becomes even more important. The art in a comic makes up a large part of the storytelling experience and the dialogue/narrative text needs to work well with the visuals to create a cohesive collaboration. When dialogue is used properly (and lettered well, but that's another topic) the comic flows, moving the reader confidently through the story.

As I mentioned in my previous post, dialogue is the only text from the script the reader sees on the finished comic page. Getting character dialogue to sound 'right' and inform at the same time is crucial.

How a character speaks tells a reader a lot about their personality, attitude, and motivation. When I describe a scene to the artist in my script, I make sure they're aware of the character's attitude and purpose. In short, what they're doing and why. That way the posing/body language they use fits well with the attitude I want to see coupled with the dialogue I've chosen.

Then, the tough part – scripting speech. It's like acting except I'm playing out the scene in my head, imagining what the character would say in this situation. Remember that characters aren't necessarily going to spout their motivations aloud. Personality, speech and action all work together to create an interesting and memorable cast. Secrets being kept, confidence, innuendo, sarcasm, wordplay and some times what characters don't say at all can help communicate different traits.

My first pass is usually long and rambling, pouring out information I think I need to get across. Unless I'm on a roll and really 'in-character' the first version I come up with is usually cold and lifeless. Here's an example, just off the top of my head:

```
                        CHARACTER
        If we don't get out of here by midnight, we're going to die.
```

There's nothing grammatically wrong with that line, but it's boring. It may be relevant information to a scene I'm writing, but it sounds really generic. It could be attributed to any character in the scene and wouldn't sound any better or worse. What I try to do is tailor that line to a specific character in the scene and have them say it in a way that accentuates who they are.

If the dwarf from **Skullkickers** said that same line, it might go:

```
                        DWARF
        If we're nae high-tailed 'ere by peak o' the moon, we're as
        good as corpsed.
```

It's the same information, but spoken in a way that feels far more fitting for the dwarf, filled with his particular cadence and personality.

If an occult genius were relaying the same information it could go:

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```
                        GENIUS
        If we cannot escape by the witching hour, I fear we may not
        live to see dawn's light.
```

Or a neurotic teenager:

```
                         TEEN
        We've gotta get out before midnight, guys. If we stay...
        we're dead meat.
```

Or the punk protagonist from an M-rated comic series:

```
               PUNK WITH TOURETTES
        If we don't get the fuck out of here before midnight,
        we're full-on fucked.
```

I get into character, try different versions and, most importantly, I say them out loud. The best way to test if the dialogue I've written 'sounds' right is for me to hear it! Some lines are subtle, others are ridiculous and ham-fisted, it really depends on the character I'm writing. I imagine the scene and speak the dialogue aloud, feeling through whether it flows and properly punctuates the panel I'm working on. Sometimes I'll find a great line that doesn't fit in that spot, so I cut and paste it into a separate scrap text file so I can look for a good place to put it later on.

Unless the character I'm writing is known for being overly verbose, I trim fat from the dialogue I write. I try shorter, punchier versions of lines to see if I can get the same information and personality across with less dialogue. When I read a comic that has gigantic word balloons filled to the brim, my eyes tend to gloss over them. I feel like the text is choking the life from the artwork. I want the artist to have room to let loose and strut their stuff. If I have a really dialogue/text heavy page I make sure it's an absolute necessity for the story. Comics are a visual medium, so if there's a way I can amp up the visuals instead of info-dumping, I'll do that instead. When a lot of text is unavoidable, I let the artist know in the script that this section is writing-centric, a quick warning so they can plan their page rough accordingly to give me extra space.

One of the things Skullkickers has given me lots of practice with is writing dialogue for action scenes. I've become a bit of a stickler for combat chatter. For me it's got to be direct and (forgive the pun) punchy. When I read comics where a character spouts five rambling lines of dialogue in mid-air and another three lines as they get punched, I kind of lose my mind. I want my action scenes to feel tense and quick, punctuated with dialogue rather than overwhelmed by it. Occasionally a character can say something mid-attack, but even then it's going to be short and sweet. I space the talking out over multiple panels so the action keeps moving or avoid acrobatic soliloquies altogether.

Format-wise, I use underlined words in my scripts to indicate that a word should be bold in the final lettering. I use full caps to indicate that it should be a larger font and bold. These indicators help give the dialogue a clear rhythm so the reader knows where to put emphasis while they read.

So the line:

```
                        DRIVER
        We're leaving, Rachel. Get in the truck and don't say a word.
```

Could be written as:

```
                        DRIVER
        We're leaving, Rachel. Get in the truck and don't say a word.
```

With the words "leaving" and "word" stressed by the speaker, or:

```
                        DRIVER
        We're leaving, Rachel. Get in the truck and don't say a word.
```

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And this time "Get", "truck" and "don't" are given more weight. Say both versions aloud, emphasizing the underlined words, and you'll feel the difference.

Don't forget ellipses. They're an easy way to indicate pauses, slowing down the rhythm of the speech.

```
                        DRIVER
         We're... leaving, Rachel. Get in the truck ...and don't say
         a word.
```

With those ellipses in there it gives a sense that the driver was making his decision after he already started talking. He paused to think about it and then stressed "leaving" to finalize the choice being made. The second set of ellipses creates another pause, like he's finished his thought about Rachel going to the truck and then remembered to tell her to be quiet. The ellipses change the mood and rhythm of the line quite a bit. The driver here sounds less confident, a bit more shaken, even though the words being used are the same.

Another trick I'll use is quick italicized descriptions under the character name to let the letterer and artist know how a character feels or where they are in the scene if that's important. Here's a quick example, using everything I've shown above, all coming together to create a panel with distinctive character dialogue and directions for the artist and letterer.

```
Panel 3
Driver looks unimpressed as he watches the drunk stumble around off panel.

                         DRIVER
           Don't you think you sh-

                          DRUNK
                 (interrupts Driver, off panel
                  shaky balloon with uneven text)
           Yu think yu kin order me 'round 'ere? FUKOFF, yu! ...I'll
           ...I'll tell yu shitall!
```

The panel description is short and clear, stressing that the focus here is the driver's reaction to what he's seeing, not the drunk. The drunk's strange and improper dialogue denotes his emotional state and motivation, using bold words and ellipses to showcase the inebriated rhythm.

Keep dialogue clear, use it to enhance the story and make it character-centric. That's the technique that's worked for me.

I hope you've found these comic writing ramblings useful. As I stated in earlier posts, this isn't any kind of absolute-must-follow method, just the way I work and a few tips. If you found these posts helpful, feel free to let me know here (or on **Twitter**), share the posts with your friends and consider **buying some of my comics** to show your support.

Also, let me know if you have any questions about the process. I'm thinking of putting together future posts about story pitching if there's enough interest from people reading along here.

click here to read part 1 of the next tutorial series on pitching story ideas

—

PS: Mom, if you're reading this blog post — sorry for all the swearing up there. I love ya. 😊

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Josh July 30, 2012 at 10:36 am   Reply

Thanks for sharing your process with us. Hopefully it will help me with the script I'm writing. Keep up the great work on Skull Kickers! I can't wait for the next issue!

ElliotDwennen July 31, 2012 at 8:30 am

Another great post Jim. I was especially looking forward to this one about dialogue.

I like the punk with tourettes bit lol.

I have subscribed to your RSS feed so I look forward to all updates!

Bret Bernal July 31, 2012 at 8:51 am

Yes, pitching advice, yes!

Lovin' the posts.

Paul Im August 1, 2012 at 1:58 pm

second.

Enrique Rivera August 1, 2012 at 12:25 pm

This was great Jim! Very insightful, and helpful. Thanks for making time from your busy scheduel to post these up, you're the man! 🙂

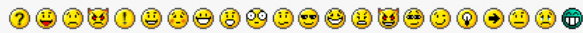**Mark Maia** September 12, 2013 at 10:29 am

Thank you sir for putting in the time to put this together.

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