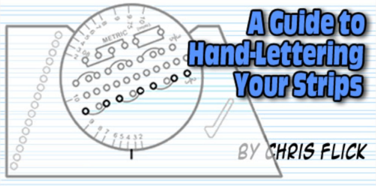
A Guide to Hand-Lettering Your Strips…

Posted on **June 5, 2013** by **Chris Flick**


A Guide to Hand-Lettering Your Strips
BY CHRIS FLICK
METRIC

I think I should start this article off by letting everyone know this really isn't an article about HOW to hand-letter your strips… that would be akin to writing an article on how to draw – and let's face it, there isn't one single article that will be able to teach you how to draw. All a drawing article can really do is detail a few tips and tricks that can help you improve your own drawings. But, unless you practice every day, your drawing improvements will remain minimal.

I've been hand-lettering all sorts of things as far back as 1984 when I took my first typography class in high school. Since then, I've honed my hand-lettering style by hand writing letters, notes, Christmas and birthday cards and a wide assortment of different things that had nothing to do with comics or cartooning.

During my high school and college years, I also did caricatures for parties and events which required some hand-lettering for dialog and other elements of those caricatures. That also aided me in practicing and developing my own hand-lettering style.

Now, even though I just said this article really isn't about how to hand-letter YOUR strips, it is an article about how I hand-letter MY strips. That means this article will cover some of the hand-lettering tools, pens and resources I've used in the past in order to help me with my own hand-lettering skills and personal style.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

It would be next to impossible to write an article about hand-lettering without mentioning the two most important tools in any hand-letterer's tools box: a T-square and an AMES Lettering Guide.

All of you should know what a T-square is but some of you may not know what an AMES Lettering Guide is. An AMES Lettering Guide is a small, plastic tool that helps a letterer set up guidelines for their letters.It looks exactly like the image used in this article's banner art – only much smaller. You can find them in most art stores that carry graphic design supplies or you can order them online for less than a few dollars at most places.

As the banner art shows, the lettering guide has a rotating circle plate and a bunch of little plastic holes. The holes are for your lead and, depending on how you set up the circular plate, your guides will either have a lot of space between them or not a lot of space. You can also create kerning guides or not.

For an explanation of kerning, tracking and other typography terms, you should check out Ken's excellent Webcomic Alliance article here.

Below are some excellent links and videos demonstrating how to properly use an AMES lettering Guide:

YouTube Videos demonstrating the AMES Lettering Guide

Todd Klein also has a great article about how to use the AMES lettering Guide tool as well. You can find his article here.

I Feel the need… the need for some SPEED!

As I have mentioned in previous Webcomic Alliance articles, I am all about speed and trying to make things easier for myself. As nice and as helpful as the AMES Lettering Guide is, when it comes to producing a multi-day comic strip, it can be very time consuming setting up your T-square, pulling out the AMES Guide, carefully and consistently figuring out your guides and then going back and forth with your lead drawing those guide for each panel of your strip. That's a good 30 – 45 minutes that could be used working on some other aspect of your comic strip or, just finishing earlier so you can get that much more sleep each night.

Here's what I did to help myself out…

Step One:

It took some experimenting but once I found a comfortable line height with my AMES lettering guide, I took a full size template of a blank Capes & Babes strip and inked those lettering guide lines. It also took some experiment to figure out that the lettering in each panel of a Capes & Babes strip usually takes up about the top 25% of each

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panel – but I added a few extra lettering guides just for those for instances where I feel “wordy” or need more space for dialog.

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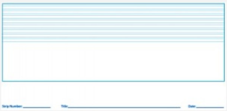
Step Two:



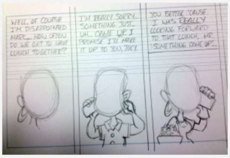
The original template is 17×5.5″ – I also increased the contrast so you could see the lines better.
Click the image above to see a slightly larger view as well.

I scanned my lettering Guide in Photoshop and, using Channels, I converted all the black lines to 35% Cyan. This emulates a non-reproduction blue. The Cyan is light enough that it will print but when it is scanned, the Cyan is too light for the scanner to pick up – which means I don’t have to worry about erasing any lettering guide lines any more.

Step Three:

I import my cyan lettering template into Adobe Illustrator document. I then put a sheet of Bristol board in my color printer and print the template out.

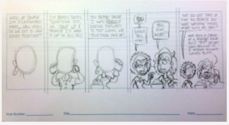
Step Four:

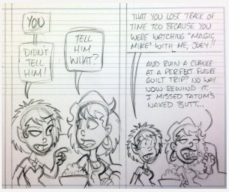

WELL, OF COURSE I'M DISAPPOINTED MAR... HOW OFTEN DO WE GET TO HAVE LUNCH TOGETHER?
I'M REALLY SORRY... SOMETHING JUST... UH... CAME UP. I PROMISE I'LL MAKE IT UP TO YOU, JOEY.
YOU BETTER 'CAUSE I WAS REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO THAT LUNCH, MR. "SOMETHING CAME UP"...

Click the image to see a larger, more detailed view…

Before I begin lettering, I will lightly block in where I think my characters will go or what position they will be facing. Very seldom is there any detail. There will usually be big ovals for each head. This gives me a sense of how much room I have for dialog, how much word balloon space I have and which direction the word stem should flow.

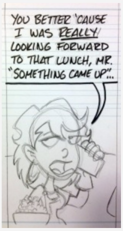
Step Five:




YOU
DIDN'T TELL HIM!
TELL HIM WHAT?
THAT YOU LOST TRACK OF TIME TOO BECAUSE YOU WERE WATCHING "MAGIC MIKE" WITH ME, JOEY!!
AND RUIN A CHANCE AT A PERFECT FUTURE GUILT TRIP? NO WAY. NOW REWIND IT. I MISSED TATUM'S NAKED BUTT...

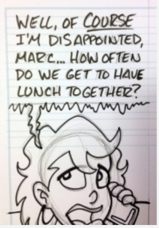
Using my newly printed strip template with lettering guides in 35% Cyan, I start writing the dialog for each panel. I use a cheap mechanical pencil that you can get at any supermarket or office supply store. The secret to this step though, is to have a gentle touch with the pencil. I don’t press the lead down too hard because I want to be able to ink on top of it and erase the lead later. It’s almost like I gently sketch each letter…

Step Six:


YOU BETTER 'CAUSE I WAS REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO THAT LUNCH, MR. "SOMETHING CAME UP"...

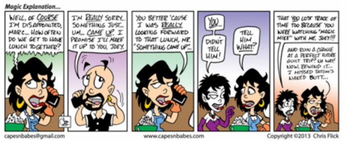
When it comes to inking the strip, the letters are the first thing I will ink but before that, I usually flesh out the rough blocking of each character by adding more details, clothing, props and anything else that might need to be done. This helps me visualize the actual size and/or design of the word balloons or whether I should just use a word balloon stem like Bloom County or Doonesbury. I’ll also sketch in the shape of the word balloons with the same light tough as I did the lettering.

Step Seven:


WELL, OF COURSE I'M DISAPPOINTED, MARC... HOW OFTEN DO WE GET TO HAVE LUNCH TOGETHER?

Now I ink the letters, ink the characters and then, lastly, ink the word balloons.

To see the strip I used for the above examples, click the link below to see the full-color, finished version:


Magic Explanation...
WELL, OF COURSE I'M DISAPPOINTED, MARC... HOW OFTEN DO WE GET TO HAVE LUNCH TOGETHER?
I'M REALLY SORRY... SOMETHING JUST... UM... CAME UP. I PROMISE I'LL MAKE IT UP TO YOU, JOEY.
YOU BETTER 'CAUSE I WAS REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO THAT LUNCH, MR. "SOMETHING CAME UP"...
YOU...
DIDN'T TELL HIM!
TELL HIM WHAT?
THAT YOU LOST TRACK OF TIME TOO BECAUSE YOU WERE WATCHING "MAGIC MIKE" WITH ME, JOEY!!!
AND RUIN A CHANCE AT A PERFECT FUTURE GUILT TRIP? NO WAY! NOW, REWIND IT... I MISSED TATUM'S NAKED BUTT...
capesnbabes@gmail.com
www.capesnbabes.com
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Magic Explanation strip.

Pens I use for Hand-lettering and Word Balloons…

I've been hand-lettering Capes & Babes since the second year of the strip. Since that time, I have experimented with a wide variety of different pens and I still continue to experiment. Here is a view of almost all of the various pens I have used since I started hand-lettering Capes & Babes:

FABER-CASTELL
GRAPHIC 1
MICRON
ARTWIN
Artist
COPIC

This is only a small sampling. I probably have used a lot more but either tossed them aside or they are no longer in my supply case. Click the image to see a more detailed view.

That being said, the one pen that seems to give me the most consistency in terms of thickness and readability is the Copic Multiliner Pen. It is the grey pen in the picture below and at the bottom. The other two pens I use for word balloon inking and emphasizing certain text:

Artist
ARTWIN
COPIC MULTILINER

Every time I think I've found a new lettering pen, I'll the new pen for a few strips and will find that the tip gets soft, the ink runs or it dries out… any number of various things. Invariably, I end up going back to the Copic pen.

I like it because, as a web designer, having text that is readable on the web is very important to me and part of that readability comes in the form of how think a letter is. If a letter is too thin, it's hard to read. If it's too small, it's hard to read. If it's too thick, it's hard to read. The Copic just seems to be the perfect choice for Capes & Babes. I know some people prefer the .08 Microtech for lettering – I've used those in the past and in a pinch – but I feel the Microtechs tend to dry up faster plus the Copic just has a much more natural writing feel to it than the Microtech tech. But that's just my own personal choice. I would definitely encourage all of you to do your own share of experimentation to see what pen might make your lettering look its best.

Why I hand-letter my strips…

Some of you might be asking why I continue to hand-letter my strips when there are companies on the web that can make a digital font family of your hand-writing style. I know Wes Molebash has done this very same thing with his various cartoon strips as well as many others.
The reason why I hand-letter goes back to that previous paragraph about speed.

When I originally started Capes & Babes, it was lettered entirely digital but I discovered a few things:

- I tended to write too much dialog in each panel. That's extremely easy to do when you're typing text on a keyboard.
- I found I ended up spending large amounts of time being obsessed with proper kerning and tracking for each word balloon.

- I did a large amount or re-writes on the fly. This meant a strip might get re-worked dialog three or four times before I thought it was FINALLY complete.
- It was not uncommon to find several typos in my dialog due to my trying to rush and making typing errors.
- If I got obsessed with tracking and kerning, I got even more obsessed with trying to create the "perfect" word balloon oval in Illustrator, including the curved word stem.

When I decided to commit to hand-lettering, I discovered the following things:

- I was a lot more tight with my dialog. No one really wants to ink overly wordy dialog. I can still get wordy with Capes & Babes but it would be much, much worse if I was still digitally lettering them. Hand-lettering ended up being a de facto editor, almost.
- Hand-lettering freed me up and I found I wasn't completely obsessed with every-single-letter. Maybe because digital lettering is cold and impersonal, it was easier to spot imperfections, but with hand-lettering, ever letter will be, by nature, imperfect so, even though it took time to get used to it, it was easier to "let go" of those imperfections.
- I thought the imperfections of hand-lettering my strips actually added some personality to my strips. We talk a lot about ways we can set ourselves apart from all the other webcomics out there and yet, it seems like 90% of them all look the same when it comes to the lettering of those strips – even ones that use digital versions of their hand writing. I also started looking at political cartoons to see different lettering styles that were being used. What I found was that there can be just as many hand-lettering styles out there as there are artistic styles.
- I could get very creative with my word balloons – especially when it came to creating Roy's special lightning bolt word stem. That would have been impossible to do in Illustrator with the same type of style I can do by hand.
- I made a heck of lot LESS typos by hand than I did digitally. People don't believe me but when you are hand-lettering and you come across a word you have even the slightest doubt about, you are much more inclined to look the word up than rely on a computer or program's spell check.

IN CONCLUSION…

Now, this article isn't meant to make an argument about digital lettering versus hand-lettering. In fact, as a web and graphic designer, I used digital fonts on a daily basis. And almost all of my promotional Capes & Babes material uses digital fonts.

Instead, this article was simply demonstrating how I personally hand-letter Capes & Babes and why I enjoy it so much. Perhaps, though, it might encourage you to experiment a little bit with your own strip and give hand-lettering a shot.

It might not be for everybody but there might be a small percentage of you that have been thinking about going "old school" and giving hand-lettering a shot. If you're one of those few, I hope this article has been extremely helpful and informative for you.

-Chris

Posted in Drawing, Featured News, Helpful Hints, Tutorials, Writing and tagged Todd Klein, Wes Molebash.

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14 Comments

Stephen Beals
June 5, 2013 at 9:12 am Reply

I really enjoyed this. It's nice to see that somebody draws as large as I do!

Ideally, I think that lettering is a part of the artwork. Whether you're spending time getting it just right digitally or hand lettering, it's more than just added text.

I always think of Patrick McDonnell's Mutts when I think of lettering that not only compliments the artist's work, but enhances it.

My trouble has always been that I'm left-handed. I have to pencil in the dialog and then ink backwards from right to left. Otherwise, everything smears. I've used many things over the years, but I mostly like my Speedball B2 dip pen and a font of my handwriting that I can add in Photoshop.

Chris Flick
June 5, 2013 at 12:10 pm Reply

Stephen, I used to draw really small when I was much younger. And i was totally comfortable doing it. These days though, if I'm struggling trying to draw something, it's usually because I feel like I don't have enough room to draw! 🙂

Sometimes, even at 5.5×16.75″ (the actual printing dimensions of my strip template), I STILL feel a bit cramped with each panel. 🙂

I like Mutts as well. I'm also digging Frank Page's Bob the Squirrel lettering as well.

Since you're left-handed, you should check out that Copic marker in the second pen photos I have in the article. The ink dries instantly so it might help with the smearing issue. And no worries… no left-handed jokes here. My mom's left-handed. 🙂

Daniel J. Hogan
June 5, 2013 at 11:46 am Reply

I love hand-lettering my comics. Not only has it helped my writing, but I feel I can do more with the text and have a personal touch I can't with software.

Plus, I think hand-lettering helps any comic stand out a bit more.

Chris Flick
June 5, 2013 at 12:05 pm Reply

I so totally agree with that, Daniel.

As I mentioned elsewhere, with Roy's werewolf lightning bolt word stem that is supposed to represent a wolf's growling sound. I wouldn't be able to do that digitally. Or, it would be time consuming to do so.

Hand-lettering gives me freedom to do different things like that that Illustrator or Photoshop doesn't.

Daniel J. Hogan
June 5, 2013 at 12:41 pm Reply

Playing with word balloon and letter shapes is one of my favorite things to do. I like using them to add more emotion/expression to the scene, like I did in this strip:
http://clattertron.com/2013/02/18/coffee-comic/

Karl
June 5, 2013 at 4:29 pm Reply

While my handwriting for my comic is, well, comicky, I feel the opposite of you about speed (hand lettering vs. digital lettering). My comics are scripted out well in advance of putting pencil to paper in the sketchbook, and the dialogue is revised during the penciling process to tighten up and long-winded speeches. Sometimes, the dialogue is even further tightened or revised or omitted during the lettering process.

I hand lettered my strip from the 1980s up to about 2003 and found my speed increased in producing the strip profoundly.

Good to see how others do things and it always proves that there is not one perfect way of doing it that fits everyone; it's what works best for the individual artist.

Chris Flick
June 18, 2013 at 4:08 pm Reply

Hey Karl… yeah, I don't always script my comics out in advance. I have the idea and the general idea for dialog for each strip before I start though. Sometimes, those strips might be sitting and working themselves out in my head for a long time before they see paper. 🙂

So for me, I was doing a LOT of editing on the keyboard and I tend to be REAL wordy when I type things out. Plus, as I mentioned, I would always fight with Illustrator to try and make the PERFECT word balloon.

Going "old school" (as Frank Page says), I find I'm much more sparse with my dialog as it's easier on the hand to letter LESS dialog, not more. 🙂

Tim
June 5, 2013 at 10:39 pm Reply

Great article. Would printer do you use that handles the large Bristol? I only have a letter size printer but I draw on slightly larger 9×12″ so that's not an option.

Our processes are close except I use a light box rather than Illustrator which is starting to annoy my eyes after a hard day's work.

Thanks again for taking the time to write this. I OWN one of your originals and I often look at it wondering how you do it,

Chris Flick
June 18, 2013 at 4:04 pm Reply

Hey Tim…
Sorry about the delay in getting back to you on this. Your comment was posted while I was at Heroes Con and once I got back, had a ton of stuff on my plate.

Here's the printer that I have:
http://www.brother-usa.com/MFC/ModelDetail/4/MFC6890cdw/overview#.UcC82NjYx8E

I got it a few years ago at my local Office Depot for a little under $200 at the time. I want to say it was in the $190 range.

frank page
June 6, 2013 at 1:59 pm Reply

i love it when cartoonists kick it old school… great article…

Chris Flick
June 18, 2013 at 4:04 pm Reply

Thanks, Frank.

Jim S.
January 31, 2014 at 7:13 pm Reply

Chris! You are BRILLIANT! Printing the lines on the Bristol is genius. I thought Dave Kellet was smart with his technique but this is great! Thanks for sharing!

Chris Flick
February 1, 2014 at 3:23 pm Reply

Jim, glad you think my little blue line trick is worthwhile. The only drawback to using my technique is you can't hand-color the strips or else the blue lines will show up underneath the design markers. That's only in case you ever want to create a truly unique, hand-colored strip though. I color everything digitally so that's not an issue as the light cyan lines disappear once the strips are scanned.

I need to really update this article though because now that Frank Page has joined the Webcomic Alliance, him and I have been able to compare notes on hand-lettering. Frank was able to convince me to try Paper Mate's Flair Pen "M" size. I found a four pack at Staples and have been using those to letter my strips for the last month or so.

Brand new Paper Mate pens have a think line at first but once you break the pens in, the line width gets a little thicker, which I prefer. Those pens are cheaper than the Copic pen I was using AND they are MUCH easier to find when it's time for a replacement.

Tim Brown
June 9, 2015 at 11:57 pm Reply

Great article, interesting to see your process and how you work!

If anyone is looking to learn hand-lettering I've written a brief crash course you can check out here:
https://timbdesign.com/crash-course-hand-lettering/

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