CHAPTER 6

WRITING & SEQUENTIAL ART

'Writing' for comics can be defined as the conception of an idea, the arrangement of image elements and the construction of the sequence of the narration and the composing of dialogue. It is at once a part and the whole of the medium. It is a special skill, its requirements not always in common with other forms of 'writing' for it deals with a singular technology. It is closest in requirements to playwriting, but for the fact that the writer, in the case of comics, is also the imagemaker (artist).

In sequential art the two functions are irrevocably interwoven. Sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric.

In writing with words alone, the author directs the reader's imagination. In comics the imagining is done for the reader. An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are "mixed" the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages.

THE WRITER AND THE ARTIST

In order to consider, separately, the role of the writer, it is necessary to arbitrarily limit the 'writing' for comics to the function of conceiving the idea and the story, creating the order of telling and fabricating the dialogue or narrative elements. With this as a given, we can arrange an order of progression which assembles itself as follows:

The idea and the story or plot in the form of a written script includes narrative and dialogue (balloons).
The deployment of words and the architecture of the structure composed expands or develops the concept of the story. Directions to the artist (description of panel and page content) carry that idea from the mind of the writer to the illustrator.

Each component pledges allegiance to the whole. The writer must at the outset be concerned with the interpretation of his story by the artist, and the artist must allow himself to be a captive of the story or idea. The separate considerations of the writing and drawing functions are directly involved with the aesthetics of the medium because the actual segregation of the writing and art function has proliferated in the practice of modern comics.

Unlike theatre (including cinema), in which the technology of its creation demands by its very nature the coordinated contributions of many specialists, comics have a history of being the product of a single individual.

The departure from the work of a single individual to that of a team is generally due to the exigency of time. More often the publisher ordains it out of a need to meet publication schedules, control his property when he owns a character, or when his editor assembles a team to suit an editorial thrust.

Many times the artist will bow to the editor’s opinion that he has limited ‘writing’ skills—or the artist will voluntarily abdicate the ‘writing’ role. So, to accommodate the dictates of the publisher or schedule, the artist will engage the services of a writer, or the writer will engage the skills of an artist. A bemusing result of this phenomenon has been the dilemma faced by modern comic book publishers when they have sought to return to the creator the ‘originals’ after publication. Who is the ‘creator’ of a comic page which was written by one person, penciled by another and inked, lettered (and perhaps colored or backgrounded) by still others??

A factor that has always had an impact on comics as an art form is the underlying reality that we are dealing with a medium of expression which is primarily visual. Artwork dominates the reader’s initial attention. This then lures the artist to concentrate his skills on style, technique and graphic devices which are designed to dazzle the eye. The reader’s receptivity to the sensory effect and often his evaluation of its worth reinforces this concern and encourages the proliferation of artistic athletes who produce pages of absolutely stunning art held together by almost no story at all.
THE APPLICATION OF "WRITING"

In comics that serve an essentially visually oriented audience or where the story demands are oriented toward a simple superhero, the action and style of art becomes so dominant that it mitigates the 'weave' of writing and art. Another factor in the loosening of this fabric is the procedure whereby the writer gives the artist the bare summary of a plot. The artist proceeds to create an entire sequence of art, composing his panels around a general assumption of unwritten dialogue and the satisfaction of his perception of the plot’s requirements. The completed work (at this point little more than a tapestry) is returned to the writer who must then apply dialogue and connecting narrative. Under these circumstances there could occur a struggle for identity as the writer, seeking to maintain his equity in the end product, overwrites in spaces arbitrarily allocated to him by the artist who has created an interpretation that is now irrevocable.

WORDS/ART: INSEPARABLE

The following simple example of the interdependency of words (text) and image (art) undertakes a theme of some sophistication. In this case the art without the text would be quite meaningless. Here the artist is also 'writing.'

![Comics image](image)

The positioning of the fish and the unembellished rendering of the art does not intrude on the theme. The deliberate pause (timing) by the insertion of a wordless panel adds weight and power to the punch line. Making the words BELIEVE, GOD and WHO boldface adds sound and disciplines the reader's internal ear. In reality, the reader is being asked to supply (or 'hear') the sound internally.
This is an aspect of ‘writing’ especially adaptable to comics. The ‘control’ of the reader’s ear is vital if the meaning and intent of the dialogue is to remain as the writer intended it.

THE APPLICATION OF WORDS

Assume for this example a script (segment) prepared by either the writer or the artist which deals with a fugitive who is running away from pursuing police. Here we seek a demonstration of the various possible applications of text which include dialogue, connecting narrative and description. Remember that in creativity there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’

EXAMPLE 1 (Humor): A ‘pure’ visual! The ‘writing,’ which may either have preceded the creation of the art in the form of a couple of sentences of description or been described orally, is dispensed with entirely.

EXAMPLE 2 (Humor): Since humor deals in exaggerated simplification, so must the ‘writing.’ Because of the simplicity of the art, text can (and has the freedom to) alter either meaning or intent. It can also affect the humor by adding a dimension of incongruity.
EXAMPLE 3 (realism): A minimum of word usage. Words here are employed for sounds. The artist shoulders the burden of conveying the action and the emotion of the fugitive by imagery alone.

EXAMPLE 4 (realism): Balloons are more liberally used to reinforce the theme.

EXAMPLE 5 (realism): A heavy application of narrative seeks to add dimension to the art and tries to participate in the story-telling by repeating (or reinforcing) what the images are trying to tell.
In view of this interdependence there is therefore no choice (in fairness to the art form itself) but to recognize the primacy of the writing. In doing so, however, one must then immediately acknowledge that in a perfect (or pure) configuration the writer and the artist should be embodied in the same person. The writing (or the writer) must be in control to the very end.

STORY AND IMAGERY

In practice the creator, given or having conceived the idea, sets about to develop it with words and imagery into a unified whole. It is here that the graphic elements ascend to dominance. For the end product is, after all, to be read as a total visual. It is this ‘mix’ which is, in the final analysis, the ultimate test of the success and quality of the sequential art effort.

STORY DEVELOPMENT

From the outset the conception and writing of a story is affected by the limitations of the medium. These virtually dictate the scope of a story and the depth of its telling. It is for this reason that stories and plots of simple, obvious action have long dominated comic book literature. The selection of a story and the telling of it, become subject to limitations of space, skill of the artist and the technology of reproduction. Actually, from the viewpoint of art or literature, this medium can deal with subject matter and theme of great sophistication.

Of the many elements of a story the most amenable to imagery are scenery and action. It is also reasonable to expect this medium to deal with abstractions that can be conveyed by human action and scenery. The dialogue which gives voice to the thought processes has the effect of rendering action meaningful. Text used in the introduction of a sequence or interposed between panels is employed to deal with the passage of time and changes in locale. In this connection, perhaps the most useful (and most used) word in comics is “MEANWHILE.”

There is no absolute ratio of words-to-picture in a medium where words (lettering) are in themselves part of the form. Sequential art operates under a rule of thumb that defines an image as either a ‘visual’ or an ‘illustration.’ I define a ‘visual’ as a series or sequence of images that replace a descriptive
passage told only in words. An ‘illustration’ reinforces (or decorates) a
descriptive passage. It simply repeats the text.

It is the ‘VISUAL’ that functions as the purest form of sequential art
because it seeks to employ a mix of letters and images as a language in dealing
with narration.

At the outset the creator makes a determination as to the nature of the story.
He must determine if he is dealing with the exposition of an idea, a problem
and its solution or the conveyance of the reader through an experience.

The style of treatment (i.e. humorous or realistic) has an obvious impor-
tance in the considerations that follow. Most often this is a predetermined
concept and is eliminated from conscious choice or protracted deliberation. It
is nonetheless important to factor it in the following steps.

In the next step the story is “broken down.” At this time the application
of the story and plot to the limitations of space or technology of the conveyance
takes place. Page size, number of pages, reproduction process and available
colors influence the “breakdown.” Sometimes, particularly in the situation
where the script is prepared by a writer for an artist, the fundamental break-
down is performed by the writer in the process of his work. The writer initiates
the breakdown and expects (very often with a fervent prayer) the artist to
reproduce or convert into visuals the description of action and compositional
instructions that accompany the dialogue. Obviously, a close rapport between
the two will prevent impossible demands by the writer and confounding
modifications (generally in the form of abbreviations and downright omissions)
by the artist who is often struggling more with the limitations of space,
time and skill of rendering (not to mention laziness) than with intellectual
considerations.

It takes a very sophisticated writer of long experience and dedication to ac-
cept total castration of his words, as, for example, a series of exquisitely writ-
ten balloons which are discarded in favor of an equally exquisite pantomime.
Where the artist must deal with or is forced to preserve the inviolability of
the writer’s words (as in dialogue or narrative passages) the result is often a
string of ‘talking heads.’ Where the writer is capable of accompanying his text
with sketches as an integral part of the script the problem is less severe.
Of course, where the writer and the artist are the same person these problems are somewhat buried in the thinking process of the writer/artist and are laundered in the flow of decision making. But he must, nevertheless, go through the entire process whether or not he does it on a set of thumbnails (writing dialogue as he goes) or follows the formality of typing a script for his own use. Here, at least, the writer's sovereignty and equity are no longer involved.

This is a simplified example of an average script. In practice the presentation style of the script varies with the standards of the publishing house — or the agreement between artist and writer. This script deals with only one page of a story.

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**Page 2**

**Panel 1**

**Narrative:** Meanwhile...

**Spirit:** "Look here, Dolan, the city is crawling with GRANCH's hoods. You've got to do something."

**Dolan:** "What? They've done nothing!"

**Scene:** In Dolan's office it's night time after hours. The only light is from Dolan's desk lamp. The Spirit is looking out the window - out to the city. It is a big city police commissioner's office.

**Panel 2**

**Spirit:** "yet!!"

**Scene:** The Spirit, pensive, still looking out the window.
PANEL 3

DOLAN: "Unless...someone... on the side of the law, of course...were to..."

SCENE: Dolan's getting a brainstorm. His face shows a crafty idea is aborning. Perhaps a close up, his face lit by the lone lamp.

PANEL 4

NARRATIVE: Two hours later....

SCENE: The waterfront of Central City. Fog swirls about the piles and rotting planking of the wharf. We see the spirit standing in the one spot of light provided by a lone lamp post. The hull of a docked tanker is barely visible in the mist. In a corner of the panel we see a shadowy figure — obviously a thug.

PANEL 5

THUG: "Welcome to our turf... don't move a muscle!!"

SPRINT: "Well, well... GRANICH's hospitality corps... tch, tch!!"

SCENE: Close in on the spirit... Out of the shadows the thug moves close to the spirit. We see his glistening knife blade pointed to just behind the spirit's ear. The thug is dimly seen. The spirit's posture is one of seeming surrender.
This flow chart shows the thinking process and the steps of development from the script of a single page (shown in detail on the preceding pages) to the pencil stage ready for finished (inking) art.
I have always been strongly of the opinion that the writer and artist should be in one person. Failing that, and in the absence of any prior agreement between artist and writer, then I come down in favor of the dominance of the artist. This is not to free him from the obligation to work in service of the story originated by the writer. Rather, I expect him to shoulder this burden with the understanding that with the so called 'freedom' will come a greater challenge — that of employing or devising a wider range of visual devices and composition innovation. He should contribute to the 'writing.'

In any event, in any ideal scriptwriter-artist relationship the artist must assume the burden of two major freedoms, omission and addition. For those who would like to have a rule these two might be useful.

**OMISSION OF TEXT**

The artist should be free to omit dialogue or narrative that can clearly be demonstrated visually.

**AS DIRECTED BY SCRIPT**

**AS ARTIST MODIFIES IT**

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**PANEL 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NARRATIVE:</th>
<th>Jones is shot from behind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JONES:</td>
<td>&quot;Gad, I've been shot in the back.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCENE:</td>
<td>Show Jones being shot in the back.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ADDITION OF TEXT/ART

The artist should be free to enlarge a sequence of panels to create 'timing' which reinforces the intent of the script.

THE SCRIPT AS THE WRITER PRODUCED IT. Actually, the writer will generally concentrate on plot and dialogue leaving (or hoping) for skillful stage craft by the artist. Shown here is a two panel segment of script.

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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PANEL 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NARRATIVE: Jones falls into the Spirit's arms just as he arrives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JONES: &quot;Glah. The. Klaa diamond is. . .gasp.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The artist has added two panels to create a 'timing' element that increases the drama. By splitting the dying man's dialogue the man's demise is visualized. Furthermore, the elimination of narrative makes the reading flow uninterrupted. This is story-telling by the artist.
This story was written by Jules Feiffer for a 4 page SPIRIT story to have been run October 12, 1952. It was never executed or published.

This is an example of a ‘script’ produced by a writer who is also skilled at drawing.

Since he can sketch he is able to supply the artist with visual stage directions.

But an even more important ingredient is the writer’s understanding of the artist’s style and capabilities. The compatibility of the writer and artist is very evident here.
An example of a typical script style. This allows the artist to innovate page layouts and panel composition.

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**Panel 1** -- (Martian) zzzt... clk... RUINED!

**Panel 2** -- (Martian) MY BEAUTIFUL SPACESHIP DESTROYED BY THAT LITTLE BEAST WITH A PEPPERMINT STICK! HOW CAN I EVER REPAIR IT WITHOUT NEW PARTS?

**Panel 3** -- (Martian) HOW CAN I EVER RETURN TO MARS? I AM DOOMED, DOOMED TO REMAIN ON EARTH! [Martian turns on television]

**Panel 4** -- (Television Announcer) AND IN TONIGHT'S DEBATE, THE SPIRIT ANNOUNCED HE WILL PROVE THE POSSIBILITY OF FLYING SAUCERS BY REVEALING A FOUR FOOT REPLICA OF A SAUCER COMPLETE WITH ALL PARTS!

**Panel 5** -- (Television Announcer) DESIGNED BY LEADING SCIENTISTS AND WORKABLE, THIS SAUCER... CLICK...

**Panel 6** -- (Martian) HA!

**Panel 7** -- (Martian) I HAVE FOUND A WAY TO RETURN TO MARS!

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**Panel 3**

**Panel 1** -- (Skeptical Scientist) THEY ARE MERELY ILLUSIONS OF LIGHT. NOTHING THE SPIRIT CAN SAY, NO SO-CALLED SAUCER WHICH HE CAN REVEAL, WILL PROVE OTHERWISE!

(Dolan, sitting on a stage with The Spirit) DO YOU REALLY HAVE A SAUCER?

(Spirit, also on stage) SHH... YES, IT'S IN THE BACK ROOM!

**Panel 2** -- Caption: IN THE BACK ROOM... [Martian sneaking into back room through open door]

**Panel 3** -- (Silent -- probably long view showing past Martian to group of kids outside back room door. P.S. Smith (whose actual name is Algermon Tidewater) can be seen with kids and parents or teacher. Dolan is approaching room too, from opposite direction.)

**Panel 4** -- (Parent or Teacher) P.S., WHERE ARE YOU GOING? [P.S. is leaving group, heading for back room.]

**Panel 5** -- (Parent or Teacher, off panel) P.S., COME ON BACK!

(Martian) P.S., THAT'S THE MONSTER WHO RUIN MY SHIP!

**Panel 6** -- [Silent -- P.S. enters back room and confronts Martian]

**Panel 7** -- [Silent -- P.S. probably knocks Martian out with his peppermint stick.]

**Panel 8** -- (Dolan, just entering back room) P.S., DON'T GO IN THERE! [P.S. is entering saucer.]

**Panel 9** -- [Saucer is taking off with P.S. in it] (Dolan, having entered now-empty back room) NOW, WHERE DID HE GO!

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**Panel 4**

**Panel 1** -- (Skeptical Scientist in studio) IN CONCLUSION, I REPEAT, THESE SAUCERS DO NOT EXIST!

**Panel 2** -- (Skeptical Scientist) THEY ARE ILLUSIONS!... MERE... ILLUSIONS! [As he talks, we see behind him through window a view of the saucer flying by.]

**Panel 3** -- (Television Announcer, gesturing toward The Spirit) AND NOW FOR REBUTTAL, I GIVE YOU THE SPIRIT!

**Panel 4** -- (Spirit) MY ONLY REBUTTAL, GENTLEMAN, WILL BE AN ACTUAL DEMONSTRATION OF A FLYING SAUCER! COMMISSIONER DOLAN, BRING IN THE SAUCER!

**Panel 5** -- (Spirit, impatiently) COMMISSIONER DOLAN...

**Panel 6** -- (Spirit, very impatiently) WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN'T? IT'S IN THE BACK ROOM!

(Dolan) THE BACK ROOM IS EMPTY!

**Panel 7** -- (Sneering Audience) HA! HA! HA! FAKE! HA HA HA HA HA!

**Panel 8** -- Caption: LATER... [P.S. is back on Earth, holding some outlandish Martian artifact, still sucking his peppermint stick. Dolan absent-mindedly notices him but doesn't see the saucer behind them, or the Martian who is even now running eagerly toward it.]

(Dolan) OH, THERE YOU ARE, P.S. WHERE'D YOU PICK UP THAT DUMB-LOOKING TOY!

**Panel 9** -- Caption: MEANWHILE... [and we see that the poor battered Martian has finally made it back into outer space, as the saucer heads toward Mars.]

THE END
THE DUMMY

For the graphic medium the conceptual layout is an almost inescapable requirement. In advertising it is called a layout or mechanical, in film making it is the story boards and in comics it is a "dummy".

This device functions as a trial mock up which gives the creator the chance to make rearrangements before the final product is begun. In comics a dummy is an indispensable tool because successful graphic story telling depends on the ability of the text and imagery arrangement to convey the narrative and hold the reader's attention. This instrument provides the editor, writer and artist with control of story and art. The time and money saving advantages are obvious.

The following dummy shows several pages from a graphic novel TO THE HEART OF THE STORM. It was executed on 8 1/2" X 11" typewriter sheets, approximately the size and shape of the final printed page. The inked page is shown alongside.
This pencil dummy page is comprehensive enough for editor and artist.
The inking shows refinements in posture and layout. Working from a dummy the artist enjoys a great deal of freedom in that there is an underlying structure upon which the rendering can depend.