FREE WITH EVERY ORDER: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 1

When I first started this blog way back in the distant past (also known as “two weeks ago”), I figured it would mostly be about the experiences I’d had coming up through the ranks as a freelance writer, sharing what “knowledge” and “wisdom” I might have gathered over the years with anyone who’s just starting out or curious about how freelance writers do what they do. I didn’t realize at the time that I’d be writing a freaking memoir along the way, but there it is.

I also put a (so far ignored) bit in the blog description about how anybody with any questions concerning the creative or the business side of things could feel free to ask me.

And, sure enough - no one has asked me anything.

But am I going to let that stand in the way of my ego-driven pontificating? Of course not! Starting tonight, interspersed with the autobiographical stuff, I’ll be posting a more or less step-by-step guide exploring the technical aspects of writing scripts and prose. This new “series,” if you want to call it that, will begin with comic book scripts, because that’s what I first got paid to write, and it’s the format I know best.

Time to put on my metaphorical tweed jacket with elbow patches. Maybe smoke a pipe.

Above: as professorial as I’m likely to get

Now, first things first: am I saying I know everything there is to know about writing? No, of course not. Not even remotely. I learn new things about writing every day. I hope to keep on learning new things about writing until I die. Sometimes I feel as if I’ve become a completely different writer over the course of a week, or even a day or two.

In fact, I would say that if a writer DOES tell you he knows everything there is to know about writing, that's an excellent indication that he is filled to the eye sockets with crap.

But you don't have to take my word for it. I'm hardly a household name. Outside of a few overtly nerdy circles, the best descriptor I can hope for as far as recognition goes might be "obscure."

So why would you listen to what I have to say about writing? Well, I can think of two decent reasons.

1. Despite my obscurity, I have been a working freelance writer for 21 years now (22 this summer), and have been steadily published in one medium or another for about the last 15. So, name recognition aside, it is an objective truth that I have written and had published a freaking boatload of stories. Some have qualified as "best-selling." Some have even won awards.
2. It's free.

So, since this is the first "class," or "session," or whatever you'd like to call it, I guess I should lay out what I intend to talk about.

STORIES IN GENERAL

1. How to approach them
2. How not to approach them
3. Resources for inspiration and insight

(Remember how I said I was still learning stuff? I thought I had a handle on story structure. Then I read Brian McDonald's book *Invisible Ink*, and it was as if I'd been slapped right back into writing kindergarten.)

COMIC BOOKS

1. Outlines, and why they're your friends
2. The "plot layout," or how I reinvented the wheel
3. The script format that has served me well for 2 decades

NOVELS

1. Why you should love them
2. What's worked for me

VIDEO GAMES

1. The different tasks that go into video game scripts
2. The mindset necessary to write games

I think that covers it - though, as I stated earlier, this is what I INTEND to talk about. Don't be surprised if it goes off the rails, especially if somebody puts a good question in the comments, 'cause I'm sure I'll stop and answer it.

PLOT-DRIVEN VS. CHARACTER-DRIVEN: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 2

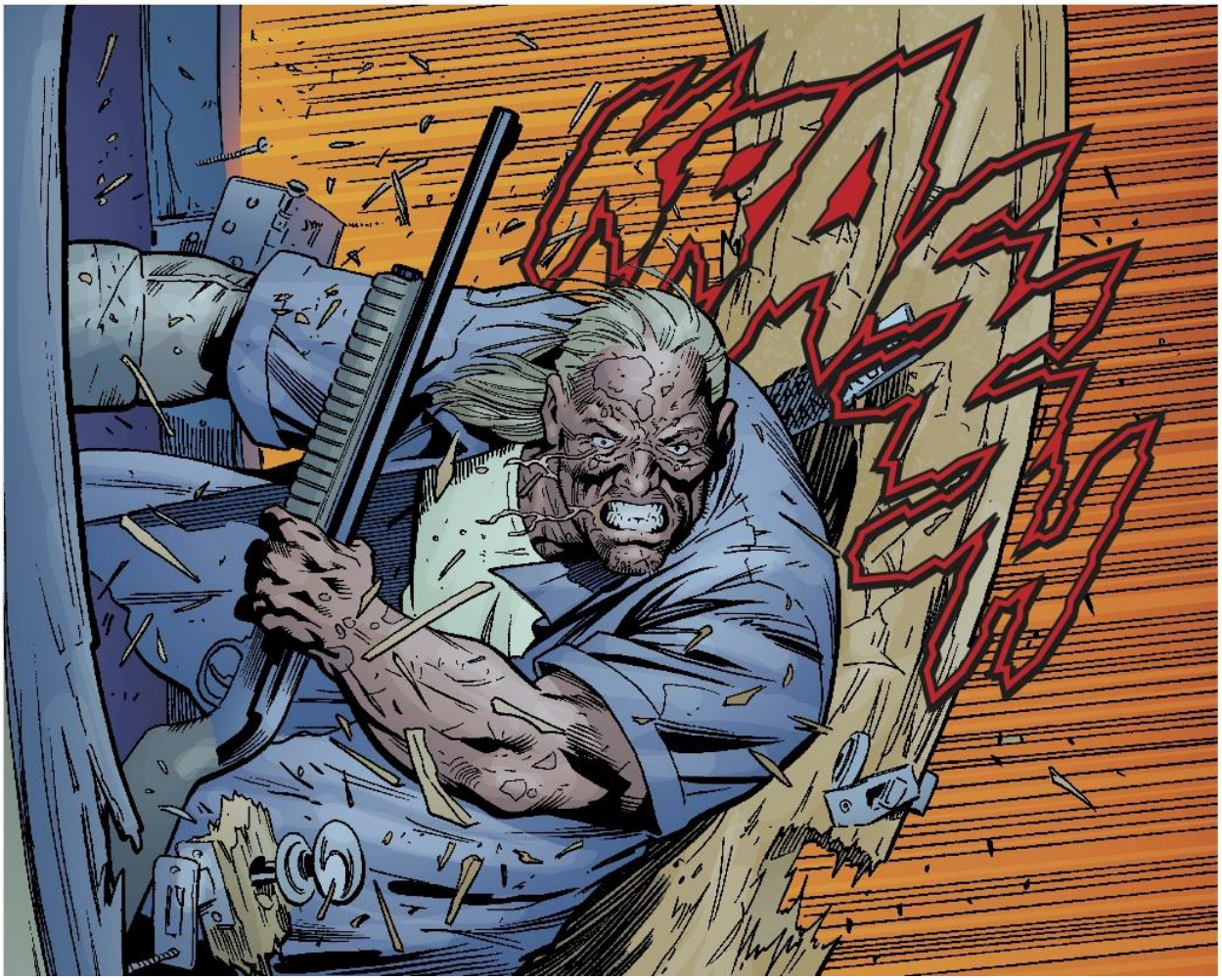


Image from *Bloodhound* issue 7.

That agitated-looking fellow you see up there is Travis Clevenger, the protagonist of my short-lived creator-owned DC Comics series BLOODHOUND (penciled, inked, and colored by the brilliant team of Leonard Kirk, Robin Riggs, and Moose Baumann). That's the project I mentioned earlier, when I said I was asked to come up with a character who was NOT:

1. a martial artist
2. an expert marksman
3. an ace computer hacker.

That request came after supremely talented and consistently jovial artist Drew Johnson introduced me to Ivan Cohen at DC Comics. Ivan wore a number of different hats at the time, only one of which was "editor," and he really wasn't looking for any new projects. But as a favor to Drew, he agreed to

talk to me, on the condition that I not bring him a character that had any of the above-mentioned qualities. Apparently he saw a lot of pitches about kung fu sniper hackers.

“Okay,” I thought. “Challenge accepted. I can totally do this.”

That’s when I had a realization that blew my mind a little bit: nothing I had been hired to do up to that point had involved creating a new protagonist.

I had created plenty of villains, sure, and supporting characters, naturally - but protagonists? …Not so much. This realization, and the work produced because of it, would prove to be something of a turning point in my career.

But let me back up a little. This is a generalization, but there are basically two kinds of stories: character-driven and plot-driven. I’ll address plot-driven first because, for the larger part of my career, that was all I knew how to do.

PLOT-DRIVEN

Coming up with a plot-driven story is pretty straightforward: you think of a situation, or an event, or maybe a whole world that would be cool to write about. Maybe a tornado ravages a small town, or a serial killer escapes from prison and takes a hostage in a pre-school, or humanity discovers that what we thought was reality is just a computer-generated illusion and we’re really all floating in tanks of goo.

If you work in mainstream comics, the problem is more complex, because you still have to come up with a (relatively) original scenario, AND you have to make sure it’s not just like some other story that’s already been done. When you’re writing something for Batman or Superman, for example - characters that have decade upon decade of already-established story material behind them - that’s no easy task.

Once the scenario is solid, it’s time to populate it with characters.

Say you decide that a team of researchers in Antarctica stumbles upon a North Korean outpost, and now some NK soldiers are chasing them, and they get trapped in an ice cave and have to figure out how to escape and not get killed. There’s a scenario.

Let’s put some interesting characters in: how about the lead researcher is a 36-year-old single mother of two who writes travel guides as a sideline and misses her kids desperately whenever she has to be away from them (though they’re staying with her sister, so she trusts that they’re all right). And the second-in-command is a 27-year-old perpetual grad student who taught himself to juggle at age 4 and has a huge, secret crush on the single mom.

Both of those character descriptions will work, so now you’re off to the races, watching the lead researcher and her assistant evade the North Korean soldiers.

The story comes first here. The plot points are crucial: can they make it across a certain ravine, can they bypass the security system to enter the North Korean compound undetected, can they (if it’s a Michael Bay movie) time the popping of the green smoke just exactly right so that the American helicopter spots them?

Action stories are usually plot-driven. Maybe the assistant will confess his love to the leader and, hey, maybe she'll even realize she feels the same way about him, so we might be able to work out a happy romantic ending after they beat the soldiers and make it back to civilization.

But if not, well, sometimes it doesn't matter. The characters in The Matrix are hardly complex. What do we even know about them? What kind of music does Morpheus listen to? Does Trinity have any hobbies? Tank and Dozer are brothers; what happened to their parents? The movie doesn't tell you. And it doesn't really matter. The plot and the setting are what's important.

Generating story ideas in mainstream comics is hugely plot-driven. You already have the main characters built in, after all. There's very little to no room for modifying your protagonist. So you come up with a tight spot for Spider-Man to get into and then get out of, plug in the pre-fab hero, and there you have it.

Now we flip the process over and look at stories that are…

CHARACTER-DRIVEN
This is also pretty straightforward: you create a compelling, fascinating character, and then build a scenario around him or her.

But here's the problem I realized I was facing after Ivan Cohen asked me for a new character: I had never written a character-driven story before. You know why? Because I had never had to. In fact, until fairly recently, I wasn't even sure exactly what constituted a character-driven story - again, because I had never had to come up with one. "I don't get it," my thought process went. "You come up with a character first? And then…what? Just watch what he does?" It took a long time for the concept to sink in that fascinating characters can *create* scenarios.

Also - and this is especially crucial in serialized formats like comic books and TV shows - readers and viewers keep coming back because of characters, not because of plots. When you ask people what they love about Star Trek, invariably you hear things like, "Oh, Captain Kirk! He was awesome!" or "Captain Picard was the greatest!" or "Spock was so $&%#ing cool!"

They're not drawn back again and again because of the plots. They fall in love with the characters. House is probably the best current example of this. (I say current even though the show just ended, because it's going to be in syndication forever.) It doesn't matter what the medical mystery is each week. People watch the show to see what House is going to say or do.

More good examples, I realized, of character-driven stories are sitcoms. Sitcoms are populated (if they're done right) with very distinct characters, each possessing a well-defined, unique point of view. So you throw a little bit of plot into the middle of a group of interesting characters, and…just watch them react to it.

An entire plot of an episode of "Friends" was "Monica babysits Ross's kid." Establish what's going on, and the rest of the show is how the characters react.

A plot from "The Big Bang Theory" was "Leonard doesn't want an old boyfriend of Penny's to crash on her couch." Every character in the cast will have a specific reaction to that situation, and to each other, and there's your story. Yes, there does have to be a beginning, a middle, and an end with some sort of resolution, and yes, that's plot, but it's not what brings people to the show.

One year at Dragon*Con in Atlanta, I found out that Nickelodeon was going to be accepting pitches for new shows on Saturday. It was Friday afternoon when I heard this, and I had exactly nothing prepared that would be appropriate for Nickelodeon, but I took what information there was to be had - they were looking for "character-driven stories" and "squash-splat humor" - and I went back to the hotel room and came up with a property. Or at least I thought I did.

What I pitched to a very nice woman in very nice business attire the next day was something called OOZEBOTS.

Oozebots was about a group of robots designed by an eccentric scientist, that were supposed to be used in heavy industry to do stuff like construct skyscrapers and re-build after natural disasters. But the scientist had to outsource the robots' construction to an overseas fabricator, and due to a translation error, "titanium" got replaced with "cornstarch."

So when the robots came back and the scientist opened the crates, what emerged were five sentient robots made of a bizarre, translucent, gelatin-like substance. This production error also affected their personalities, so that they related to each other in much the same way the Three Stooges did. The Nickelodeon exec listened politely while I stumbled through this (I've never been very good at verbal pitches), and then told me that it sounded to her as though what I really wanted out of this was a toy line, not a TV series. "Thanks but no thanks," she said.

I was baffled; no, it certainly wasn't the best thing I'd ever come up with, but on one day's notice, I thought I'd done a decent job of providing a platform for some goofy, irreverent antics with plenty of both "squash" and "splat." The problem was that I hadn't bothered giving any of these characters a personality. How exactly did they relate to each other, aside from bonking each other in their squashy little heads?

…Huh. Good question.

I didn't deliver on the "character-driven" part of the deal. At all. And now Nickelodeon thinks I'm a dumbass.

SO! This brings us back to Mr. Travis Clevenger of BLOODHOUND. I had my marching orders: no martial arts, no marksmanship, no hacking.

This was a character to be set in the DC Universe, so I wanted him to be formidable enough to handle himself in a world with lots of extremely good fighters. Therefore…okay, he's huge. Like professional wrestler huge. Like…TRIPLE H huge. (There's a reason that Clev, as I decided to call him, looks a lot like Paul Levesque.) And he's no martial artist, so…he's a brawler. A low-down, dirty, kick-you-in-the-nuts, jab-you-in-the-eye scrapper who has a favorite pair of brass knuckles. All right, so how did he get that big? He's naturally strong…and I'm from the South myself, and know what growing up on a farm can do for the muscles…so Clev was a farm boy from…Cartersville, Georgia.

But he needs to be dangerous. What if he went to prison? What if he made some kind of horrible mistake, got sent to prison, and got even stronger by lifting weights all the time?

And "dangerous" doesn't just mean "physically formidable." He's a non-powered guy in a world full of superheroes and supervillains, so he's got to be smart, too. Maybe…maybe I can take a little bit of Vin Diesel's character in Pitch Black, when he talks about the "animal part" of his brain. Maybe Clev

can put himself in the same mental space as the really twisted supervillains. Maybe he tracks them down because he innately understands how they think.

So it would make sense that he gets into law enforcement - that way he gets paid for doing this. All right. I've got a big, dangerous, dirty-fighting cop who specializes in tracking down supervillains.

But he went to prison - okay, he and his partner must have gotten into something really bad.

Oooh! What if Clev and his partner's wife were having an affair? Partners are usually close as family, if not closer - what if they've known each other a long time - HOLY CRAP, what if one Clev's partner's children is actually Clev's kid? And then what if Clev's partner finds out about the affair?

So this big, dangerous cop can track down super-powered criminals, but he's also involved in some shady dealings with his partner, and having a long-standing affair with his partner's wife. Then his partner finds out, confronts Clev and tries to kill him, and Clev ends up killing his partner?

Off to prison he goes.

So the story starts with Clev in prison. Okay. Why would he get out of prison? Why, in the DC Universe, with hundreds of superheroes to choose from, would anybody get this particular guy out of prison for any reason?

Because there's a super-powered killer on the loose, targeting young women…and his latest target is the daughter of Clev's late partner.

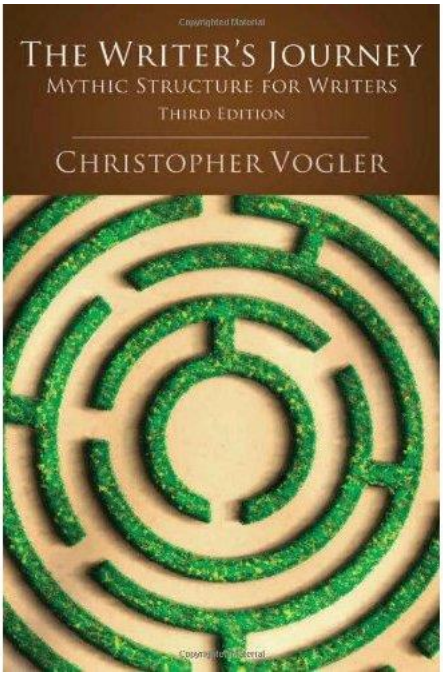
Clev's daughter.

The story goes on from there, and in spite of himself, Ivan Cohen was hooked. BLOODHOUND got approved by the DC brass and hit the shelves in 2004. The series ran for 10 issues. And let me tell you: that was the finest comic book writing I've ever done. It sold for crap, mainly (I like to believe) because an utter lack of marketing support meant that hardly anybody even knew it existed. But it was something of a critical darling, and when it ended, one reviewer ran a headline: "Bloodhound Canceled, Comics Readers Prove They Have No Taste." That made me feel pretty good.

I knew Clev better than I've known any other character I've written. I knew what he'd say, what he'd do, and what he'd think in any given situation, and it made the series much richer than any work I'd done before.

As far as I'm concerned, if you have the option, character-driven is the way to go.

MYTHIC STRUCTURE AND ME! …I MEAN, AND YOU! How to Write the Way I Write, Part 3



Buy this book.

I had been getting paid to write for seven or eight years before I was introduced to the book you see up there: *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler. It changed - *profoundly* changed - how I did my job. I wish I had found out about it much earlier. Like, when I was about six.

I was at a con (either Dragon*Con in Atlanta or MegaCon in Tampa, I don't remember which) when I met Scott Ciencin, another freelance writer. Whereas I had been concentrating on comic books, Scott had made a name for himself as a novelist, working primarily in licensed-property novels. Scott had read a couple of my comics and enjoyed them, and he and I started talking on the phone pretty regularly. During one of those conversations he asked me if I had read *The Writer's Journey.*

"Nope," I responded. "What's that?"

Very seriously and, as I soon came to discover, completely accurately, Scott said, "It's the keys to the kingdom."

I didn't know a single thing at the time about Joseph Campbell, or the work he had done combing through an entire civilization's worth of culture to produce *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.* I didn't know anything at all about how Christopher Vogler distilled Campbell's work and turned it into, essentially, a how-to guide for storytellers. But I would soon learn. And because of that, my productivity was about to skyrocket.

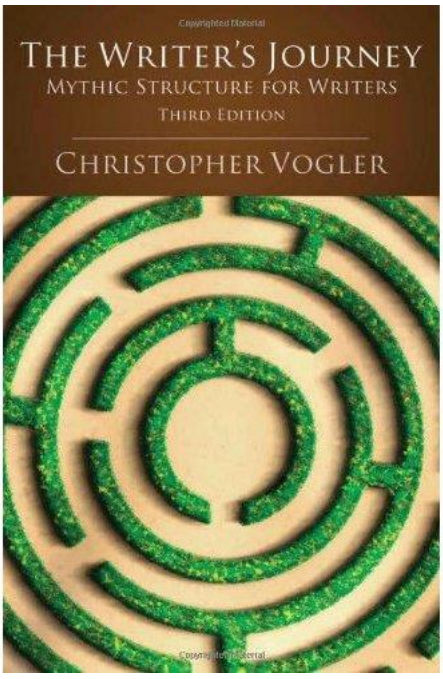
Let me see if I can break it down quickly here…

Basically, what Campbell and Vogler are saying in their respective books is that there are common elements in stories from every culture on Earth, as far back as culture has existed.

From *Gilgamesh* to *Little House on the Prairie* to *Star Wars* (especially *Star Wars*) to *My Cousin Vinnie*, you can take the stories apart structurally and pinpoint each element. This structure - the "mythic structure" - applies not only to plot points, but also to characters. Vogler, in fact, lists and analyzes each of the character archetypes that show up again and again and again in stories across the globe.

The biggest part of what *The Writer's Journey* did for me was to facilitate writing stories quickly. There is a structure involved, an actual twelve-point story skeleton, that can help you figure out what happens in *every single kind of story*. It applies to action, and romance, and horror; whether your protagonist is facing a chainsaw-wielding maniac, or a tough new principal in middle school, or some grubby bastard that your mom just *had* to go and marry, Vogler's structure will guide you and help you put the meat and skin and hair on the bones.

I'm not going to list the points of Vogler's outline here, because I don't want to get sued for plagiarism, but if you're interested in writing, trust me on this. Get the book.



Here it is again!

Now, am I saying that you *have* to follow this structure in every story? Nope. You can leave parts out, or mix and match, or even ignore it entirely. There are plenty of examples of books and movies and whatnot that don't follow the structure. In fact, there are writers who turn their noses up at the whole concept of a codified "story structure" and consider it vulgar. I can't say they're wrong.

Besides, you are your own writer. I can't and don't want to tell you what to do. (Okay, I told you to get a copy of the book, so I guess sometimes I do want to tell you what to do. I'm a contradiction!)

But the name of this column is "How to Write the Way I Write," and let me tell you, this is a GREAT BIG CHUNK of how I write.

Before Vogler, I'd come up with an idea, and then just start throwing stuff at it, and hope that what stuck looked like a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It might take me a day, or a week, or five years; I was basically at the mercy of whatever trickled out of my brain, at whatever pace it chose.

After Vogler, I had a *plan*. When an idea first sparked, I might have a really good first part, and a *killer* ending, but nothing for the middle. Or a really awesome beginning and the first part of the middle, but nothing after that. Without Vogler's help, sometimes I'd figure out what should go in the missing bits, and sometimes I wouldn't. Using his structure, though, I could see where certain parts should go - the parts that have worked in stories for thousands of years - and I had the confidence to follow his roadmap.

Using this structure, I learned to map out stories, break them down into their component parts, and get each part done in a reasonable amount of time. An amount of time, in fact, that got shorter and shorter the more I did it; another thing Scott Ciencin taught me is that writing is very much like lifting weights. The more you write, the more you *can* write, and the faster you'll become. You're building up your strength.

Because of *The Writer's Journey*, in 2004 when I was writing four monthly comic book series (*Voltron*, *Micronauts*, *Firestorm*, and *Bloodhound*) all at the same time, I had little to no trouble keeping up with the workload (and preserving my sanity). In 2007, when I started working on the first *Alex Unlimited* novel, I completed the first draft in about three and a half weeks. For a while in 2010, I was working on the video games *Prototype 2*, *Transformers: War for Cybertron*, and two different versions of *Transformers: Dark of the Moon,* again all at the same time. I never missed a deadline.

In fact, I've never missed a deadline in 21 years, and I lay a lot of that at Vogler's feet.

So, in short, Scott Ciencin was right. *The Writer's Journey* is the keys to the kingdom.

THE INNER LIFE OF COMIC BOOK PANELS: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 4

It's been a crazy few days here.

My father had an aggressive tumor removed from his face, and is not allowed to talk for a week because it might rip the stitches loose on the reconstruction. (I loaned him my laptop for the duration. He's getting a huge kick out of the text-to-speech function. I don't think it makes up for not being able to eat solid food, but it's a start.)

I'm under the gun to get a screenplay finished for a possible indie film production. It's due Friday.

And, least on the list of worries but still a source of stress, we discovered that a stray cat somehow wound up dead in our pool. I choose to believe the cat lost the will to live and committed suicide; an alternate theory is that the hawk that hunts behind our house nabbed it and accidentally dropped it in the pool. In either case, it's buried at the back of our property now. Rest in peace, Unknown Cat. Better luck next time, Señor Hawk. (That's why my cats don't go outside.)

I also had occasion this week to take a look at a few scripts from an aspiring comics writer. Now, this is not something I do ordinarily, but I made an exception in this instance, and navigated my way through his three samples. And while the ideas were good, it rapidly became apparent that this writer - through no fault of his own - was just plain unaware of how to construct a comic book script. His scripts were non-viable because there was simply no way for an artist to draw them. He had violated many of the Rules of Writing For Comics.

(These could probably be called "Jolley's Rules of Writing For Comics," but that would sound really egotistical…and yet applicable, since I'm the one delineating them. See, this is why I resisted writing a blog for so long.)

Anyway. I had planned first to go over how to break a story down so that it always fits neatly into the number of pages you have allotted for your script, but I think it may be more important to cover the proper construction of a panel first. So here we go.

RULE 1: PANEL DESCRIPTION
a) You must think of your panel as a snapshot. The image it presents, while it might depict objects in motion, cannot depend on the actual motion of those objects.
b) Describe everything that is necessary for the artist to put in the panel, and nothing that isn't.

The a) part…

A comic book script is broken down into Pages, Panels, Dialogue, Captions, and Sound Effects - often written "SFX." (And occasionally Thought Balloons, though I don't care for Thought Balloons and try my hardest never to use them. They tend to make writers lazy.)

First: PAGES. Ideally, each page of your script should correspond to one page in the comic (your editor will thank you for that), and should let the artist and the editor know how many panels are on that page. So the first page of your script starts out:

PAGE ONE: five panels

or

PAGE ONE: three panels

or

PAGE ONE: splash page

Or whatever. It's important to put the number of panels right up there at the top, because that's what the artist looks at first, when he or she is designing the layout of the page. And artists are human, just like anybody else, and can make mistakes. If an artist designs a beautiful layout for a four-panel page, only to realize that the page actually has five panels, there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth as he does a bunch of erasing and starts over. Head that off right from the beginning. Put the number of panels right up there.

The Page heading is followed by the panel headings, panel descriptions, any dialogue, any captions, and any SFX. The script for the panel you see up there at the top of the page, from *Bloodhound #3,* looks a lot like this:

Panel 3
REVERSE ANGLE, so that we're looking up at Saffron and Clevenger; they make quite a pair here. Saffron's leaning over the desk a bit, bracing herself with one arm on its surface, while displaying her FBI credentials with the other. Her expression is one of icy, unyielding determination. Clevenger stands about a pace behind her, TOWERING over her with his arms crossed, staring down past her at the manager.
SAFFRON: Take a good look at us, Mr. Gorman.
SAFFRON: Try and guess which one enjoys having his time wasted the most.

Each panel of your comic needs to be described as if it's a still photo taken from a movie. You cannot have actual *motion* in there; you cannot have a panel description that reads like this:

Sally stands in front of Mr. Woolrich. As he talks, she pulls out her pocket watch, checks the time, and replaces it.

That would be THREE panels: Sally standing there, and then Sally looking at her pocket watch, and then Sally putting the watch back in her pocket.

Now, this is not to say that you can't have a ton of stuff going on in your panels. I'm reminded of one of Mark Millar and Frank Quitely's panels in *The Authority*, in which one character stands in the foreground at the left side of the panel, and has just fired an arrow. In the mid-ground, a character with wings has just swooped down and is delivering a punishing blow to a bad guy. And in the background, another character is *catching* the arrow fired by the guy in the foreground. (I may not be recalling that with 100% accuracy, but you get the idea.)

Early stories in *The Authority* tended to read like summer blockbuster action movies. In any given panel, there could be four or five amazing things happening, but the panels were still described like snapshots - like good sports photography, for example, as a football player catches a touchdown pass, or as an MMA fighter lands a knockout punch.

Or, to shift gears entirely, like this:

Photograph by Eddie Adams

You've probably seen that before, but in case you haven't, it's a famous photo taken during the Vietnam War, and captures the exact moment that a vicious murderer is shot in the head by a South Vietnamese general.

Add the Sound Effect **BLAM** right above the pistol, and it's a comic book panel. Another thing to be aware of is the ANGLE from which you choose to describe your panel. Now, you don't necessarily have to choose an angle at all; you can, if you prefer, rely on the artist for some of the angles and placement of objects and characters in the panel. You could have a panel description like so:

Panel 4
Simmons comes charging into the boardroom, frothing at the mouth.

You're not specifying there how close the "camera" is to Simmons, or where it is in the boardroom. You're leaving that up to the artist. When you get the panel back, you might get a broad shot of the room as Simmons bursts in, or a close-up on Simmons, or Simmons might just be partially visible in the background while most of the panel is taken up by a super-tight shot of a fish in a fishbowl on the table. Most of the time that's fine (and you can't complain if you didn't specify)…

…but if it's important to your story that, let's say, Simmons' eyes are bloodshot, and you need to see that in Panel 4, then you need to get more specific with your POV (Point of View):

Panel 4
We're in the boardroom. POV is right in front of the double doors, as Simmons bursts through them. This is a pretty close shot of Simmons' face, from maybe two feet away, and we can see that his eyes are badly bloodshot. He's also frothing at the mouth.

If you need to see that Simmons' eyes are bloodshot, then you do NOT write a panel description like this:

Panel 4
Simmons bursts into the boardroom, his eyes bloodshot, froth in the corners of his mouth. The other board members all react in panic, some scrambling up out of their chairs, some diving under the table.

If the artist is going to depict all the board members freaking out and scrambling to get away, he will have to use a broad angle, with a POV near the wall opposite the doors, or maybe up near the ceiling. He will NOT be able to show all those people's reactions AND be close enough to see Simmons' bloodshot eyes.

An artist I was working with described to me a very troubling panel description he was handed at one point. It was a full-panel page, or "splash" page, depicting a huge crowd that stretched as far as the eye could see down a broad city street. Hovering high in the air, keeping watch over the crowd, were three superheroes.

See the problem? If the crowd stretches away as far as the eye can see, you're looking at the crowd - probably from a slightly elevated POV, like on a balcony or standing on top of a car - and you're NOT looking up in the sky. If you're looking up in the sky to see the superheroes hovering up there, you're NOT looking down at the crowd. It drove the artist crazy.

Essentially, in order to write good panel descriptions, you have to learn to think visually. You have to *see* each panel in your head, or at least a close approximation of it, in order to describe it in such a way that an artist can depict it properly (and without making the artist want to kill you in your sleep).

And now: the b) part!

A good, solid panel description has one purpose: it must give the artist every single bit of information he needs to illustrate the panel. The description doesn't have to be elegantly worded; it doesn't have to be funny; it doesn't have to make you sound smart. It ONLY has to inform the artist. (Not to say that panel descriptions *shouldn't* be all of those things. They just don't *have* to be.) Comics is a highly collaborative medium, though, and artists can and often do contribute as much to the storytelling as the scriptwriter. Depending on the artist, whoever you're working with will probably enjoy having the creative freedom to add to the work. Let's say you're introducing a bad guy - we'll call him SHEMP - and you want to show him in a seedy hotel room. It might not matter what the hotel room is like, other than seedy. If that's the case, then your panel description can be something like this:

Panel 1
Broad shot of a seedy hotel room. SHEMP, 40, a guy who looks like an old, fat version of Tim Allen, sits on the edge of the bed in his boxer shorts, holding a mostly empty bottle of whisky. He's staring dully at the floor.

That's all you need. Now, given that description, the artist can have a field day: he gets to decide what the decor of the room is, he can put a piece of art on the wall, he can draw little cockroaches scuttling across the floor, whatever. He can create, and if everything works properly, it will add to the story.

On the other hand, if there's something specific about this hotel room that's important to the story, you HAVE to put that in there.

Panel 1
Broad shot of a seedy hotel room. SHEMP, 40, a guy who looks like an old, fat version of Tim Allen, sits on the edge of the bed in his boxer shorts, holding a mostly empty bottle of whisky. He's staring dully at the floor. On a table beside his bed is a HIGH-TECH DEVICE that's startlingly out of place with the rest of the room; it's like a cross between a birdcage and a juke box, and is about the size of an average desktop printer. THREE SMALL, ROUND LIGHTS glow RED on the device's base.

So the weird, futuristic machine is important to the story; it's fully described in the script, and you can (usually) count on the artist to put it in there where it's supposed to go. But you STILL don't get any more specific about the hotel room, because it's not crucial to the story.

Let's change scenes. If you've got a guy jogging through Central Park, and the only important things are that it's this particular guy and that he's jogging, you can say this:

Panel 1
BRIAN STEVENS, 30, a blonde, blue-eyed, very fit man in a track suit, jogs through Central Park. It's an ordinary day, and people go about their regular business.

The artist can determine the angle and the distance from which you're looking at Brian Stevens, how many other people to draw, anything he wants. A lot of artists will tell little stories in the background; you might get the panel back and see that the artist has added a small boy holding a balloon, running from a smaller girl who clearly wants the balloon back. Or maybe your main character is jogging past a young man in the process of proposing to his (horrified) girlfriend. It's an open invitation to be creative.

If it's raining, however, and your guy is still jogging…for one thing, that says something about his character, and for another thing, the people in Central Park will be greatly decreased in number and motivations to be there. With this panel description:

Panel 1
BRIAN STEVENS, 30, a blonde, blue-eyed, very fit man in a track suit, jogs through Central Park. It's RAINING. There aren't many people out and about, but Brian is oblivious to the rain.

Now you're inviting the artist to add, say, an umbrella salesman. Or some businessman who's just lost his job, walking home, soaking wet and dejected. Or a drug dealer leaning against a tree, trying and failing to look casual. Or you might just get Brian Stevens jogging in the rain, with *no* other people around him.

ONE THING TO NOTE: this philosophy of "everything you need, nothing you don't," is not shared by all comic book writers. Some writers put a TON of freedom in the artist's hands - more than I'm comfortable with, honestly. I saw a script years ago that had this description:

PAGES 11 - 14
Collins approaches the beast's lair.

As far as I'm concerned, that's just lazy. That's putting almost the entire burden of constructing the story on the artist's shoulders. If you're going to do that, you should list the artist as co-writer.

On the flip side, some writers go into meticulous, exhaustive detail about every single thing you see in every single panel. Alan Moore is famous for this. If he puts a scene in a library, chances are good that he'll list the titles on every single one of the books you can see on the shelves. He'll describe every article of clothing that every character is wearing, and how they're wearing it. He'll tell you how each pillow is arranged on a bed, and maybe the pattern of the lace on the window curtains. Now, this is Alan Moore we're talking about here. He's comics royalty. He's practically a demi-god. He wrote my single favorite comic book in the history of ever: *Batman: The Killing Joke*. (And yes, I know Moore doesn't like *The Killing Joke* anymore, but I still love it.)

But I also heard a comics artist say, regarding Moore's scripting style, "Jesus Christ. Just draw it yourself."

It is, of course, up to you to figure out what your style will be.

What I've described here is just How To Write the Way I Write.

CAPTIONS, SCHMAPTIONS: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 5

Got the indie screenplay done and sent off a day ahead of the deadline today, and I thought that meant I was going to have a few days to breathe, but no! Instead I get to devote most of Father's Day Weekend to research for a potential new video game job. Happy to do it, too. Being a freelancer basically means never saying no to legitimate paying work, and this could open a big door for me, so into research land I go.

That doesn't have anything to do with captions.

This entry is about captions, but it also dips back into my last post, in which I discussed panel descriptions in some detail. The part of that entry most relevant to this one was where I said that, when writing a panel description, you need to include everything the artist needs to know to illustrate it, and nothing he doesn't.

How does that tie in with captions, you may ask? Well, allow me to offer another one of Jolley's Rules of Writing for Comics:

RULE 2: CAPTIONS
Your caption must never provide information already given in the panel description, and vice versa.

In a much earlier entry, I talked about my first real conversation with a comic book editor, in which Dan Thorsland described the script he was reading at that moment. He told me that the panel description specified that a scruffy man in a leather jacket was getting off a bus, holding an oblong box under one arm. The caption accompanying that description was, "The stranger holds an oblong box under one arm."

That's terrible, of course. It's terrible because it's redundant, and because it insults the reader's intelligence. If you can see well enough to read a comic book, you already know, at a glance, that the stranger is holding an oblong box under one arm. You don't need to be told again.

Perhaps worse than being redundant, it blows an opportunity. You could have used that space on the page to tell the reader something about the stranger that they couldn't get just from seeing the illustration. Maybe the other passengers kept hearing his stomach rumble. Maybe he smells really bad. Maybe the driver is glad to see the stranger go because he kept humming the same irritating song over and over. There's no way the illustration could have conveyed any of that, but a caption could. Easily.

Okay, full disclosure: I don't actually use captions very much myself. If I do, they tend to be first-person narration, and sparse at that. There are two reasons for this: first, I enjoy the challenge of telling a story purely with images and dialogue. (The only captions I can think of in *Bloodhound*, for example, are ones that specify locations.) Second, if I decide to adapt one of my comics into a screenplay - and I have - I find that it's much easier to do if I haven't got captions all over the place.

Above: my kind of panel

AND YET… sometimes I waffle, and think I might be doing myself a disservice by not using captions, because they are a device that's pretty much unique to storytelling through sequential art. They can come in incredibly handy, and can impart information to the reader with a brilliant economy of space.

Look at that: two words, and we have a wealth of information that we wouldn't have had otherwise. Captions can pull that off brilliantly.

Another excellent use of this that you see in comics (and almost nowhere else) is the introduction caption. In a TV show, if a new character shows up, you've got to have someone actually make an introduction - "I'm Agent Henderson, just transferred in from the Hackensack office" - or figure out some other way to let the audience know who this person is. And that other way will have to take up some valuable screen time.

In a comic book, though, you can put a brand new character on the page and introduce him simultaneously. Just put a caption beside him.

Here, let's pretend this is an illustration:

That grumpy-looking person could be anyone, right? And in a movie, or TV show, or stage play, if someone like that wandered out in front of the audience for the first time and started talking, there would probably be a significant part of a scene devoted to establishing the character's identity.

But in comics, you can accomplish this in a split-second, and maybe even go one better by - again - revealing information that the illustration otherwise can't.

HOWEVER, here's an addendum to Rule 2:

If you do use captions, you must not go overboard with them.

There are two reasons for this - one stylistic and one practical.

The stylistic reason: comic books are a visual medium. Your first and foremost method of telling a story HAS to be the art. A picture really is worth a thousand words, and you've got to use that imagery to get your story across. The dialogue and the captions should embroider the images, provide the hooks and fasteners that connect everything and make it whole; they should not be the whole show by themselves. If you find that the substance of your comic book script is 5% panel descriptions and 95% captions and dialogue, maybe you should consider writing a novel instead. (I actually did come to that conclusion about a project at one point, and ended up writing a book. More on that experience will come later on in this blog.)

The practical reason: if you go overboard with captions (and/or dialogue), you'll cover up the art. If you're writing a comic book script, I feel safe in assuming, that is not your goal.

Also, to tie these two reasons together: reading an overly wordy comic book is just not all that much fun. Huge walls of text surrounded by boxes or word balloons are clunky and look out of place. A super-verbose comic book detracts from both the words and the art.

So, you might ask, how much is too much? How do I know when a caption is too long? Well, I can tell you the way I do it.

First off, unless they are very very short, I limit the combined number of captions and word balloons in a panel to four. Four is the maximum, and that's only if I have a page with four or fewer panels on it.

If the page has five panels on it (unless one is much larger than the rest of them), the maximum combined count of word balloons and captions per panel drops to three.

If the page has six or more panels, it drops to two.

And as far as the word count in each caption or word balloon, I've developed a rule of thumb that's served me well (and never caused an editor to complain). I write my scripts in 12-point Times New Roman, and I set up a custom indent so that all of the captions and dialogue bits start at the 2 inch mark. Then I never let them run longer than two lines.

It looks like this (excerpt taken from my Lerner Books graphic novel *My Boyfriend Bites*):

PAGE TWO: four panels

Panel 1
Night - establishing shot of VANESSA SHINGLE'S HOUSE, a very ordinary two-story affair built to look as though it's made of ADOBE (like a lot of homes in the Southwest).

SFX:	*skritch skritch skritch*
SFX:	*skritch skritch skritch*
CAPTION (Vanessa):	You think you know somebody.

Panel 2
Now we're inside Vanessa's room. It's also relatively ordinary -- about what you'd expect from a seventeen-year-old girl's room -- but right now it's lit only by a small DESK LAMP, and is thick with menacing shadows. We don't see Vanessa or the desk she's sitting at in this shot...

SFX:	*skritch skritch skritch*
VANESSA (small, off):	That ought to be enough.
CAPTION (Vanessa):	Well let me tell you, not everybody is who you think they are.

One last bit to impart (again tying back into my post on panel descriptions): you **must** understand the difference between information that is conveyed by images and information that is conveyed by captions.

You CANNOT have a panel description that reads like this:

Panel 1
George collapses on the unmade bed, face-down, without even taking off his shoes. He's exhausted. This has been the worst day of his life, and he hates his boss right now.

You can't do that because there is no way for the artist to convey that this has been the worst day of George's life and that he hates his boss. The artist can handle George collapsing on the bed with this shoes on; he can handle giving George the body language to indicate that he's bone-tired. The rest of it does not belong in a panel description, and if you're going to use captions to get it across, it needs to read more like this:

Panel 1
George collapses on the unmade bed, face-down, without even taking off his shoes. He's exhausted.
CAPTION (George): This has been the worst day of my life.
CAPTION (George): God, I hate my boss right now.

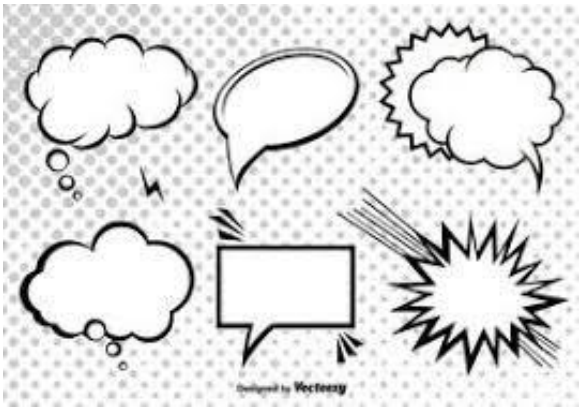
Working within the space constraints, there are no limits to how much depth you could give this scene. For example…

Panel 1
George collapses on the unmade bed, face-down, without even taking off his shoes. He's exhausted.
CAPTION: No one at the office realized how much trouble George was in.
CAPTION: None of them had heard the boss's quiet ultimatum.
GEORGE (muffled): I could kill him. No one would blame me.
GEORGE (muffled): They might even give me a medal. Heck, a whole parade.

So, to recap: never say anything in the panel description that should go in a caption, and vice versa - and never get so wordy that your captions and dialogue cover up the art because a) it defeats the purpose of a comic book, and b) you'll make your artist want to kill you in your sleep.

And no one wants a homicidal artist.

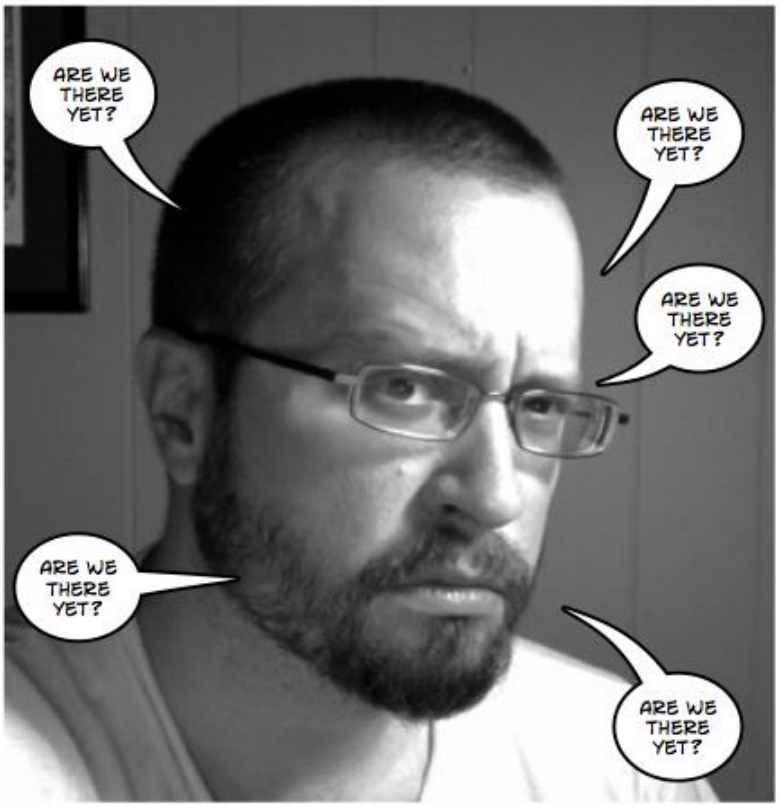
LET'S DIALOGUE: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 6



Pretty much everything in "How to Write the Way I Write" so far has been about the technical side of things, because a lot of people want to know how to write comic books, and there aren't a lot of resources out there that explain the nuts and bolts. When approaching dialogue, however, what I have to say is going to get a good bit more subjective. There are a few technical things I can tell you, but I pretty much already covered the important bits in my last post.

That entry ("Captions, Schmaptions") lets you know roughly how big a word balloon can safely get, and how many of them you should have on the page. One additional bit, however, involves the caveat on the maximum number of word balloons per panel, which was, "Unless they're really small." Ordinarily, on a page with, say, five panels, one of the panels might be a head shot that looks like this (if you pretend the photo of me making a grumpy face is an illustration).

You can break the maximum-number-of-word-balloons guideline, though—if the balloons are small enough.



I have more to say about putting dialogue balloons on a page, but I'll get to that in a bit. First, back to the subjective stuff.

RULE 3: DIALOGUE
Don't learn to write comic book dialogue only by reading comic books.

I might get some push-back on this, but I'm serious: you'll be doing yourself a disservice if you try to make your dialogue sound like dialogue you've read in other comic books. Why? I could go on at some length—and I will—but it boils down to this: if you emulate someone else's style, all you're doing is giving readers a knockoff of something they already have. It's like making a copy of a copy. If you want to differentiate yourself from the crowd, you need to define your *own* voice, not channel someone else's. The same principle applies just as solidly to comic book art.

I remember reading an interview back in the mid-90's in which a famous comic book artist (I genuinely don't remember who it was—one of the original Image guys, I think) said, "If you want to learn to draw comics, study comics! Figure out how your favorite artists do what they do, so you can do it too!"

Garbage. Malarkey. Horse$#!+. He couldn't have been more off-base.

Because, if you learn to draw the way Jim Lee draws, even if you get really freaking good at it, you're still going to be someone who draws like Jim Lee. And we already have a Jim Lee.

If you set your literary sights extraordinarily high, and decide you want to learn to write dialogue just like Neil Gaiman's, well, maybe you can. But what are you going to be left with? Dialogue that sounds just like Neil Gaiman dialogue. We already have someone who does that (Neil Gaiman), and he's better at it than you are.

Now, I'm not saying you won't ever get hired if you write or draw just like someone else. You can peruse your local comic shop and readily find dozens of examples of working creators who are *obviously* aping someone else. And hey, if aping somebody's style is what you need to do to put food on the table and buy diapers for your kid, for God's sake, don't be too proud to do it. (If I had been snooty about my work all these years, I would've starved long ago.)

Just make sure that aping someone else is not ALL you can do. Because you might get some work if you can write dialogue exactly like Garth Ennis, but—correct me if I'm wrong here—it is *not* your ultimate goal to be described as "that writer who sounds just like Garth Ennis."

"Okay, Mr. Know-it-All," you might say, if you're in third grade, "What are you saying I need to do to learn to write dialogue?"

This is advice that you'll find in every single book about writing that's ever been published, but it's there because it's true: listen to people in the real world talk.

Listen to the people around you. Listen to the differences in the way your best friend talks to you and in the way he talks to his mother. Listen to speeches from politicians and to conversations between people waiting for a bus and to what your significant other says when he or she is breaking up with you. Listen. Listen and remember, and write it down.

Pay attention, not just to the information someone conveys, but to the specific language they use to convey it. Start noting, mentally, every time you hear someone use a phrase you haven't heard before. (It really struck me when I heard my eight-year-old niece talk about writing notes back and forth with a friend on a whiteboard. She said, "It's my favorite doing at recess!")

Likewise, take note of phrases you hear again and again; sometimes they'll be common, and sometimes they'll only be common to *you*. (Whenever my Baptist deacon father gets particularly agitated about something, he comes out with, *"I'll swear to my time!"* I don't think that actually means anything, but it's certainly distinctive.)

If you're going to write solid, convincing dialogue, you need to *love the words*. Think about them. Turn them over in your head and look at them from every angle. And above all:
LISTEN.

Natural dialogue doesn't follow rules. Most people don't use perfect grammar when they're talking. For that matter, most people don't even say things in logical order. I had a screenwriting professor who told the class, "Write down a paragraph's worth of dialogue, but put each sentence on a separate line. Then take a pair of scissors and cut out each sentence. You can drop them on the floor, and in whatever random order they land in, chances are they'll still sound like something someone could say."

Now, I will warn you, that when the switch in your head gets thrown from "non-writer" to "writer," you're going to start looking at the world very differently. Suddenly, as Stephen King puts it, "everything becomes grist for the mill."

It can get sort of ghoulish. Every little thing that happens to you, every day, suddenly becomes potential story fodder. That applies to plots and characters as well—I bet every one of you reading this knows at least one person who would make a terrific, original character—but for the purposes of dialogue, *everything you hear from now on* has a chance of becoming words spoken in a story. Your mind becomes a recording device, and you find yourself analyzing the language used…

…when you get hired (or fired).

…when you're told that a family member has passed away (or been born).

…when someone tells you he or she loves you (or hates you) for the first time.

…when your doctor delivers some very, very bad (or very, very good) news.

Even as you're going through the emotions and reactions that those situations bring, if you're a writer, there will be a part of your brain that's tucking the experience and the words away and thinking, "Ooh, I can use this…"

Exactly *how* you use it is where creativity and interpretation comes in. My friend Mario lived a fascinating life. He saw more, and went through more, in his 35 years than most people do in their entire lives, and if he hadn't lost a battle with cancer he would've gone on to live as much as any ten people combined. You'll probably hear me talk about him again in this blog. I'm actually planning to write a book.

One day Mario related a story to me from his time in the Army, about something that had happened to someone in his company when they were stationed in Korea. It involved an unwise tryst with a local working girl, and resulted in the hapless G.I. contracting an STD that I had never even heard of—an STD so extreme and so communicable that he was *never allowed back in the States*.

Now, armed with inspiration like that, I could have decided to write a fact-based story about this poor schmuck whose libido turned him into an unwilling ex-pat. But instead I decided to set the story in the future, do a whole sci-fi thing with it, and turn the working girl into an alluring alien. I told Mario what my plans were, and he said, "Hey now—you can't just go turning everything I say into a story!"

Well, that's where he was wrong. If you're a writer, you can do exactly that. Moreover, you *should*. You can take influence and inspiration from tons of different sources; you can be influenced by certain writers, certain movies, certain TV shows. But there are two crucial things to remember:

1) Use the INFLUENCE. Don't copy directly.
2) Take what you use, in whatever way, shape, or form it eventually comes out, from real life.

Also, now that I've started numbering things, here are a few other rules that I live by when writing dialogue.

1) If you're writing a fight scene, the dialogue should be minimal, if there's any at all. Maybe a grunt or an exclamation of pain here and there. When people are fighting, they *don't have time to chat*. I don't know how many times I've seen a panel—ONE PANEL—of someone like Wolverine in mid-leap, spouting out two or three great big dialogue balloons. In the time it would take him to say all that, the bad guy could've just left.

2) If you've got two or more characters doing something that *they know how to do*, they are NOT going to spend their time talking about it. Task-related dialogue between two plumbers repairing a sink might involve an occasional "Hand me that wrench." Otherwise, they're going to be talking about the game they saw last night, or the trouble one of them is having with his wife, or which kind of car one of them is thinking about buying for his teenage kid.

This applies to anyone and everyone, from hired assassins to cyborg bodyguards to alien prostitutes, and it's something that I realized in an epiphany while watching the opening scene of *Pulp Fiction*. Jules and Vincent spend about twelve seconds discussing the logistics of the job they're doing, and the rest of the time they talk about things entirely unrelated to recovering briefcases or shooting Frank Whaley.

3) Two characters who know each other will hardly *ever* call each other by name. Maybe it'll work if one is calling out to the other from a different room, as in, "Hey Mark, what kind of pizza do you want?" But if they're just talking to each other? Again, listen to real conversations. They will NEVER sound like this:

"Paul, I can't decide what to watch on TV tonight."
"I know, Chris, there's two different shows I want to see."
"What do you think we should do, Paul?"
"Well, Chris, maybe we should play badminton instead of watching TV."

Ugh. Just… ugh. No one talks like that. (Comic book editors are very fond of putting the characters' names into the dialogue, I guess to make sure everyone reading knows who each character is, and it drives me insane.)

OKAY! I mentioned earlier that I'd spend some time on how dialogue balloons get put on a page. This is that part.

When you're writing a comic book, once the art has been done to one stage or another (usually the pencils, before the inker gets the pages), either you or the editor will usually make copies, then go through and draw outlines for the captions and balloons on the pages in roughly the places you want them to go.

The marked-up pages are then sent, along with the script, to the LETTERER, who does the final creation and placement of the captions, dialogue, and sound effects. I'm not going to get into too much about lettering, because lettering is an art form in and of itself, and I don't want to shoot my mouth off about something of which I have limited understanding. I will say this, though: letterers are the great unsung heroes of comics, and their jobs are usually thankless. Most people only notice the lettering when they find something they don't like about it…but the truth is that good lettering can *vastly* enhance a comic book.

I have actually done a tiny bit of lettering myself. On the first couple of issues of *G.I. Joe Frontline: Icebound* I served as the letterer, and I also lettered the seventh issue of *Obergeist*, which was called *The Empty Locket.*

And let me tell you: IF POSSIBLE, EVERY COMIC BOOK WRITER SHOULD DO SOME LETTERING. Before I did my (admittedly amateurish) lettering jobs, I didn't think much about how the words were going to be arranged on the page; I just wrote them and thought, "Okay, they'll show up, that's

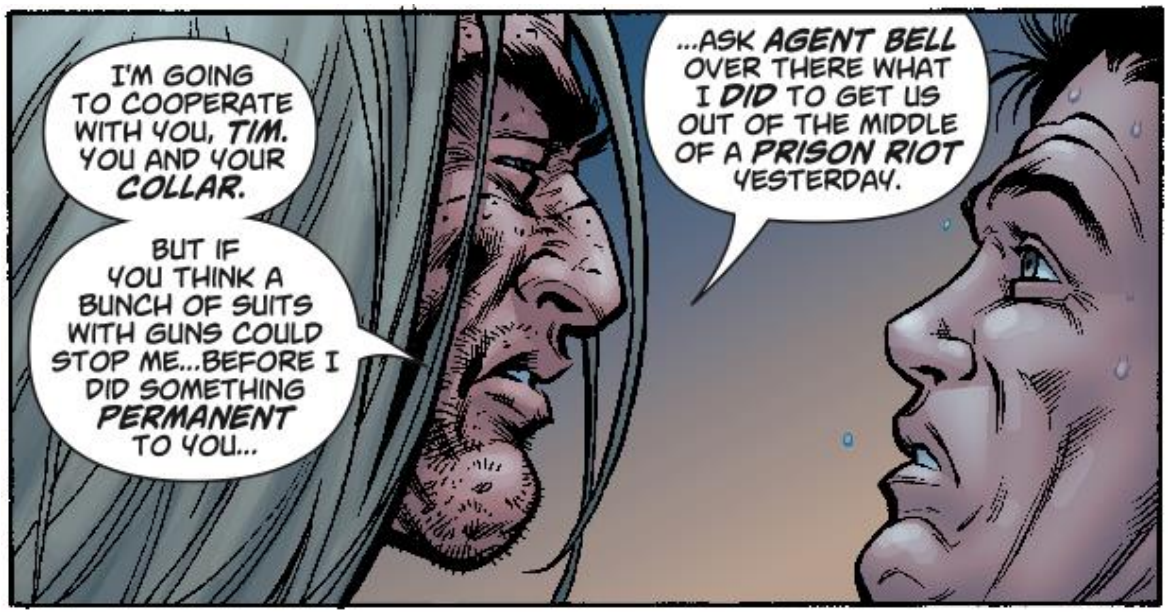
good enough for me." Actually placing the words on the page myself not only instilled in me a deep respect for good letterers, but also affected how I wrote scripts from then on.

Now, I have no idea how to go about lettering with a pen. I used the Adobe Illustrator software, and it's my understanding that most letterers these days do also. So if you don't have Illustrator, and don't have access to it, then this won't do you much good. But if you do…

GO HERE

and read everything. Seriously. You'll thank me for it.

Putting em-PHA-sis on the right syl-LAB-le: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 7



This is a follow-up entry, which I'm writing thanks to the esteemed John Nadeau. John wrote to me after I posted the last entry and asked a couple of good questions about indicating where the emphasis goes in dialogue (and why I hadn't addressed that).

I didn't address it because it slipped my mind. So!

When you're writing comic book dialogue, you'll need to emphasize certain words, more so than you would if you were writing prose. In prose, you have the advantage of all those great words on the page that are *not* dialogue, and you can have a passage such as this:

Donald closed the door quietly behind him, the gun steady in his hand. His eyes never left mine. "Step away from her. Now." His voice came out so icy it brought chill bumps to my skin.
The words "Step away from her. Now." don't need to be emphasized in any particular way, because the rest of the paragraph lets you know how they were spoken. You don't get that luxury in comic books, though, so you have to use other methods to convey finer nuances of meaning.

You can do this in any number of ways.

You could put in a special bit in the panel description that looks like this:

NOTE TO LETTERER: please use a "cold" font for Donald's dialogue in this panel.

or

NOTE TO LETTERER: please draw icicles hanging off Donald's dialogue balloon here.

You could rely on the art team to convey how icy-calm and dangerous Donald is, through his body language and facial expression, and leave the dialogue unaccented.

But the most common way, and the way I would do it, would be to emphasize some of the words.

The most traditional and, in general, most fool-proof way to indicate an emphasized word in a script is to underline it. Underlining is better than using bold or italics, because a hurried eye is less likely to skim over an underlined word than it is a word that's bolded or italicized. Plus, if you want to indicate *degrees* of emphasis, sometimes you want to use a combination. So if I were writing this as a comic book script, Donald's dialogue would end up looking like this:

DONALD: Step away from her. Now.

Or maybe like this:

DONALD: Step away from her.
DONALD: Now.

(Putting the dialogue on two lines like that lets the letterer know that you want two dialogue balloons, with "Now" in a balloon of its own.)

If, on the other hand, Donald came into the room with his gun and just completely lost his %&$#, he might have raised his voice. I use two general methods to convey that. The first is one of those underline-italics-bold combos I mentioned:

DONALD: Step away from her!
DONALD: *Now!*

I'll even throw in some capitalization if things are getting really heated:

DONALD: Step *away* from her!
DONALD: *NOW!*

Doing it this way, I can probably expect to see all of the dialogue bolded, with "away" and "Now" in a bit larger size font than the rest of the words.

The other way is to use DIALOGUE DIRECTION. This is something that you put right after the name of the character, in PARENTHESES, that indicates something to the letterer. It might look like this:

DONALD (shouting): Step away from her!
DONALD (shouting): Now!

Dialogue direction gives some leeway to the letterer. It'll be up to him or her to decide how to indicate that Donald is shouting; he might use an interesting font, or make the words larger than usual, or he might use a "jagged" word balloon. The words "Step away from her!" might end up looking something like this:

Dialogue direction can also be very handy if you're using narrative captions, and they're invaluable if you've got people talking who aren't in the current panel. For example:

Panel 1
Establishing shot of SEAVER'S COTTAGE. It's POURING RAIN. Only one light burns inside.
CAPTION: November, 1967.
CAPTION (Seaver): "I never regretted what I done that night."

By indicating this difference, you're letting the letterer know in a concise way that he needs to have two different kinds of captions here. Usually this is achieved by picking different fill colors for the captions - gray for the narration and blue for the dialogue, for example - but if the comic is black and white, then the letterer would probably design the borders of the caption boxes themselves so that one is visually distinct from the other.

Here's what the script looked like for that panel up there at the top of the column, from *Bloodhound #2.*

Panel 6
CLOSE TWO-SHOT, in PROFILE, of Tim and Clevenger, as Clevenger steps forward and leans down to look Tim dead in the eye. A striking CONTRAST should be made here between the simple SIZES of their HEADS; Clevenger's head, compared with Tim's, is HUGE. Plus Tim is terrified, while Clevenger has adopted a sort of ICY GLARE.
CLEVENGER: I'm going to cooperate with you, Tim. You and your collar.
CLEVENGER: But if you think a bunch of suits with guns could stop me… before I did something permanent to you…
CLEVENGER: …ask Agent Bell over there what I did to get us out of the middle of a prison riot yesterday.

Looking at it now, I think it would have worked just fine if I hadn't emphasized any of the words in Clevenger's last bit of dialogue. It's obvious that he's big and imposing, and it's obvious that Tim is scared to death, and if it read, "…ask Agent Bell over there what I did to get us out of the middle of a prison riot yesterday," unaccented, it would do the job I intended it to do. But the first two lines need the emphasis where it's placed. You can practically hear the contempt in Clev's voice when he says the words "Tim" and "collar."

Likewise, Clev wants Tim to understand that, if he so chose, nothing could prevent him from doing Tim great bodily harm, and the emphasis on the words "stop" and "permanent" drive that home. Here's another example from the same issue, with a bonus sound effect thrown in:

This is the script for those two panels:

Panel 2
Back to the Caddy – where Clevenger has just VAULTED over the balcony railing and is LANDING on the HOOD, partially CAVING IT IN. He's got RIPPED BEDSHEET STRIPS wrapped around his hands. There's a sort of GENERAL CHAOS inside the car…

SFX:	KHRUMP
VOICE 1 (from car):	*No -- ¡No!*
VOICE 2 (from car):	*¡Mi nariz! ¡Mi nariz!*

Panel 3
…made worse as Clevenger RIPS the WINDSHIELD FRAME completely out of the car (his hands protected by the ripped sheet wrappings)…

CLEVENGER:	All right, you sons of bitches.
CLEVENGER:	Let's get a look at you.

I broke one of my own rules here, by using just italics to indicate emphasis. This is actually part of why I'm telling you to use underline first and foremost — the letterer made those words look exactly the same as he would have if I had underlined them, and underlining is the more commonly accepted, "go-to" standard in the industry.

This is also a good example of how to use dialogue direction to indicate that a voice is coming from inside something else. Here it's coming from inside the car; I could have used the same direction back at Seaver's place, so that the line "I never regretted what I done that night." could have come right out of the cottage. All it would have taken is this:

SEAVER (from cottage): I never regretted what I done that night.

I have a general rule about emphasis in dialogue, which is that if it's not necessary to convey the meaning you want, you shouldn't use it. "Go and give this chicken to Mr. Curtis" reads just fine, and doesn't gain anything by doing this: "*Go* and give *this chicken* to *Mr. Curtis*."

HOWEVER, you should be aware that some comic book editors disagree sharply with me on this. On one project, after I turned in my first script the editor called me up and said, "Hey, I notice you didn't put the emphasis on the dialogue. Do you want me to do that?"

I hadn't worked with this editor before, but I had been in the business long enough for huge red flags to shoot up when editors volunteered to make large-scale script changes for me. "Um," I said, because I'm eloquent like that on the phone, "I, uh, I'm pretty sure I did put the emphasis in."

There was a pause. I heard shuffling paper. Then she said, "No, I don't think so… I'm looking at the first page here, and none of the dialogue is emphasized at all."

Red flag! Red flag!

In a carefully tactful manner (or at least, in a manner that was intended to be carefully tactful), I said, "Well, yeah, that's true…none of the dialogue on the first page is emphasized. That's, uh, that's how I meant it to be."

There was an even longer pause. Sounding confused, she said, "So, you don't want the letterer to go through and bold every few words? Just, y'know, to make the dialogue read naturally?"

The way she said it, it sounded similar to, "So, you don't want the mechanic to put the lug nuts back on your wheels? Just, y'know, to make sure your tires don't fall off?" As if I were either stupid or painfully ignorant about The Way Things Were Done.

Now, I have never said that my dialogue is perfect. God knows I'm always trying to improve. But I do *like* my dialogue — on occasion I even *love* my dialogue — and I am, in almost every case, proud of it. The absolute LAST thing I wanted was for someone I had never even met to go through and add emphasis "every few words" of my script.

I managed, after a bit of discussion, to convince her that the script was the way I intended it to be, and that the blame could fall squarely on my head if the things the characters said were too hard to follow because they weren't profusely bolded. She didn't like it, but she did relent, and the project proceeded with my script unaltered.

This is one of the many things about which you should make sure that you're on the same page with your editor. I'm just intensely glad she called and asked, instead of telling the letterer, "Hey, put the bold in, would you? This Jolley guy forgot to do it." It might have been okay if she had done that. MIGHT have. But I'm picky about words in general, and I'm *monumentally* picky about my own

words, and one of the things that drives me straight up the wall is to see improper emphasis in a comic book.

It goes back to listening to people talk. There is an organic flow, or cadence, to natural speech, and yes, sometimes you can use emphasis to illustrate it. You can also use emphasis to change the meaning of it in subtle ways. Take this line:

"Ginger is so delighted that her daughter's taking dance classes!"

Sounds like something you could hear practically anywhere. Standing in line at the grocery store. Listening to your mom talk on the phone. Whatever. But you can start to shade in meanings by adding emphasis to certain words.

"Ginger is so delighted that her daughter's taking **dance** classes!"

Okay, so "dance" is emphasized. Specifying that means Ginger's daughter was probably considering one or more other kinds of classes, and Ginger's happy she finally settled on dance.

"Ginger is **so** delighted that her daughter's taking dance classes!"

Now we're talking about the degree of Ginger's delight. Apparently she's over the moon about her daughter's decision.

"Ginger is so delighted that her **daughter's** taking dance classes!"

We emphasize "daughter," and suddenly we understand that, hey, it sounds as if Ginger has a daughter and maybe a son, too, and apparently it was sort of up in the air which of her kids was going to sign up for dance. And now that her daughter has, Ginger's pleased, which indicates that if her son had instead, Ginger's delight might be markedly less so.

But now look at this:

"Ginger is so delighted **that** her daughter's taking dance classes!"

Emphasizing the word "that" indicates… what? Nothing. It doesn't change the sentence in any logical way, and it sounds awkward. (Plus it grates on my nerves like the proverbial fingernails on a chalkboard.)

If you're going to emphasize a word or words in dialogue, just make sure that a) it sounds natural, and b) it adds something to the meaning of what the character is saying. Reading your dialogue out loud is a great help in this, as is getting someone else to read it. (Someone who will give you honest feedback — this goes back to what I've said in the past about every writer needing an editor.)

I freely admit that I may be in the minority when it comes to objecting to bad dialogue emphasis. There used to be a long-running, popular comic book series — it had lots of fans, and won some awards — and the dialogue emphasis the writer used was, to my eyes, SO AWFUL that I couldn't bring myself to keep reading it past issue 7 or so. I remember one sentence in particular that was something very similar to this:

"I tried, **and** tried, **and** tried, **and** it never **did** me any good."

I pointed that sentence out to a friend of mine and said, “Look at that! That’s terrible! Who talks like that?”

He said, “Oh…huh. I didn’t even notice.”

So, yeah. Maybe I’m the weirdo.

NAILING THE PAGE COUNT: How to Write the Way I Write, Part 8

Okay, first, my apologies to the six or seven people who read this blog, because I haven't posted anything here in something like six weeks. I don't have an excuse, but I do have fairly decent reasons: in those six weeks, I've landed one prose deal with a major publisher, have another very likely prose deal pending with another major publisher, written a feature film screenplay that's about to be taken out to the market at large, and co-written a TV pilot that has, at the time of this writing, gotten either intense interest or actual offers from three production companies. Plus I got another year older.

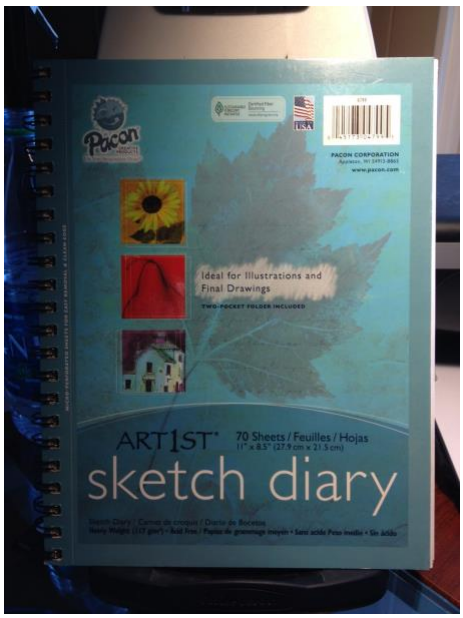
It's been kind of busy around here.

But that hectic pace shouldn't have kept me from paying attention to my blog. I'll attempt to remedy that, starting now.

The subject of this post is "Nailing the Page Count," by which I mean, "Making Sure Your Story Fits the Exact Number of Pages Allotted." I don't know if anyone else does this the way I do it, and I don't know if there might be some better way out there. What I do know is that, since figuring this out, making the story fit into sixteen pages, or 48 pages, or 120 pages, whatever, has not been an issue. It has become a built-in, required feature of my creative process when working on a comic book script, and is one of the big reasons I can turn a script around as quickly as I do.

(For a standard, 22-page comic, assuming I'm jazzed about the project, it takes three days. I know there are writers out there who can do an entire script in something like ten or twelve hours, so I freely acknowledge that I'm not breaking any speed records. But in each of those three days, I'm spending between four and six hours each day on it — not killing myself or swilling Red Bull — and at the end, I've got a finished product ready to turn in.)

Once I've begun to get a picture in my head of what the story is going to be, the next step involves a sketch book. Mine typically looks like this:

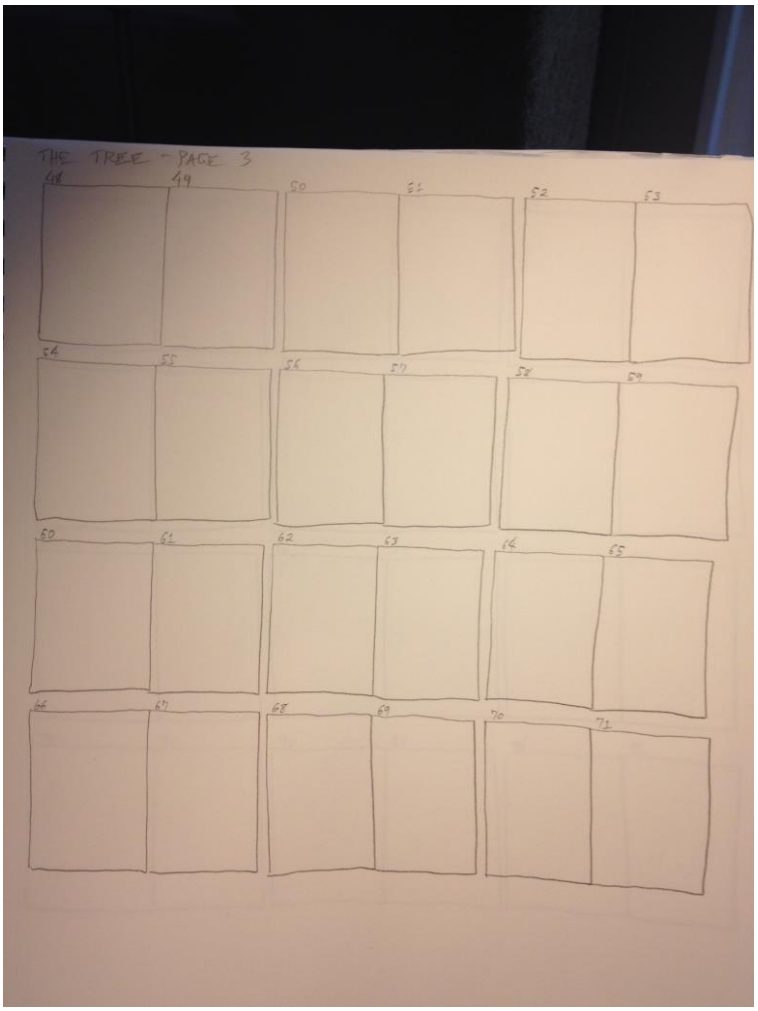


I've had a lot of sketchbooks. They fill up fast.

It's not a huge sketchbook, but it's bigger than the standard 8.5 x 11 inch sheet of typing paper. The actual size doesn't matter too much. Let's call it "large-ish."

Next, I pick a blank page and start drawing rectangles on it, each rectangle representing one page of the script. I draw the first "page" by itself, then hook the rest together two-by-two, so it's readily apparent which pages are facing and which aren't. This arrangement is especially important in knowing, at a glance, which pages end at a page-turn. If possible, you want to put your surprises right after a page turn — in other words, anything shocking should be at the top of an even-numbered page.

These page-rectangles end up looking something like this:

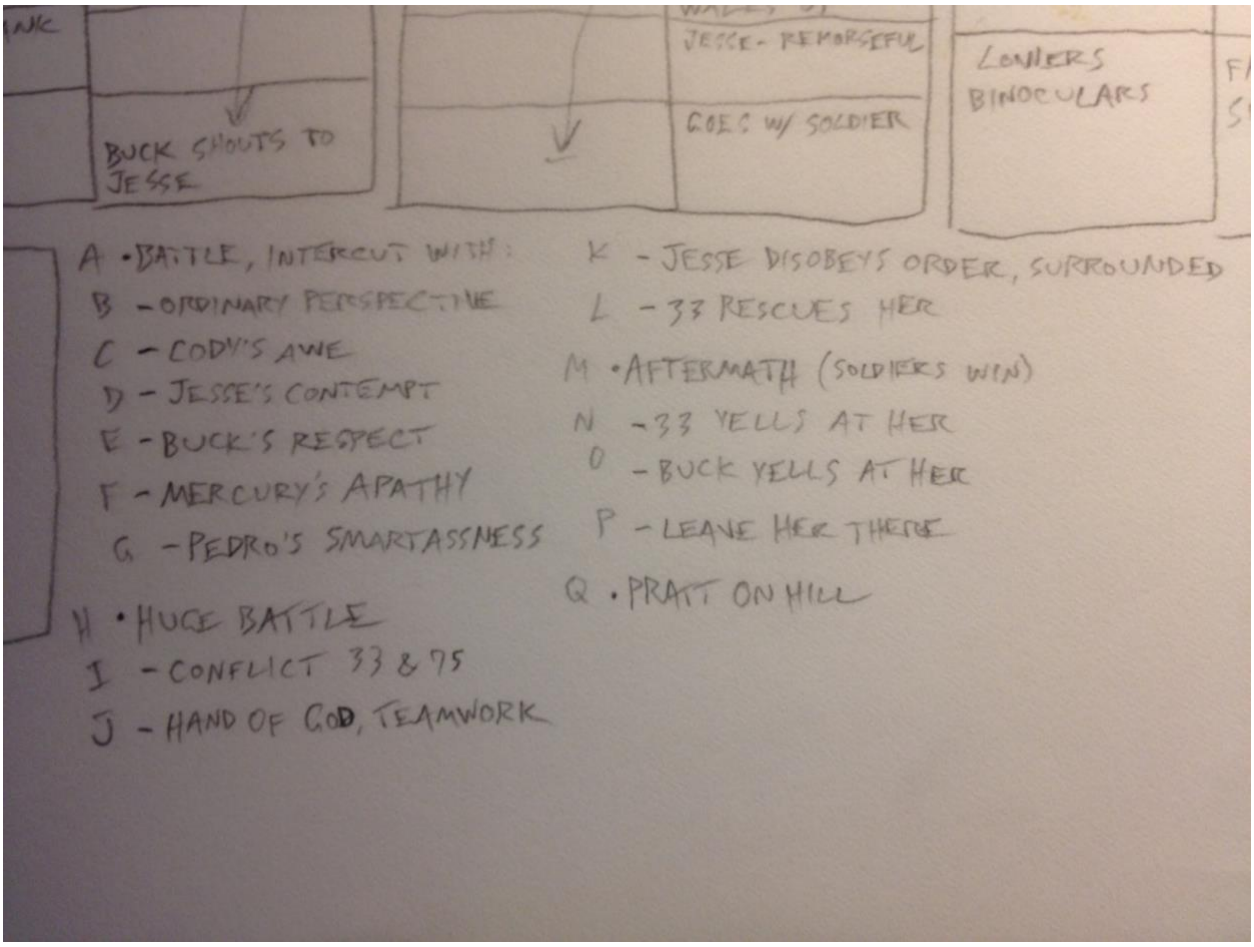


And yeah, they're sloppy. But no one's going to use this thing but me, so it doesn't matter. You may also note, if you look really closely, that it says "Page 3" at the top. If I'm working on something that goes beyond 22 pages of script, I use additional pages in the sketchbook. I also number each of the pages, and I put the number at the upper left corner of the page. I started out, long ago, putting the number in the center, but one of the things that happens sometimes is you end up re-numbering some of the page-rectangles. And if you scratch out the old one and write in the new one, it's less confusing if you start the numbers out over at the left side. Plus it makes room for the Scene Letter, which I'll get to shortly. Now: the next step is writing down, in bullet-point format, the Big Things that you know need to happen in the story. Basically the broad-strokes plot elements - one per scene, more or less.

I'm talking about this kind of thing:
- Monster goes on rampage through small town
- Sherlock Holmes gets call as he wraps up other case
- Holmes and Watson arrive in small town
- Investigation
- Second monster rampage
- Holmes finds evidence - end on cliffhanger

Then I give each point a letter:
A - Monster goes on rampage through small town
B - Sherlock Holmes gets call as he wraps up other case
C - Holmes and Watson arrive in small town
D - Investigation
E - Second monster rampage
F - Holmes finds evidence - end on cliffhanger

I write that lettered list down on the same page with the rectangles. It looks like this (taken from when I was writing the Tokyopop movie-tie-in series *Priest*):



(And yes, that's what passes for my handwriting. Legible? Sure. Artful? Not so much.)

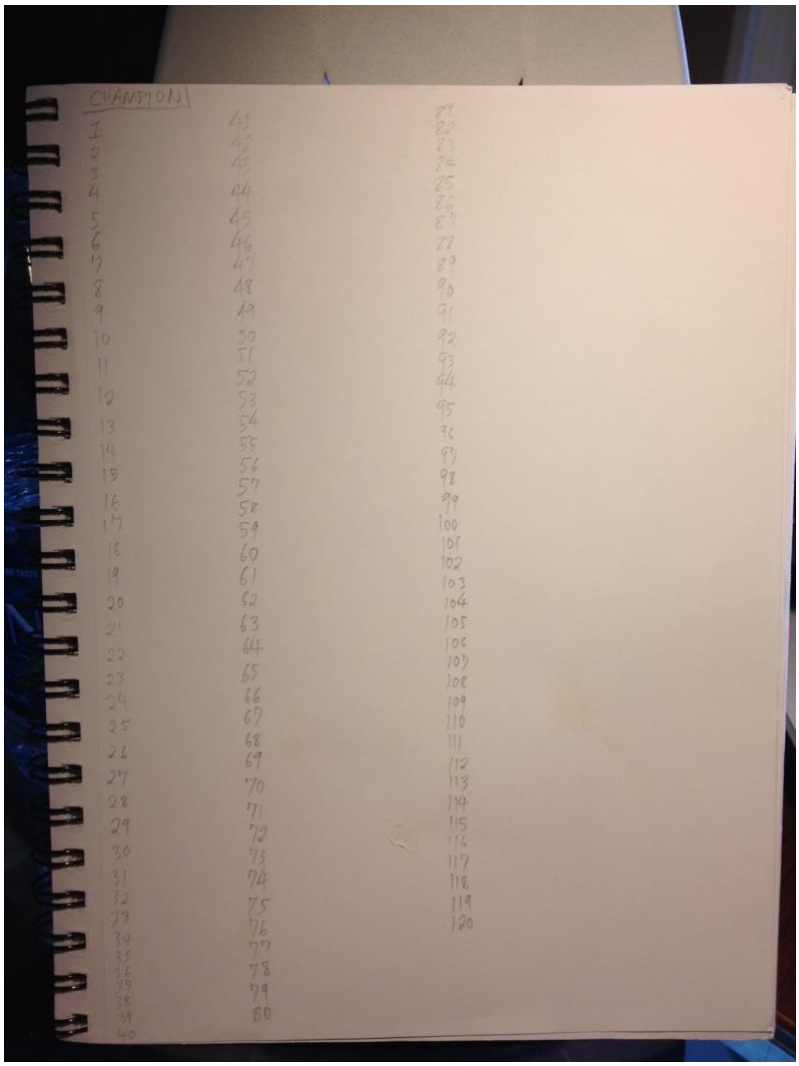
Then - on the same page if possible - I write down a long column of page numbers, 1 - 22. If it's a bigger project, I use another sheet of paper and make multiple columns, 1 - 22, 23 - 44, etc. Leave plenty of space between these columns.

At this point, if you're like me and consider basic arithmetic just *barely* understandable, you break out a calculator. Divide the number of pages allotted to the script by the number of plot points, and there you have the number of pages you can take for each scene.

In the completely-made-up-on-the-spur-of-the-moment Sherlock Holmes example above, I've got six broad-strokes plot points. That means I divide my standard, 22-page issue by 6, and get 3.67. So, roughly, I've got three and two thirds pages to accomplish each of those scenes. If you were doing a 48-page comic, but had the same number of plot points, you'd have eight pages for each scene.

That's the average number we've just determined. I can take some pages away from some scenes, and I know others will need more. Now here's where I really start playing around with scene length.

I take that column of page numbers, block off how many I think I'll need for each scene, and write the scene's letter next to it, either with a straight line if it's only one page, or with a little bracket if it takes more than one. It'll look like this:

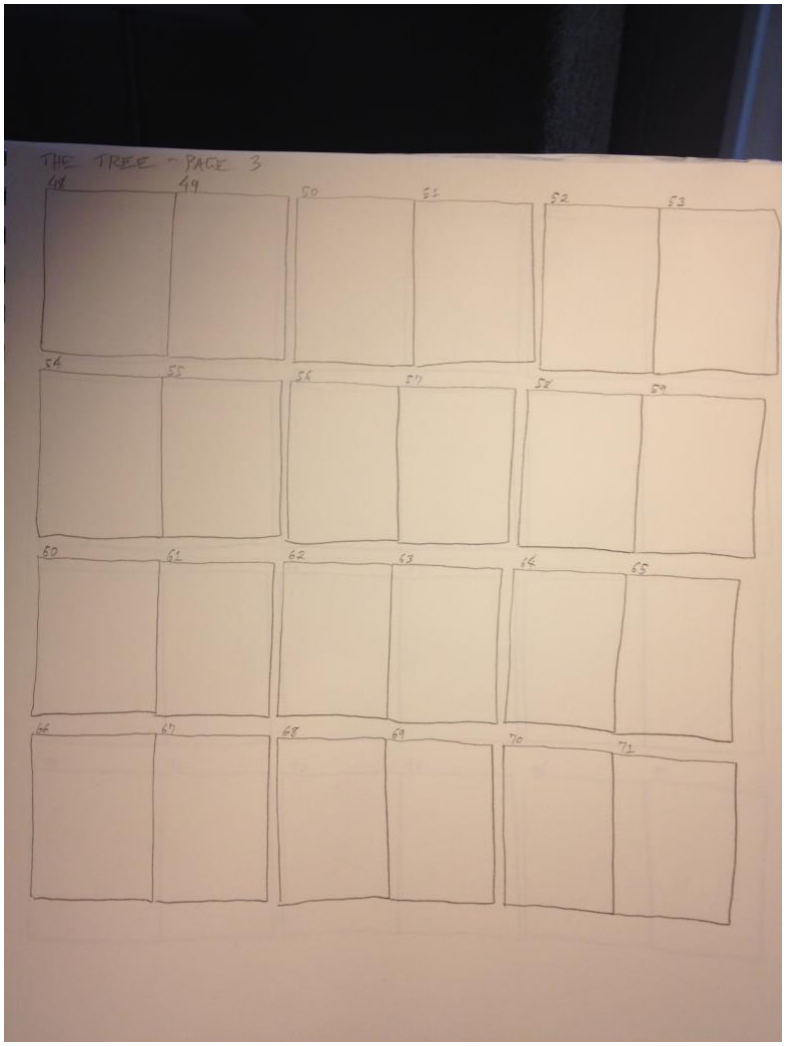


I use a pencil, and write lightly, because I'll probably have to do some re-jiggering on this. If there are certain scenes that I have a better picture of in my head — for instance, if I know one is simply a guy who comes bursting into a room and shouts, "THERE'S TROUBLE AT THE MILL!" I'll just give that one page.

Often I get the scenes I'm more sure of assigned first, and then realize I have either way too many

pages left over, or not enough for something important. So I erase the lines and brackets and try again. (And if it's a superhero comic, it's a safe bet that some big splashy fight scene will take up a lot of pages, so a lot of times I map out the other scenes first and let the fight take up the excess.)

Once I have each lettered scene assigned to a page or group of pages, I go back to the page rectangles and write that letter at the top of each page in its group. That ends up looking like this:



So! What I've got now is a whole page of rectangles, each representing one page, with the page numbers at the top of each one (so I don't screw up my page count in general) as well as the scene letter. That way I can look at the rectangles, see which scene they go with, and just glance down at the bottom of the sketchbook page, at the scene list, to get reminded of which scene that is.

This is one of the Big Tricks, as far as I'm concerned: just write one scene at a time. Don't drive yourself insane trying to keep the entire work in your head while you're doing it. Just do one scene at a time, which is a much smaller, more manageable task. And if you've gotten this far with my whole Plot Layout thing, you'll always know where you are in the story and what needs to come next.

Okay, now I've got my page-rectangles all lined up and ready to go. What I do next is divide each

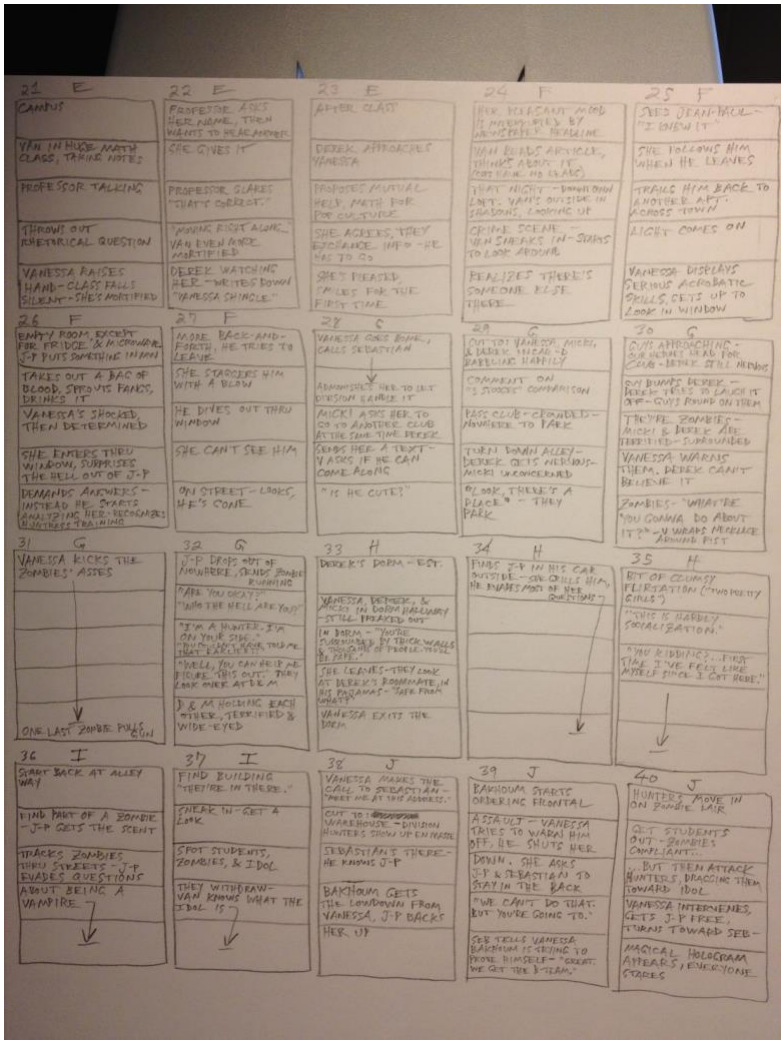
page up into individual panels, and write little eensy tiny notes in each panel, telling myself what goes there.

(I discovered, many years after I started doing this, that what I've been doing is actually a very basic form of storyboarding. Film directors do this kind of thing too. So it's not as though I came up with anything revolutionary — as with most of my comics-writing career, this just came about thanks to trial and error.)

Again, this is not a set-in-stone kind of thing. Many times I block out four panels on a page, for example, and then discover that it needs five panels. So I divide one of those four in half, and write even tinier notes.

These notes do not have to be complete sentences. They barely even have to be complete thoughts. I've always been pretty good at coming up with fight scenes on the fly, so a lot of the time I write the word "FIGHT" in the first panel, and then just draw a snaky arrow through the rest of the panels to indicate that the fight needs to go all the way to the end of that page. If I do that, and know the fight ends at the last panel, I'll draw a line in front of the arrow, indicating that that's where it stops.

All of this is stuff I do to minimize, as much as possible, how much I have to think about the story structure while I'm writing the actual script. I don't want to worry about the pacing; I want to know that I've already got the pacing mapped out.



Once I've filled in all the page-rectangles with my scribbly little notes, it looks like this -------->

This way, when I sit down to write the script itself, I'm only looking at one page at a time. In fact, I'm only looking at one panel at a time. It compartmentalizes the process. All I have to do is glance at the sketchbook, and I know exactly what I'm supposed to be putting into each panel.

What this also does is that it lets me complete an entire first draft, before I ever hit the first keystroke.

When you do a plot layout like this, you're in the story the whole time. Thinking about the ingredients, how they're put together, what effects you're going to achieve. You'll realize things as you're making notes on each page, on each panel — things that work. Things that don't work. Things that

need to be added, or omitted entirely. The story will take a much firmer shape in your head than it did when you first started drawing those empty pages.

Now, I attempted to show this method to an aspiring comic book writer at one point, and was met with scorn and rejection. That's fine. As I've said before in this blog, I'm not saying this is The One and True Way to Write Stuff.

I'm just saying this is How to Write the Way I Write.