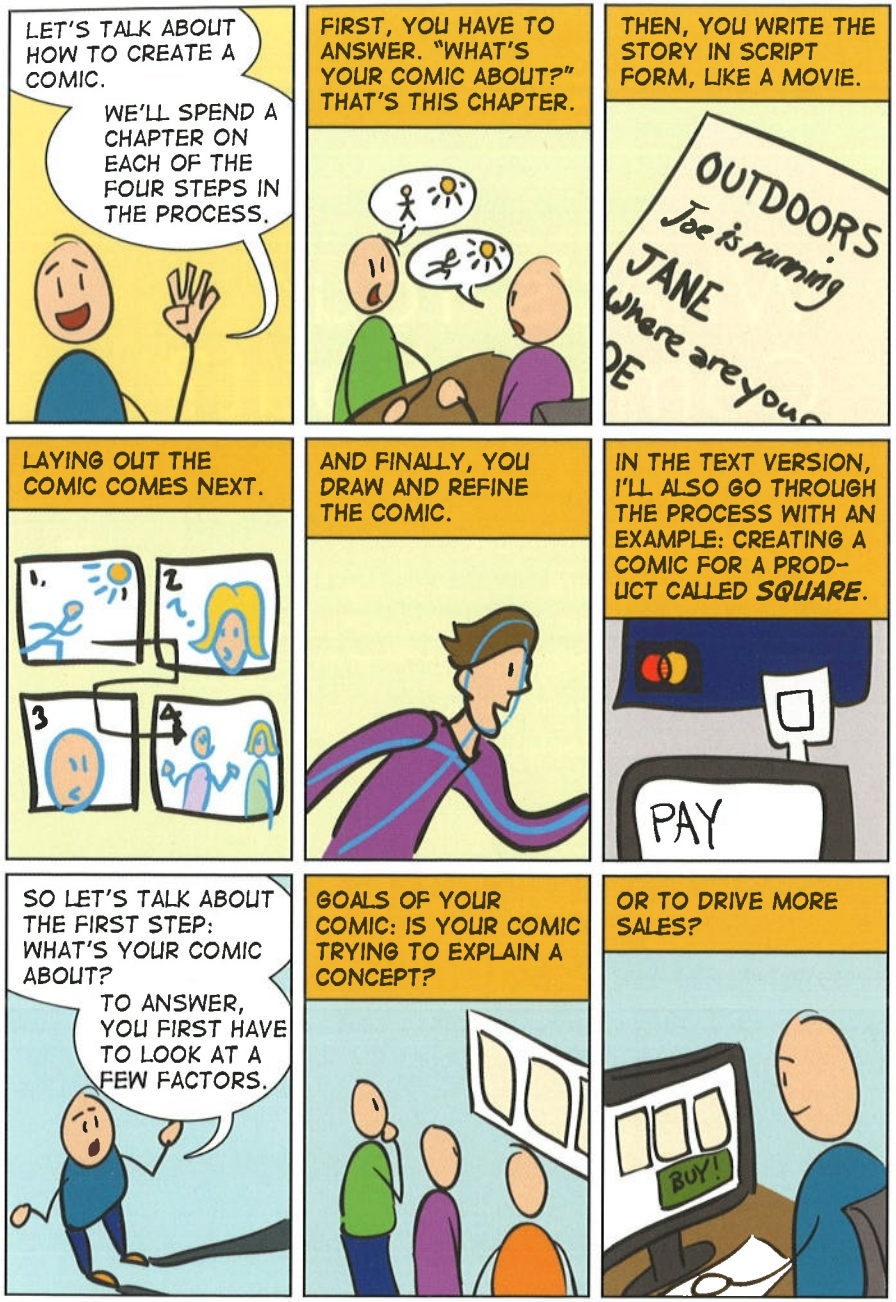
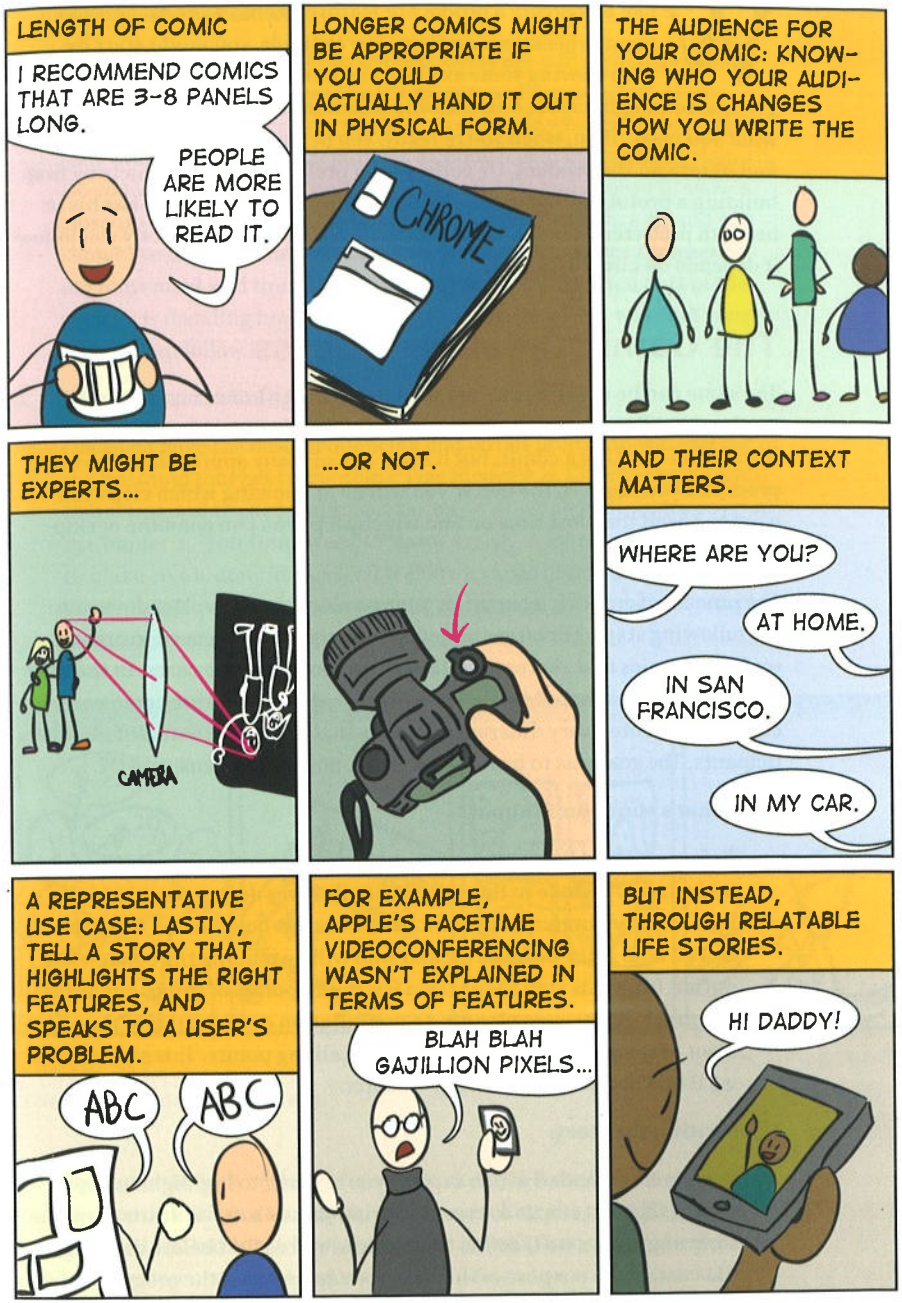
CHAPTER 4

What's Your Comic About?


LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW TO CREATE A COMIC.
WE'LL SPEND A CHAPTER ON EACH OF THE FOUR STEPS IN THE PROCESS.
FIRST, YOU HAVE TO ANSWER. "WHAT'S YOUR COMIC ABOUT?" THAT'S THIS CHAPTER.
THEN, YOU WRITE THE STORY IN SCRIPT FORM, LIKE A MOVIE.
OUTDOORS
Joe is running
JANE
Where are you
LAYING OUT THE COMIC COMES NEXT.
1.
2
3
4
AND FINALLY, YOU DRAW AND REFINE THE COMIC.
IN THE TEXT VERSION, I'LL ALSO GO THROUGH THE PROCESS WITH AN EXAMPLE: CREATING A COMIC FOR A PRODUCT CALLED SQUARE.
PAY
SO LET'S TALK ABOUT THE FIRST STEP: WHAT'S YOUR COMIC ABOUT?
TO ANSWER, YOU FIRST HAVE TO LOOK AT A FEW FACTORS.
GOALS OF YOUR COMIC: IS YOUR COMIC TRYING TO EXPLAIN A CONCEPT?
OR TO DRIVE MORE SALES?
BUY!


LENGTH OF COMIC
I RECOMMEND COMICS THAT ARE 3-8 PANELS LONG.
PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO READ IT.
LONGER COMICS MIGHT BE APPROPRIATE IF YOU COULD ACTUALLY HAND IT OUT IN PHYSICAL FORM.
CHROME
THE AUDIENCE FOR YOUR COMIC: KNOWING WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS CHANGES HOW YOU WRITE THE COMIC.
THEY MIGHT BE EXPERTS...
CAMERA
...OR NOT.
AND THEIR CONTEXT MATTERS.
WHERE ARE YOU?
AT HOME.
IN SAN FRANCISCO.
IN MY CAR.
A REPRESENTATIVE USE CASE: LASTLY, TELL A STORY THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE RIGHT FEATURES, AND SPEAKS TO A USER'S PROBLEM.
ABC
ABC
FOR EXAMPLE, APPLE'S FACETIME VIDEOCONFERENCING WASN'T EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF FEATURES.
BLAH BLAH GAJILLION PIXELS...
BUT INSTEAD, THROUGH RELATABLE LIFE STORIES.
HI DADDY!

When you create a product or feature, there's a product development process you undergo. For example, you might start by interviewing some existing customers or running some focus groups. You might create business and functional requirements describing what you need. Then, when you're ready, you begin design and development and iterate on the product. Or perhaps you prefer to define products by first building a prototype, bypassing formal requirements. Everyone has his or her own preferred process. What process you use and how strictly you follow it depends on circumstances.

The Comic Creation Process

The same can be said for creating a comic: there isn't one correct way to go about it. I'll present a comic creation process that includes all the steps involved in creating a comic, but it's just one of many approaches. The more practiced you are at it, the better you will be at knowing which steps you need to spend the most time on and which steps you can combine or skip over entirely.

The process of creating a comic for your product can be broken down into the following steps. For larger projects, you might feel the need to create multiple comics that represent different personas and use cases. In the case of the comics we created for Yahoo!, we created a total of three comics. Each comic represented very different use cases that resonated with different participants. The goal was to be representative, not comprehensive.

1. **What's your comic about?**

   Before creating the comic, you need to decide why you're using comics and what to include in the story. What features do you want to highlight, or more importantly, which features can be excluded from the story? Who is the product for and who will be reading the comic? The output from this step should be a few bullet points of things you want to highlight. If you were planning a presentation or essay, this is the equivalent of setting up the thesis and main talking points. This step is what we'll talk about in detail in this chapter.

2. **Writing the story.**

   Once you've decided which aspects you're going to highlight in the comic, the next step is to create a script. Just as a movie starts from the scripting phase, we'll define the comic in words first before drawing the comic. The purpose of this step is to define what the progression of the story is. If the first step were defining a thesis, then this step would be defining the outline. You'll define the characters that are in the comic, the settings where the story is told, and the dialogue that will be spoken either by narration or by the characters.

3. **Laying out the comic.**

   Even when the story has been defined, there are still a lot of decisions that need to be made about the composition of a comic. Just as photographers, filmmakers, or painters must decide what parts of a scene they want to capture, each panel in a comic has to be carefully planned. Do you want to show the building they're in? Do you choose to show a close-up of the product? How much, if any, of the interface should you show? I've talked about how comics are very powerful for representing movement and time. If comics are sequential art, then part of the process is deciding how to sequence the story in such a way that your readers can follow it.

4. **Drawing and refining the comic.**

   Once you have the basic sequencing and layout prepared, you can put in the finishing touches to the comic (see Figure 4.1). I'll cover some additional tips and tricks to augment the basic drawing techniques covered in Chapter 3, "You Don't Need to Be an Artist." A lot of tools also exist to make comic creation easier. I'll share a range of resources, including drawing software and layout templates, to make the process of creating comics even faster.

FIGURE 4.1
The comic creation process.

To help illustrate each of these steps more clearly, I'll use an example and create a comic from start to finish over the next four chapters. The example is a real product, but to my knowledge, they haven't used comics in their product development or marketing . So let's pretend we've been asked to create a comic for them.

The Example: Square

Square is a little physical card reader which you can plug into the headphone jack of an Android phone, an iPhone, or an iPad (see Figure 4.2). After you plug it in, you can accept payments from any major credit card with minimal initial setup. It's currently used by small businesses, coffee shops, street food carts, people who are selling items on Craigslist, garage sales, and many others. This card reading device and its associated software are free, but each time you run a transaction, a flat rate is charged to the merchant.

FIGURE 4.2
The Square credit card reader.

I feel that Square is a very appropriate example for a number of reasons. First, it's a product that spans many devices, including mobile devices, tablet devices, and a website. Second, the product has many use cases and personas, which is probably the case for many of your products. Finally, there are clear, real-world interactions that can be associated with the story of Square's usage.

If you'd like more information on Square, you can look up the product at http://squareup.com. It's worth mentioning that the founder of Square is also a co-founder at Twitter, where I used to work. However, my use of their product as this book's example is without any consultation or inside knowledge of their product. We'll go into more detail with this example soon and continue doing so for the next few chapters.

Now that we have an example to work with, let's start the first step of the comic creation process by answering the question: What's your comic about? Take a look at Figure 4.3.

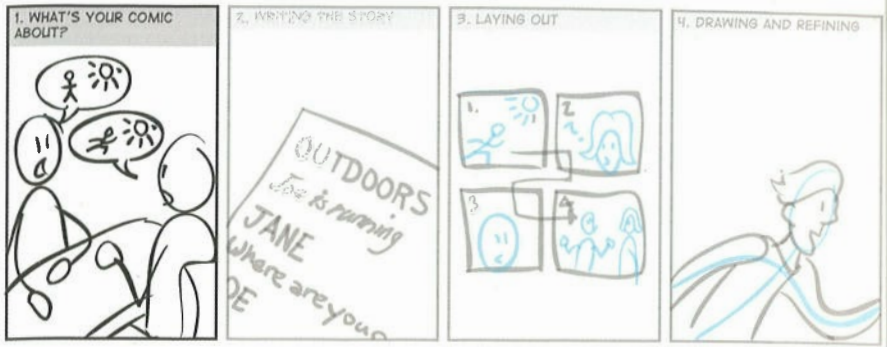


FIGURE 4.3
What's your comic about?

Answering this question can be tricky. Instead of approaching it as one broad and vague question, it might be easier to break it down into a few logical steps. Once you have addressed these, it should be much easier to narrow down your comic story.

1. **Define the goals of your comic.** What do you want to get out of it? What is the next step you want the reader to take after reading your comic?
2. **Decide on the length of your comic.** The length will dictate how much detail you give and how precise your messaging needs to be.
3. **Identify the audience for your comic.** Your story may change, depending on the audience's expertise level and the context in which you're portraying your comic.
4. **Select a representative use case.** Think of a scenario that shows off your product well. Once you find that, the scenario will naturally help you narrow down which features to highlight.

Goals of Your Comic

Before thinking about what's in the comic, you should start with what you want the comic to accomplish. If you know what actions you hope to inspire through the comic, then you can design the comic toward that goal. When Google decided to create their comic for Google Chrome, they had a clear goal in mind. They didn't want people to focus on feature comparisons between browsers; instead, they wanted readers to gain an understanding of their technical motivations for building a Web browser from scratch.

The goal of the comic may vary, depending on whether it's for a product that exists or not. When using comics to describe products that haven't been built, the goals may be centered on understanding and sponsorship. The comics we created at Yahoo! were to validate our product vision with potential users as well as management. Our goal was to get feedback on how useful the product ideas were and to get support from management to start building the product as described in the comic.

Sometimes, the goal can be completely measurable. At Raptr, we used a comic on the homepage to describe the product. Our goal was to help visitors understand our product, but there was a specific action we were also hoping to inspire—user sign-ups. Similarly, since Square is a product that's already in the market, the goal of our fictitious comic should be to help merchants understand why it's useful and ultimately to have them sign up to receive a Square device. Defining the goal of your comic is a crucial step, but it shouldn't be that difficult. If you've already decided to create a comic, chances are you have some idea what you're hoping to accomplish from it.

The Length of Your Comic

After deciding what your comic is about, the next important factor is to determine how long your comic will be, because you need to know how much room you have to work with. I encourage the use of very short comics (3–8 panels) to illustrate an idea. At that length, they're easy to consume, yet they contain enough information both for internal and external communication. The comic should fit on the homepage of a site, on a postcard, or in an email to your team. However, there are plenty of examples of longer form comics.

The Google Chrome comic, mentioned in a sidebar in Chapter 2, "Properties of Comics," was over 30 pages and was fairly technical in nature (see Figure 4.4). Even at that length, it was much more digestible than a detailed white paper and represented just the right balance for readability. The comic was available online, but it was also distributed in physical form to key developers and industry experts.

The U.S. Navy, as a way to connect to its Japanese audience, created a full *Manga* (Japanese form of comics) book in both English and Japanese to explain why their aircraft carrier would need to be docked in Japan for several months (see Figure 4.5). Given the widespread acceptance of *Manga* as a medium for any topic, this seems like a great way to connect with their audience. A lot of people were interested in the carrier so publicizing the comic wasn't difficult. Many local and online press outlets wrote articles about the comic. When they released the book, there was a line around the block to get a copy of the book!

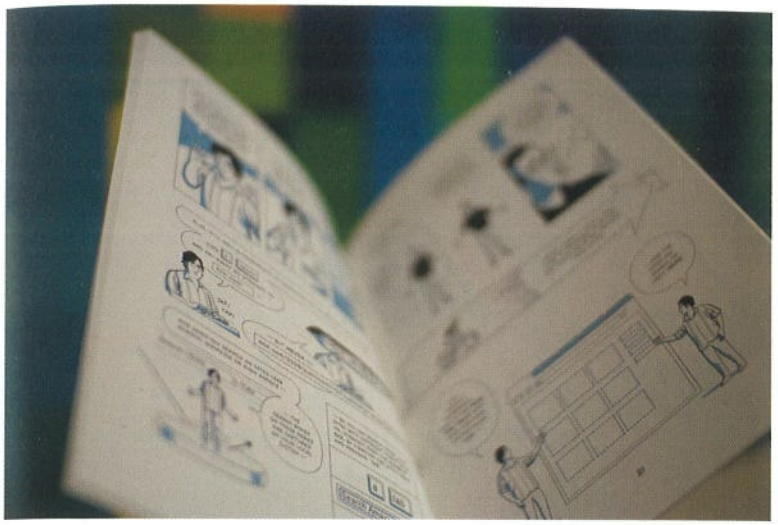


FIGURE 4.4
A copy of the Google Chrome comic book.

FIGURE 4.5
Manga for U.S. Navy's USS Washington.

Another example of longer form comics in use comes from Adobe's Evangeline Haughey, who was trying to find creative ways to encourage team members to read her user research reports and decided to spice one of her reports up by presenting it in comic book form. It was a handful of pages, and she printed them as booklets, complete with a fake comic book cover illustrated by her colleague Julie Meridian (see Figure 4.6).

FIGURE 4.6
Adobe's comic book cover.

One commonality between these examples of longer form comics is that they all feature a physical component to their distribution. If your ideas are more complex or lengthy, consider creating longer comics but also think about ways to distribute physical copies of the comic. It's surprising how hard it is *not* to read a copy of a comic that's in your hand!

Longer form comics aren't always appropriate, however. Akoha, a start-up that uses trading cards to encourage "doing good deeds," tried to use comics to explain their services in an innovative fashion. Unfortunately, it was a multi-page comic that few visited when coming to their homepage. In contrast, many companies, such as Nectar, used very simple three-panel comics on their homepage (see Figure 4.7). These comics were easy to consume and immediately explained the product.

FIGURE 4.7
Akoha's multi-page comic vs. Nectar's three-panel comic.

I love constraints. We've all seen the power of using them. Presentations are constrained by time and reports by number of pages. In movies, the editing process is crucial to ensure that the film is under a certain number of minutes. This process culls the unnecessary scenes that do not add to the depth of the story. These constraints may seem artificial, but you'll find that they're helpful, forcing you to be creative and thoughtful. By constraining a comic from three to eight panels, you're forced to think about what features are most important to convey.

How Common Craft Distills Ideas into Simple Animated Videos

Lee LeFever cofounded Common Craft (http://commoncraft.com) with his wife Sachi. They make explanatory videos that are short and simple, made out of paper cutouts and a whiteboard (like in Figure 4.8). They have become experts in explaining complex subjects, and Lee's upcoming book, The Art of Explanation, *will help professionals improve their explanation skills. Common Craft has built a library of videos for educators and worked with companies like Intel, Google, Ford Motors, and Dropbox. In total, their videos have been viewed over 50 million times. I sat with Lee for a few minutes at the South by Southwest Interactive festival and asked him about his approach.*

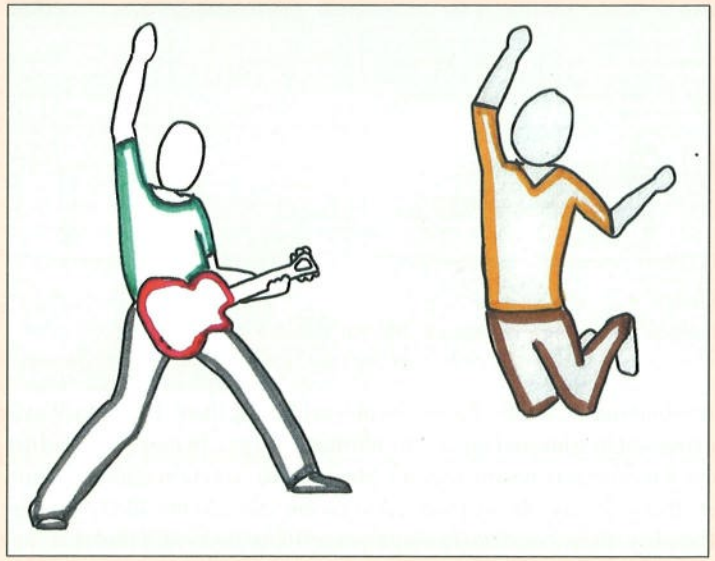


FIGURE 4.8
Common Craft characters are simple figures.

How did you come up with the idea for this format?

Starting in school and going into my work in the tech industry, I always felt that good, easy-to-understand explanations were in short supply. The geeks were doing the explaining and doing it poorly. We started making videos to solve this problem. In terms of the visual format, it was Sachi's (my wife and partner) idea. I tried standing in front of a whiteboard and talking to the camera to explain an idea, and it was, let's say, discouraging. She saw the potential to point the camera down onto the whiteboard and use paper cut-outs, markers, and hands. The format has been consistent since the first video and is now being adopted by teachers who build simple videos with students and call them "Common Craft Style" videos. We love to be an inspiration for educators.

Can you walk me through what the process is for creating a video? How long does it take?

We approach all our videos with the same goal: to make an idea easier to understand in three minutes. Over the years, we've come to a number of conclusions about how to make this happen. From our perspective, great explanations are based on empathy and confidence. In order to make an idea easy to understand, you must put yourself in the audience's shoes and *empathize* with their perspective, knowledge, ideas. Then, you think about your communication in terms of building and sustaining the audience's *confidence*. This means starting with context and the basic ideas before moving into details. We always say—forest first, then the trees.

In terms of production, every video is different, but they usually follow a similar process. We give Common Craft members the ability to suggest and vote on potential titles. This is a big help in knowing what videos to make. Once we decide on a title, we do research and talk a lot about the big ideas, what the audience needs, and how we can approach it. This can take hours or weeks, depending on a number of factors like our existing knowledge of the subject. Next we write the script, which is the heart of our work—where the explanation truly resides. This process is very iterative and represents the biggest chunk of time. Once we feel good about the script, we create and iterate on the storyboard and shoot the video. Shooting is usually done over two days and takes around six hours—all live-action stop-motion. Then post-production begins and can take 8–12 hours. All told, I'd say a video takes around 40–50 hours to create.

The Audience for Your Comic

Aside from comic length, the Google Chrome and U.S. Navy comics also share something else in common. Both comics had a very clear understanding of who their audience was and had stories specifically tailored for them. In the case of Google Chrome, the audience was technical enough to care about browser performance and engineering. With that in mind, they were able to tell stories about JavaScript processing and browser caching. For the U.S. Navy, an understanding of their audience—Japanese residents of Yokosuka—determined the format of their messaging. In fact, they were so successful in that campaign, people lined up around the street to get a copy of the printed *Manga*.

Who your audience is, where they're from, and what they know can influence the contents and delivery of your story. Let's say somebody asked you, "How do I get to the nearest post office?" What would you say? Maybe something like:

> Turn left at the first light, keep going until the stop sign, and then make a right on Main street.

These directions seem pretty straightforward, but what if you knew the person asking you? Let's say, it's your cousin Joseph who's a bit navigationally challenged. Then you could give a few more details.

> Turn left at the first light where the blue gas station is. Keep going—you'll pass that playground we used to play at—and make a right when you see our old high school.

What you're doing is offering the right level of detail based on the person you are communicating the information to. We actually scope our conversations based on context and audience all the time without even realizing it. If you had answered the question with every painstaking detail, it would be more like this:

> Insert your key into the ignition; turn it once until you feel the engine starting. Before you back out of your garage, make sure to check all your mirrors for any people or vehicles...

...and so on. We don't go into this level of detail because we implicitly understand and consider the audience's expertise level. This is an important consideration but insufficient. Beyond the expertise level, we also want to consider the audience's context. In the previous example, I assumed that the person was asking for driving directions and was a driver. However, the person asking for directions might be a bicyclist or pedestrian. To a bicyclist, the grade of the street is important; a pedestrian doesn't cares about one-way streets; and drivers can't drive down stairs.

Now let's look at a business context. In *Design of Everyday Things*, Don Norman discusses the concept of mental models—how people view a system. Norman uses a camera as an example. If you were to ask an engineer how a camera works, you might get an explanation about light, aperture, and shutter speed. The comic for such an explanation might look like Figure 4.9.

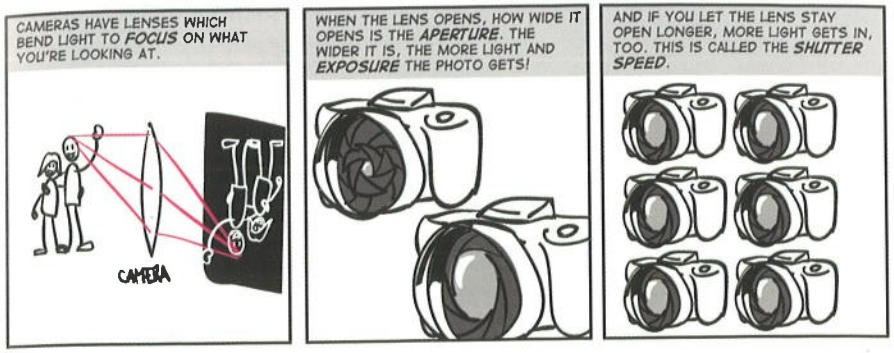


FIGURE 4.9
How a camera works.

However, if you were to ask a layperson how a camera works, they might tell you about how to turn it on, how to focus, and how to upload a picture. Then the comic might look like Figure 4.10.

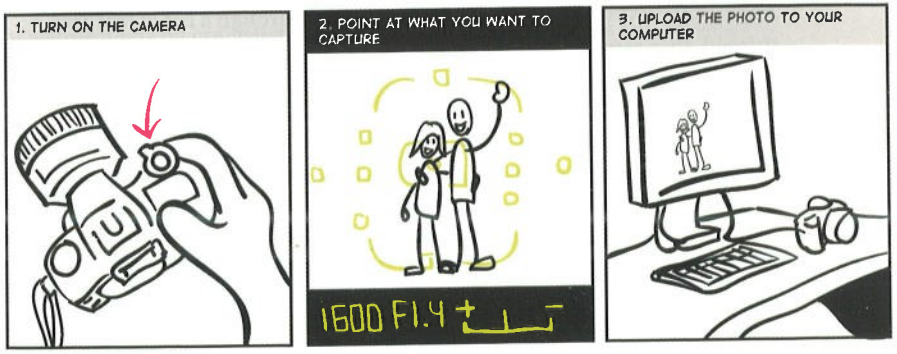


FIGURE 4.10
How a camera works to a layperson.

Both of these comics are correct. They simply differ based on the expertise of the audience and the context of what the audience is hoping to learn from the story. If you know your audience, you'll have a much better idea of what your story is and how to frame it. We can apply these considerations to our Square example, too. For Square, our audience is potential merchants who have trouble receiving credit card payments and might find Square useful. These merchants need to be smartphone owners, so they are presumably reasonably tech-savvy. At the same time, they only care that the device is easy to use and secure, but are unlikely to understand (or care) about the detailed technical workings of the hardware.

Selecting a Representative Use Case

You now know whom you want to read your comic and its context. The next step is to find a story that helps your readers understand why they should care! To accomplish that, you need to find a use case that resonates with them and their problems. Sometimes, you're trying to tell a story of a problem they didn't even realize they had.

When Apple launched its iPhone 4 and videoconferencing application, FaceTime, we already had many competitive and compelling products we could use. Skype, Google Talk, and even Apple's own iChat had free video chat and even video conferencing capabilities. One important distinction was that it was on the phone rather than on a computer—but given you had to still be connected to a WiFi network, this portability was limited.

Apple didn't explain FaceTime's differentiation through a list of features. Instead, they aired a series of short and powerful advertisements that showcased powerful, human use cases—scenarios such as a father traveling abroad and conferencing in with his family, or grandparents seeing their grandchild for the first time (see Figure 4.11). Are these scenarios unique to FaceTime? Certainly not, but they were compelling and helped the viewer relate to why the feature was important to them.

Now let's go back to Square. What kind of use cases could we use for Square? Let's list a few situations where we think Square would most help solve a problem.

- Trade shows
- Selling large items on craigslist
- Coffee shops
- Garage sales
- Small merchants
- Food stands
- Massage therapist
- Musicians

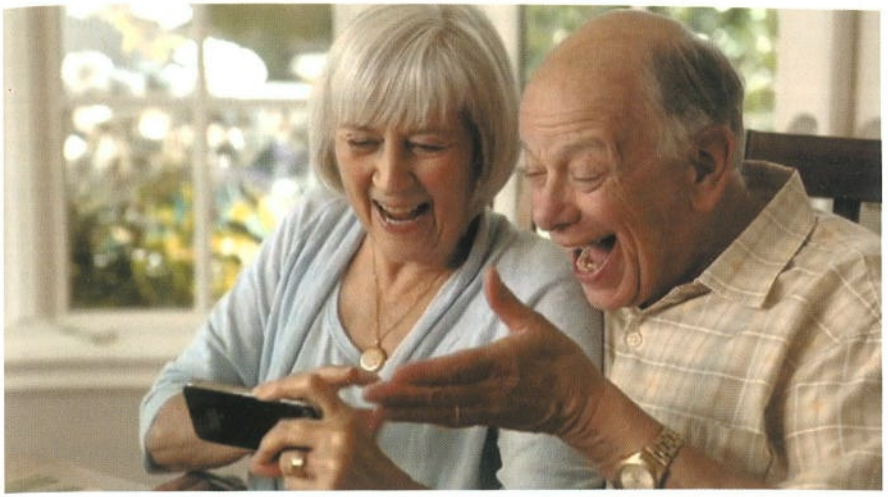


FIGURE 4.11
Apple's FaceTime advertisement.

Notice the overall theme of the use cases listed here. In each case, the users do not typically have an easy means of accepting credit card payments but find themselves in situations where they need to do so or lose business. For some, such as coffee shops and small merchants, the users have an established business. Other use cases are around individuals who may need to accept credit cards on occasions when they're running garage sales or selling items on craigslist. Others still may be in the goods and services business, providing their services in various locations including conferences, craft fairs, or people's homes. Two themes arise from looking at these use cases: there's the advantage of Square's mobility and the advantage of Square's ease of access to a credit card payment system.

Conceivably, we could create just one comic on the mobile use case, and it would inherently also describe the easy credit card payment system. However, if we were actually creating these for Square, it would probably be beneficial to have a separate comic for merchants lest they think, "Well, that's nice, but my shop doesn't move around so I don't need a mobile solution." For the purposes of this book's example, let's take the use case of selling books at tradeshows and conferences and create a comic around that. For that use case, which of Square's features should we highlight? Maybe it will be useful to list all the features:

- Free App on iPhone, iPad, and Android.
- Free card reader device that plugs into the mobile device's headphones jack.

- Accepts Visa, Mastercard, American Express, and Discover.
- Purchasers can use their fingers or a stylus to sign their signatures on the phone or iPad.
- If the card can't be read, there's an option to enter the number manually.
- A lot of focus is placed on the design of the card reader, the website, and the mobile applications.
- Money received is deposited daily to your bank account.
- A flat fee of 2.75% is charged for all transactions.
- The purchaser can get a receipt by email or text message.
- The vendor does not have to commit to any contract to receive the device or use the service.
- From the website, the vendor can track a history of all invoices.
- All transactions are secure.
- Full reports on what was sold.
- Regular customers can set up a tab.

Yikes! That's a lot of features to include in a story. How are we going to create a comic with only 3–8 panels that encompass all of these points? There are more bullet points than panels! Luckily, we have a use case now to help us narrow down which features are important to highlight and which are less so. Important aspects include the fact that it's a device that plugs into popular mobile devices and accepts all major credit cards. It's debatable whether the cost of the device (free) is something that you need to highlight in the comic. You could argue that the comic gets the reader interested enough to investigate, and you could subsequently explain the details. However, as you'll find later, it's easy enough to incorporate the cost into the dialogue.

Some details that you can skip in the comic include how often the money received is deposited, the fees, and the lack of a contract. All of these elements are important selling points for the product, but remember the questions the comic should answer: "What is this and why should I care?" Can you imagine if the iPhone 4 commercials talked about their two-year contracts or even the cost of the phone?

Summing up, here are the features that seem most important to highlight for the mobile payment use case we're doing:

- Free App on iPhone, iPad, and Android.
- Free card reader device that plugs into the mobile device's headphones jack.
- Card reader accepts Visa, Mastercard, American Express, and Discover.
- Purchasers can use their fingers or a stylus to sign their signatures on the phone or iPad.
- The purchaser can get a receipt by email or text message.
- From the website, the vendor can track a history of all invoices.

That list seems much more manageable. Can you see the story crystallizing? You've decided the goal of the comic is to get merchants to understand Square and sign up for one. The audience for the comic is merchants who are technologically savvy. The problem you're going to showcase is someone selling goods at tradeshows and conferences with no easy way to accept credit cards. In particular, you'll create a story around a person who wants to sell books at a conference. (As it turns out, Lou Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld Media, the publisher of this very book, now use Square to sell their books at conferences!) Finally, you have narrowed down the feature list to just over a handful to highlight. Now that you know what the story is about, let's talk about how to write it!

How Brad Colbow Creates an Informational Comic

Brad Colbow is a Web designer, illustrator, and cartoonist. He is the creator of The Brads, *a Web comic on technology and design. He also creates informational comics on various subjects, such as HTML5 with Jeremy Keith and Mental Models with Indi Young. Brad explains how he goes about taking a subject and breaking it down into a comic.*

Most of my information comics tackle technical subjects. A long detailed article or blog post is a great way to share knowledge, but sometimes a brief overview can be valuable—that's where a comic shines.

1. **Understand the subject.** I try to gather as many sources I can on a topic to see how different people approach it. I take notes and start to figure out what information is important and what I can leave out.

2. **Break it down to its most basic parts.** I start with a simple outline, a bulleted list of the most important information, or sketch out some notes. For example, if I'm writing about touch gestures for the iPhone, I might list dozens of them, but for a comic I probably just want to focus on a handful (see Figure 4.12).

   To narrow it down, I might take a look at the most popular apps and see what they use or just summarize what a touch gesture is (Figure 4.13).

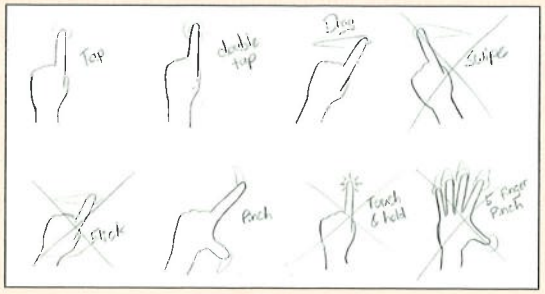


FIGURE 4.12
A visual bullet list of important information.

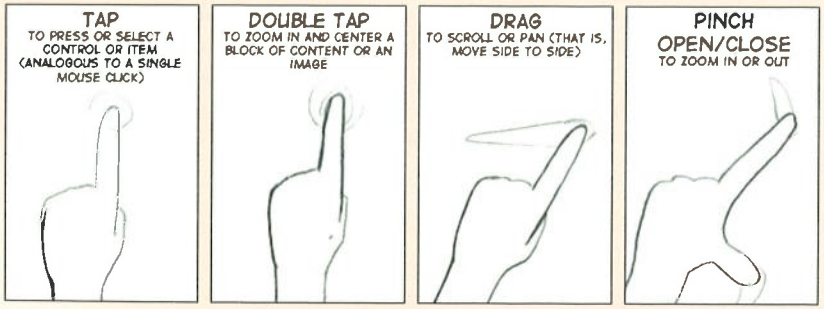


FIGURE 4.13
Summarizing touch gestures.

Often at this stage I'll reach out to someone who's very knowledgeable on the topic and share what I'm working on to make sure I'm on the right track and not missing anything important.

3. **Fleshing it out.** Now it starts to look like a comic. I start to figure out how many panels there will be and what information goes in what panel. Since the topics are dense, I try not to put too much text in any one panel.

4. **Come up with a theme.** If you just have a narrator speaking, you wouldn't have much of a comic. In "Misunderstanding Markup," I had the narrator (writer Jeremy Keith) coming back from a shopping trip. The food made a nice metaphor to visually play off when drawing (Figure 4.14).

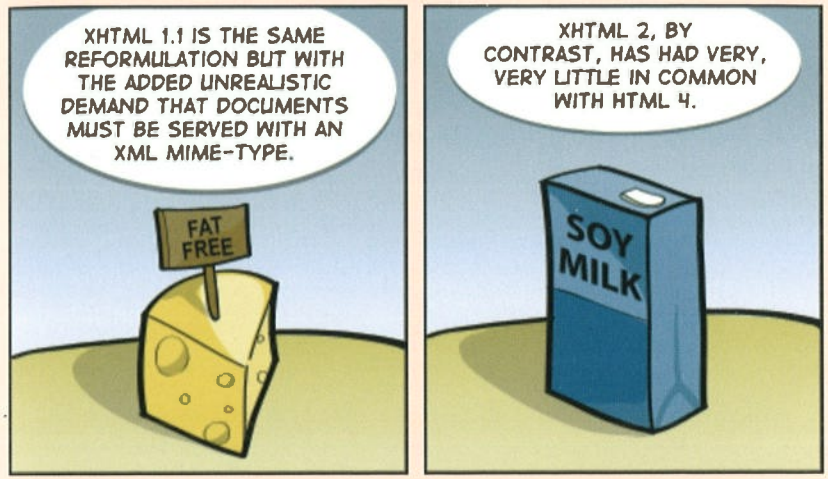


FIGURE 4.14
Using grocery items as a theme for the comic.

5. **Illustrating.** Once all the content is in place and makes sense, I can move forward with the fun part, drawing.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced you to the four steps of creating a comic: deciding what your comic is about, writing the story, laying out the comic, and then drawing the comic. We started on our example comic for the mobile payments start-up, Square, and will continue to build the comic through the next few chapters.

The first step in creating a comic is deciding what you want the comic to be about. You can break down that question into four components to be answered separately:

1. Define the goals of your comic.
2. Decide on the length of your comic.
3. Identify the audience for your comic.
4. Select a representative use case.

Once you've determined the answer to each of these components, you can then start scripting the comic and creating the story!