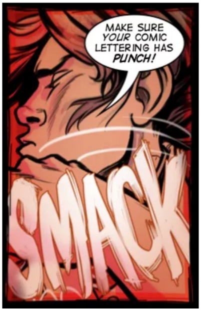
Comic Layout Tutorial: The Comic Lettering Spell

By Lora Innes


MAKE SURE *YOUR* COMIC LETTERING HAS *PUNCH!*
SMACK

I was never interested in lettering.

…until I learned that good comic lettering is one of the most important ingredients for casting a story-spell on my readers.

I just have to make sure the words don't cover any important element in the art and I'm done, right?

Early in the making of my webcomic, I received a comment from a reader who politely pointed out how awkwardly I had spaced the words in a balloon.

*Wait, there are **rules** to comic lettering?*

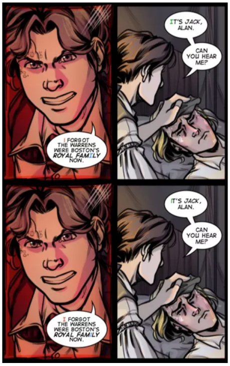
The commenter gave me a helpful suggestion which seemed embarrassingly obvious after I read it.

Mortified, I thanked him and began re-lettering large portions of my comic. If this reader had noticed, I was sure others had. If people were getting tripped-up by awkward lettering, I was breaking my own spell.

In this post, I'll share four tips for good comic lettering which will help you to cast your story's spell instead of breaking it.

These four examples are from a recent page of my historical fiction comic, The Dreamer.

All I's Are On You.


I FORGOT THE WARRENS WERE BOSTON'S ROYAL FAMILY NOW.
IT'S JACK, ALAN.
CAN YOU HEAR ME?
I FORGOT THE WARRENS WERE BOSTON'S ROYAL FAMILY NOW.
IT'S JACK, ALAN.
CAN YOU HEAR ME?

While a capital "I" with crossbars is appropriate in multiple scenarios, in comics it should be *only* be used for the proper pronoun "I."The top two panels improperly use the letter "I." The bottom row shows the correct use. [click to enlarge]

Unless a character is declaring that they ("I") do something, use an "I" without crossbars.

(You really have to look out for incorrect "I's" when copying and pasting text from a Word document straight into your word balloons. All of those "I's" will have crossbars.)

Look at the example to the right.

There are three "I"s in each set of panels and each "I" is a different color.

The top two panels are wrong, the lower two are correct.

- The red "I" here is that proper pronoun mentioned above. So it *should* have the crossbars on it. Always.
- The blue "I" is in the middle of a word. There is no excuse for having crossbars on an "I" anywhere in the middle of a word. Ever.
- The green "I" is at the beginning of a sentence. This also applies to proper nouns like names and places—"Irene" or "Iceland." In comics, avoid using crossbars on your "I"s, even where a capitol "I" should be used. In comics, even proper nouns start with crossbar-less "I"s.

"Good comic lettering can help to cast the spell of your story. Awkward lettering will break the spell."

[click to tweet this quote]

The Flawless Diamond.

The reader suggestion that I mentioned in my opening was this:

Fit the text into your word balloons like a football… …or a diamond.

Most word balloons are ovals so the most natural way to fill up that space is to break up the lines of your text in an oblong.

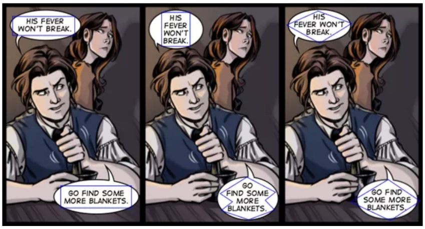
The longest line of text in any word bubble should be at the center, which also happens to be the widest part of the balloon.

As you work away from that center toward the top and bottom of your balloon, each line should get shorter than the previous one.

This maximizes the area of a word balloon, and will help your lettering take up less space on a page.

A square block of text in a round balloon leaves large chunks of white space which covers your art for no good reason.

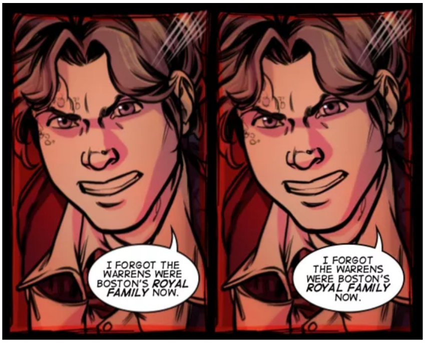
(We discussed balloon layout in our previous post on comic balloons.)


HIS FEVER WON'T BREAK.
GO FIND SOME MORE BLANKETS.
HIS FEVER WON'T BREAK.
GO FIND SOME MORE BLANKETS.
HIS FEVER WON'T BREAK.
GO FIND SOME MORE BLANKETS.

The first two panels have a lot of wasted space within the word balloon because the text is not broken into a shape that fits naturally within the balloon. The third panel successfully implements the football formation.

Here are some general rules to keep in mind when creating your letter-diamonds.

- In graphic design, it is not a good idea to have a single word floating on a line. However, in comic lettering, this is often necessary—especially when there are only a few words in a given balloon. Personally, I don't like to leave an "A," "I" or any other two-letter word floating at the top of a balloon unless the text is *extremely* short.
- Try to keep words such as "a," "the," "Mr./Mrs./Miss/Dr." and "of" attached to whatever follows, rather than leaving an orphaned "a" at the end of a line break.
- Avoid hyphenating whenever possible.
- Names and other similar phrases joined together should be kept on the same line whenever possible. For instance, in the following panel, the taunt "Royal Family" is put in bold. On the left the term is broken up. But on the right, those two words to stay next to one another. This has more impact than when they are broken apart.


I FORGOT THE WARRENS WERE BOSTON'S ROYAL FAMILY NOW.
I FORGOT THE WARRENS WERE BOSTON'S ROYAL FAMILY NOW.

Keeping important words or phrases together will help emphasize them.

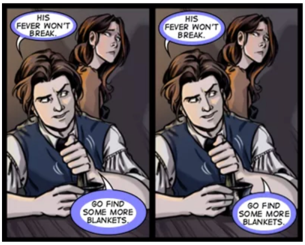
Not only is the term "Royal Family" kept together in the right panel, it also successfully implements the diamond formation. It keeps the "I" from being orphaned on the first line *and* the "the" is kept with the noun it modifies ("Warrens").

Find A Space To Talk.

Padding is the space between your text and the edge of your word balloon.

Make sure this space is uniform and consistent for every balloon within a panel, from panel to panel and from page to page.

- Avoid text too close to the edge of a balloon. Your text will look cramped. Let it breathe.
- Likewise avoid leaving too much padding which creates an excessive amount of deadspace.
- (The exception to this is one of the ways to suggest a whisper: small text in an oversized balloon.)

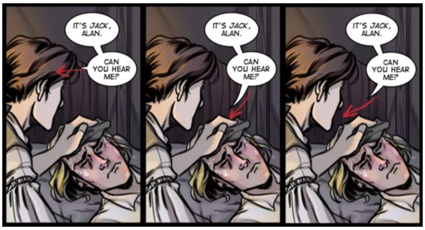

HIS FEVER WON'T BREAK.
GO FIND SOME MORE BLANKETS.
HIS FEVER WON'T BREAK.
GO FIND SOME MORE BLANKETS.

On the left the top balloon has too little padding, the bottom too much. On the right the padding allows the text to breathe and is consistent in both balloons.

Don’t Talk With Your Hands.

Word balloon tails should always, always, always point to a character’s mouth. Not their head, not their belly, not their shoulder.

Make tail lengths cover half the distance between the character’s mouth and the edge of the balloon.


IT'S JACK, ALAN.
CAN YOU HEAR ME?
IT'S JACK, ALAN.
CAN YOU HEAR ME?
IT'S JACK, ALAN.
CAN YOU HEAR ME?

On the left his head is talking, perhaps he’s telepathic. In the center, his hand has much to say. Finally on the right he’s speaking with his mouth and we, the reader, don’t have to think twice about it.

Don’t Break The Spell.

These are simple tips but once you begin using them, they will really add polish and professionalism to your comic pages.

> “I honestly think that good lettering can make an amateurish effort look less so, similar to the way good visual FX in an otherwise low-budget movie can make that movie feel bigger and better.” -Comic Letterer Troy Peteri in a CBR Interview.

Nate Piekos also has a fantastic article about the different types of balloons and fonts you should bookmark to reference.

Good lettering, like good writing, good anatomy, good layouts and good colors will help to immerse your reader in the story.

Anything that does not look effortless will snap the reader out of that experience and break the spell.