CHAPTER 5

Writing the Story

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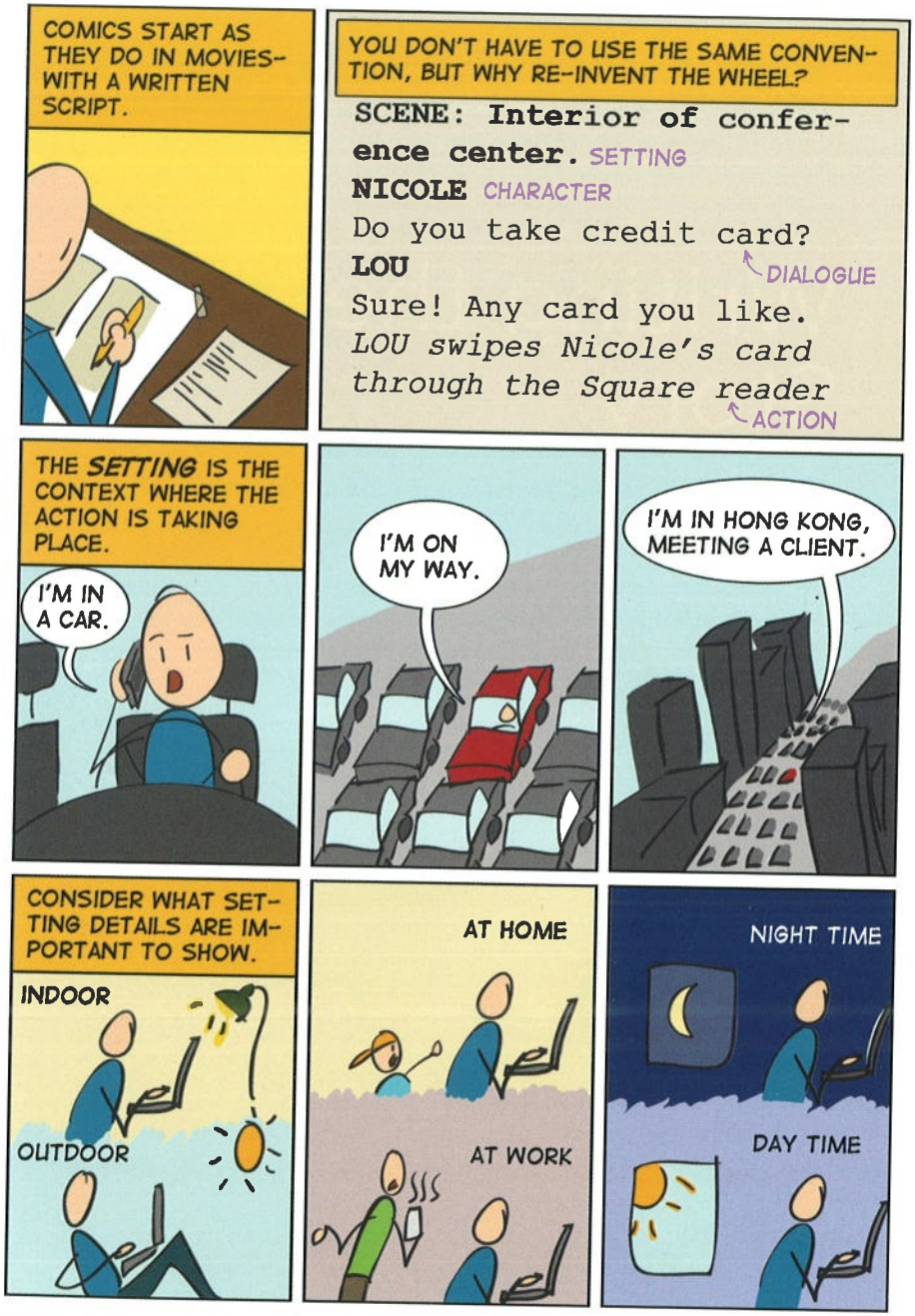
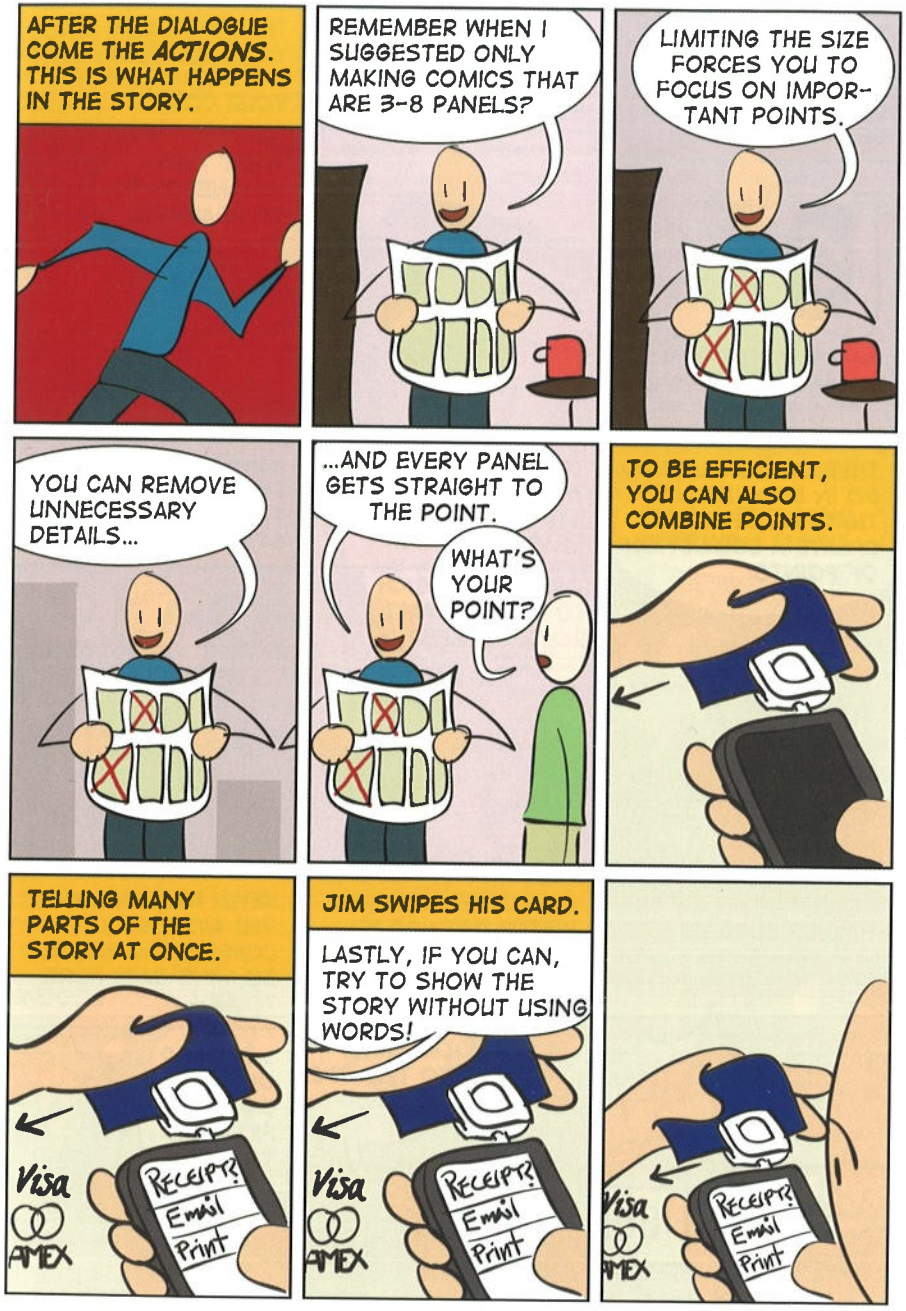

COMICS START AS THEY DO IN MOVIES- WITH A WRITTEN SCRIPT.
YOU DON'T HAVE TO USE THE SAME CONVENTION, BUT WHY RE-INVENT THE WHEEL?
SCENE: Interior of conference center. SETTING
NICOLE CHARACTER
Do you take credit card?
LOU
DIALOGUE
Sure! Any card you like.
LOU swipes Nicole's card through the Square reader
ACTION
THE SETTING IS THE CONTEXT WHERE THE ACTION IS TAKING PLACE.
I'M IN A CAR.
I'M ON MY WAY.
I'M IN HONG KONG, MEETING A CLIENT.
CONSIDER WHAT SETTING DETAILS ARE IMPORTANT TO SHOW.
INDOOR
OUTDOOR
AT HOME
AT WORK
NIGHT TIME
DAY TIME


THE CHARACTERS IN YOUR COMIC SHOULD BE BASED ON EXISTING OR INTENDED USERS OF YOUR PRODUCT.
Mark
Age: 35-45
Industry: Internet
Likes independent bands and flannel. Has a tendency to
YOU SHOULD KNOW WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE FROM INTERVIEWS OR OTHER RESEARCH.
AGE
THE DIALOGUE OF YOUR CHARACTERS IS A CRUCIAL ELEMENT IN YOUR COMIC.
WHAT THEY SAY NEEDS TO BE REALISTIC.
THERE IS SO MUCH TO DO IN DOWNIEVILLE THAT I WILL HAVE TO CREATE A COLLECTION OF POINTS!
TRY TO AVOID "GEE WHIZ!" DIALOGUE AND STAY TRUE TO THE CHARACTERS.
THERE'S SO MUCH TO DO! HOW AM I GOING TO KEEP TRACK?!
HOW THE DIALOGUE IS DISPLAYED MATTERS, TOO. FROM THE STYLE OF THE TYPE...
POW
SMASH
I AM A ROBOT
TO THE STYLE OF THE SPEECH BUBBLES.
pssst
HEY
scary
1010
ONE OTHER THING TO WATCH OUT FOR IS THE OVERUSE OF CAPTIONS.
TRY TO USE DIALOGUE TO TELL THE STORY...
KEVIN WENT HOME, HAD A CUP OF COFFEE, AND WALKED 20 MINS BACK HERE TO SAY...
...INSTEAD OF THE CAPTIONS FILLING IN TOO MUCH.



After deciding what your comic is about, the second step in the comic creation process is to write out the story (see Figure 5.1). This part of the process still doesn't involve much, if any, drawing. The focus is on telling the story, with an understanding that it will eventually be told in comic form.

FIGURE 5.1
Writing the story.

Effective storytelling, whether in prose, movies, or comics, is a skill of its own. There are many resources on the topic. Whitney Quesenbery's and Kevin Brook's book *Storytelling for User Experience* may be a good companion resource to read. Within this chapter, we'll focus on how to plan and document a story to make it easier to draw the comic later.

At eBay, designers Shailesh Shilwant and Deb Aoki use comics and drawing extensively to communicate their ideas. They liken the technique to watching a movie:

> "When you are watching a movie, you hopefully watch it all at once. When you're making a movie, you never see it all at once. You're making it in 15 different parts."
>
> —Shailesh

> "When you have a full storyboard, you can see the full story arc so you can see where it's really slow or where you can cut out a scene instead of focusing on specific areas like how big to make an explosion."
>
> —Deb

Instead of focusing on the minutiae of specific features, you can use comics to help people see the whole story in one arc up front. So how do you write that story down? How do you describe a comic in words?

A Crash Course in Scriptwriting

The movie analogy that Shailesh and Deb used to describe comics is actually incredibly apt. Much like movies, many comic writers also write out their story beforehand by using similar scripting conventions comparable to movie scriptwriters. For example, let's take a look at the script for *Romeo and Juliet* from the most celebrated scriptwriter, William Shakespeare.

> **SCENE: A churchyard; in it a tomb belonging to the Capulets.**
>
> **PARIS**
>
> I do defy thy conjurations,
>
> And apprehend thee for a felon here.
>
> **ROMEO**
>
> Wilt thou provoke me? Then have at thee, boy!
>
> *They fight*
>
> **PAGE**
>
> O Lord, they fight! I will go call the watch.
>
> *Exit*
>
> **PARIS**
>
> O, I am slain!
>
> *Falls*
>
> If thou be merciful,
>
> Open the tomb, lay me with Juliet.
>
> *Dies*

The script is composed of four primary elements, which are specially formatted:

- **Setting** of the scene is defined up front, often in bold. It describes the time of day, the location, whether it's indoors or outdoors, and if necessary, even the city or country. The setting may also include what's going on in the background.
- **Characters** are usually defined in all caps and bolded. They're also used as titles to indicate who is speaking.
- **Dialogue** is what is being spoken, and it follows the character. Dialogue is typically printed in regular type.
- **Actions**, often taken by the characters, are usually in italics.

While not all writers use this convention for comics, it is one that suits our needs very well. Each of the elements in a script (setting, characters, dialogue, actions) needs to be considered carefully when you're writing your story.

Setting

The setting is the context where the action is taking place. This seems simple and obvious enough at first glance but when considered carefully, it's actually a very contextual piece of information. For example, imagine if somebody called you right now and asked, "Where are you?" How would you answer? It would depend on who was asking, when they were asking, and where the other person was.

When I was traveling frequently for work and it was known that I was often out of town, the answer might have been "San Francisco" to many of my friends. For a person who was local, the answer could have been a general "at work," comment, but if it was a colleague calling, then the answer would have been something much more specific such as "in conference room B."

In fact, the location alone may not be sufficient in a setting. I've been talking about setting as though it's only a place, but there's much more to context. Let's say I was in a car when someone called and asked, "Where are you?" Here are some answers I could give:

- "In a car" (somewhat useful but it doesn't describe much).
- "In a black Subaru" (might be completely unnecessary detail or might be incredibly useful if the person is on the lookout for your car).
- "On my way" (has similar utility to "in a car" in that it conveys you are in motion but not much else).
- "Almost there" (much more useful information, even though it's quite vague).
- "At 4th and Main" (more precise and useful, although not necessarily indicating whether you're staying there or not).

See how many ways you can establish a setting? Remember that who your audience is, how much they know, and how much you need them to know, all dictate how much information you need to include in the setting. Ask yourself these questions when you're determining the setting, but in addition to simply answering them, also answer "Is it important to state the following details?"

- Is it indoors or outdoors?
- Is it a place of work? Home? Other?
- What kind of building is it (for example, hospital, skyscraper, conference)?

- What city/country is it in?
- What time of day is it?
- What is the weather?
- What else is happening?

Let's sketch out a few of the Square scenarios we discussed in Chapter 4, "What's Your Comic About?" I talked about using a Square credit card reader at a local coffee shop, at a food cart vendor, or at a craigslist sale. So what happens if you don't take the time to establish a setting? Potentially, you could jump right into someone making a transaction with the Square device (see Figure 5.2).

However, without establishing a setting, you only know that a sale has taken place. For some scenarios, this might be perfectly sufficient, but it seems as if the story would be improved with some additional context. If you're creative with the way you build the comic, you could even show the setting without adding an additional panel. Let's change the comic to show a coffee shop as the setting (see Figure 5.3).

FIGURE 5.2
No setting established.

FIGURE 5.3
Coffee shop as setting.

With this simple change to the first panel, you've helped establish the setting without losing anything from the story. By the way, an opening panel like this is referred to as an *establishing shot* because it establishes the setting. In addition to using an establishing shot, you can also use another trick. Instead of adding a panel to show the merchant and customer conversing, you can implicitly associate the dialogue in the first panel. Although strictly speaking it might look like the building is talking, the reader can easily parse the real meaning if you make sure to continue the dialogue in the next panel. I'll talk more about this later in the chapter.

Showing the coffee shop from the outside is a very simple way of establishing the setting, but there are actually a lot of different ways you can accomplish the same thing. You can show the interior of the coffee shop from above, you can show a close-up of something representative of the setting, or you can even show a logo or sign that indicates the setting (see Figure 5.4).

FIGURE 5.4
Different ways to show a setting.

For each of these, you would describe the scenes differently in the script. Here are the four ways I've shown a coffee shop written in script form.

1. SCENE: Exterior of the coffee shop, full view of the shop.
2. SCENE: Interior of coffee shop, view from above.
3. SCENE: Close-up of a cup of coffee being served.
4. SCENE: Close-up of the coffee shop logo on a coffee cup.

All of them are effective and accomplish the goal of setting sufficient context. This is a great example of a case where there are many right answers. What method you choose to establish a setting can often be broken down to stylistic preferences. Experiment with different ways and see what you like.

A coffee shop works pretty well as a setting, but it doesn't quite highlight the strength of the product. You want to show that this product could be used *anywhere* and by *any business*, large or small. Instead of a coffee shop, you could explore more mobile settings, such as a food cart, shown in Figure 5.5. For that scenario, you might want to focus on the fact that it's a small business—tiny even—and you can establish this by showing the whole scene at once.

FIGURE 5.5
Food cart as setting.

To emphasize the size (or lack thereof), in this case, I focused on showing not only the merchant but also the environment around the cart. Showing other objects and people in the scene helps the reader get a sense of the scale. The mobile aspect is also highlighted by putting the food cart outdoors. The time of day, the specific intersection or park, and even the goods being sold aren't crucial to getting the point across.

Characters

Once you have a setting established, you can start to define the characters that will live in the setting. Several different types of characters that might exist in your story include the following:

- Characters that represent the people with the problem you're solving (the target audience).
- Characters that interact with the target audience.
- Objects or locations that play a significant role as a character (often the solution).

For the most part, you probably have an idea who these characters are already. Many companies will have marketing teams that research the market segmentation and demographics of your customers. User experience teams will often put together fictional personas that represent typical customer archetypes. These personas are chock-full of details not only about the age and gender of the person but also the habits and problems they typically run into.

If you don't have this sort of data available to you, I definitely recommend you spend some time doing some basic interviews of your potential market.

Your comic is a proposal. Basically, it's a story that explains how a product or service you're offering solves a problem for a specific kind of person. In order to use the comic to validate the idea, you'll need to know who to show the comic to!

As you decide on who your characters are and what they look like, remember that one of the advantages of comics is the ability to abstract the details of the characters. For example, if you're proposing a service that appeals to males 13–35 years old, you don't need to draw someone who is obviously one age or the other. A stick figure will often suffice.

For my Square example, I have three characters that are important: the merchant selling the goods, the buyer, and the Square reader.

Dialogue

I've talked about how comics are a unique juxtaposition of words and images. The dialogue in a comic represents a significant part of the "words" portion of comics. But is the dialogue anything more than words in speech bubbles, as represented in Figure 5.6?

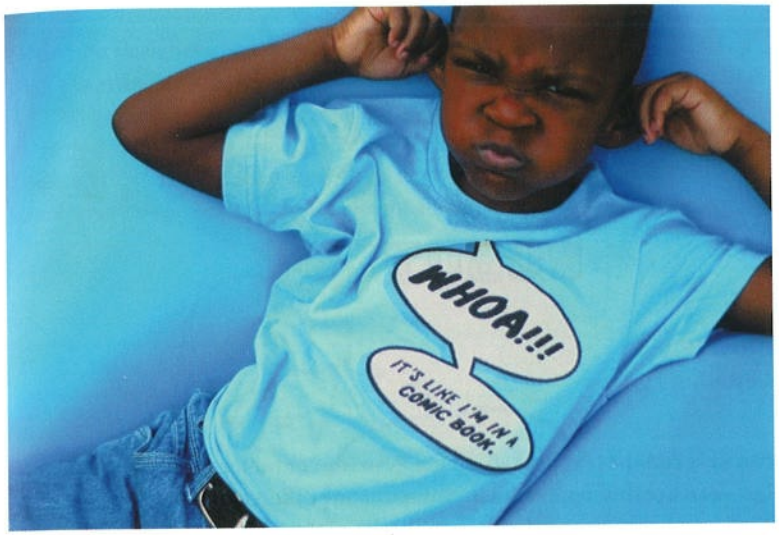


FIGURE 5.6
Whoa!!!

Although most people will associate the imagery as the primary component of comics, the use of words in comics is just as much an art form—so much so that mainstream comics will often have a dedicated writer as well as a letterer—someone whose sole job is to write the words on the comic.

Even in the whimsical t-shirt above, there are a number of elements beyond the words, "Whoa!!! It's like I'm in a comic book."

The sizes of the words are varied to change the emphasis. Sure, there are three exclamation marks to really drive home the expression, but it's the size that really matters here.

The "Whoa!!!" is also placed in its own speech bubble, giving it additional emphasis but also setting up a pause. Earlier, I mentioned how comics can show the passage of time in very unique ways. One such method is with the placement and number of speech bubbles.

Finally, the words "comic book" are **bolded** to also show emphasis within the second speech bubble—but less emphasis than the oversized "Whoa!!!"

If you read superhero comic books such as *The Incredible Hulk*, you'll start to notice how each word is carefully crafted as though it were a piece of art in and of itself. In particular, action comics will use words as artistic sound effects represented through their lettering style (see Figure 5.7).

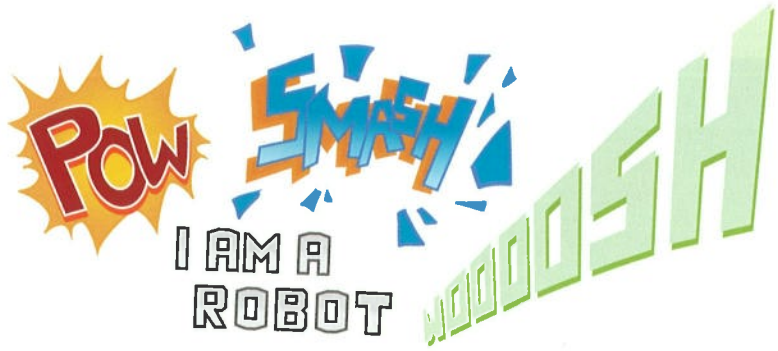


FIGURE 5.7
Lettering styles.

Not only can the text be stylized but even the container—the speech bubble—can use different styles to communicate different levels of emphasis. You're probably already familiar with a lot of the conventions without even realizing it. For example, a burst instead of a bubble often represents a loud noise or a yell. This convention is frequently used in supermarkets and other stores where you will see a "NEW!" or "SALE!" sign encapsulated.

Slightly less prevalent is the use of dotted lines to represent a whisper. A wavy, squiggly line might be used to convey something spooky and ethereal. A rigid, rectangular bubble may represent a robotic or computerized voice. Much like the font choices, the shape of the speech bubble can tell us a lot (see Figure 5.8).

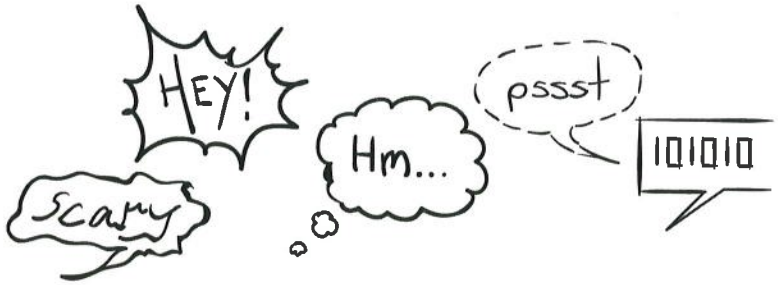


FIGURE 5.8
Different speech bubbles can give different meaning.

Choosing Your Words Carefully

Of course, the visual style of the words and bubbles means little if the content isn't chosen carefully. Writing the dialogue can be the trickiest part of creating a believable and engaging comic. Before I talk about some guidelines, let's return to the Chapter 1, "Comics?!" example from Yahoo! When our team was creating this comic, we created a number of different characters, each with its own story.

One of our designers, Shane Kibble, created a character named George. In George's story, he was planning a trip and wanted to use our new features to create a personal map. For George, the ability to create his own paths and mark points of interest seemed like a great way to plan a backpacking trip. The feature was called *map annotations* and in the comic, there was one panel where George made the statement shown in Figure 5.9.

FIGURE 5.9
This is George.

We showed this comic, as well as the two other ones we made, to prospective users of the yet-to-be-built product. Our hope was to get a feeling of whether this was a problem that resonated with them. When we showed George's comic, these were some of the comments we received:

"His girlfriend must be really mad at him for him to go through all this trouble."

"This guy has no life."

"Wow! This guy is really anal."

It became clear that the language in this particular panel wasn't realistic, so we changed it to something with less jargon...but not before our poor fictional friend George was dubbed by the team as "Anal George."

Our lesson from that experience was to make sure that we used language that was fitting to the characters being portrayed. When you are trying to create a fictional story around a corporate message, it's very easy to forget to check the marketing messaging at the door.

It's also very easy to fall into the trap of being overly enthusiastic. Remember those radio advertisements where two people were talking to each other? For example:

ROGER

"Hi, Jenny! What're you doing?"

JENNY

"Oh, I'm just looking at the classifieds trying to find a new place to live. My current place is *horrible*, but it's *so hard* to find anything."

ROGER

"Have you tried *craigslist*?"

JENNY

"No! What's that?"

ROGER

"It's a website where people post places for rent!"

JENNY

"WOW! Look at this. With *craigslist*, I'll have a new apartment in no time!"

Despite being a completely fictional advertisement, just imagining this conversation coming up on the radio makes me shudder. I think people are very attuned to spotting what is and isn't genuine. Most of us are not actors, but we can spot bad acting. Similarly with the comic you write, it's very obvious when the dialogue is "Gee whiz! Isn't this a great product!" contrived to show off the product, as opposed to a believable story. There's no magical formula to ensure that your comic sounds realistic, but if you're building something that truly solves a problem, it shouldn't be too difficult. If you do find it difficult to create a story that isn't contrived, it might be a sign that the product itself isn't solving a realistic need!

Captions

So far, I've primarily talked about dialogue as it refers to the words within speech bubbles. Another important content piece is what's referred to as the *captions* in comics. Captions are frequently at the top or bottom of the panel and usually serve as some sort of narrative. You can see some example captions in Figure 5.10.

FIGURE 5.10
Examples of captions.

You can use captions to convey any information you want. They can be used to communicate time ("two hours later"), setting ("in a galaxy, far, far away"), action ("George studied the book in more detail"), or even dialogue ("George asked the man to stop"). Although you typically use speech bubbles to indicate dialogue, sometimes you may want to change perspectives so that the character is out of view. By keeping the dialogue in the caption, the reader can infer that it's still the same person talking, as shown in Figure 5.11.

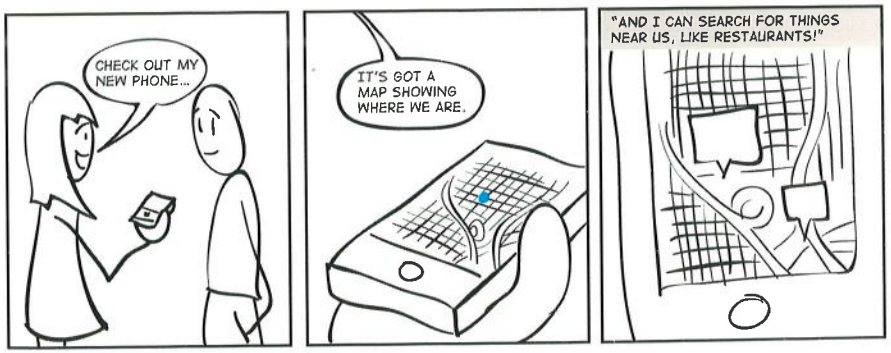


FIGURE 5.11
Using (a) off-panel speech bubbles and (b) captions to continue dialogue.

In this example, the character is talking about her phone. The first panel establishes who is speaking and the context. In the second panel, you can see the phone close up but not the character. You can still use speech bubbles here, with the origin pointing off-panel to show it's still the same person speaking. Finally, in the last panel, you see a full view of the phone, and there is no room for anything else. Here, you might want to use the caption to show that the character is still speaking.

A few cues, such as the ellipsis from the previous panel and the quotation marks around the caption, help the reader connect this to the dialogue. You could actually use the caption to show dialogue in all three panels.

Because captions are so flexible, they are also the easiest element to abuse. When people show me the comics they've created for their organizations, the most common problem I see is an abuse of captions. Those poor, poor captions! So much is asked of them. Like in this story by Frank Ramirez, shown in Figure 5.12.

FIGURE 5.12
So many captions!

Ramirez's comic does a good job of showing what this CD conversion service does, and it's certainly more interesting than marketing copy. However, it could be even better!

This story is essentially told entirely through the captions. If you look at Step 4, Megan is completing a purchase, signing up for an account, and even dropping an envelope off in the mail. That's a lot of steps that aren't represented by the art.

Could the story have been told instead through pictures and spoken dialogue? Why not just have Megan talk about her CD collection? How many of the words used in the captions could be illustrated or spoken instead?

The Story Is All Around You

Karl Dotter is a UX cartoonist. He founded ToastCo Labs to help companies visually explain how they work and why they matter. Here, Karl explains how you can generate characters and start forming stories without even writing a script.

At ToastCo we tell the best start-up stories. Working with Bolt Peters, we focused on crafting a story that included real motivations and desires that a researcher might have. These real-life ingredients help make the characters and story relatable to the reader. Sometimes a client has a great vision or script that they come to the table with, like Gerald the Researcher, a character Bolt Peters and ToastCo created for an animation describing their UX Research product, Ethnio.com. At the core of a good product, business, or comic is a human story. This story usually involves the daily pleasures and pains we can relate to in our lives. With Gerald, it was a very specific type of pain. Gerald was frustrated with the type of results he was getting with his research lab and so the visuals of Gerald wishing he was a hero of UX research matched his motivations, dreams, and desires. How realistic are the characters, locations, and actions in your story? Try focusing on these three aspects of the story and make them authentic so that readers can feel an "I relate to that" connection with the story.

Let's say you have that scribbled scenario and a character in mind. How would you do the storytelling part without ever using a script? Tom Hart, a former instructor at New York's School of Visual Arts, now at his own school, SAW, SequentialArtistsWorkshop.org, teaches cartooning to undergrads. He has a very simple process for collecting and generating story ideas. He first collects and writes down characters, locations, and actions on 3 x 5 index cards and puts them in an organized box. When he's ready to create a new story, he'll pick a character type, a location type, and an action type. This is a great method to create an instant story. I practice a similar technique by writing dialogue notes on one side of an index card and drawing a thumbnail of the scene or action on the other side. Very quickly you can start to organize a collection of these index cards into what can later become a storyboard or comic (Figure 5.13).

FIGURE 5.13
Collecting and generating story ideas.

You can be a good storyteller. As you begin to practice creating and experimenting with characters, contexts and motivations, remember that there are stories all around you. Just the act of opening your eyes and ears and observing your surroundings is enough to start a great story.

Perhaps the defense of such lengthy captions is that it would be too cumbersome to draw a panel just to show Megan dropping off an envelope. I would suggest that this is precisely why you shouldn't rely on captions to carry a narrative.

By attempting to capture the story fully within the art and the dialogue, you force the question, "Do you want to spend time drawing this? Maybe it's not an important part of the story." The time and effort required to draw the extra panel can force you to focus on what information is truly important to convey. It may also force you to think about how much work you're putting the user through. If it's easier to not draw Megan with an envelope, think how much work it is for her to leave the house to actually physically do it!

Remember: *Don't use captions as a crutch* to add unnecessary information and always try to *speak from the character's voice.* The less you use narration and the more you embrace constraints, the more efficient your comic will be in doing its job.

How You Tell the Story

Constraints will force you to select a handful of core ideas and then find the most concise way to explain them. Another product that enforces constraints is Twitter because you're not allowed to have more than 140 characters in each message (or *Tweet*). When Twitter was first introduced, this limitation seemed like it would lead to inane messages about sandwiches, but as people became used to the medium, they started recognizing just how much could be said within 140 characters. I've found that my process for writing a Tweet and fitting it within the constraints is the same process I use to reduce my story to a comic.

When I write a Tweet, I first write exactly what I'm trying to say without any editing. Typically, this starts out longer than 140 characters. Through a few edits, I find that the character limit forces me to think about what the truly important and salient points are that I'm trying to make. This process I use for editing my Tweets is the same process you can use to edit your story and reduce it to its core.

Here's an example of a Tweet I was trying to write. I was visiting Lisbon for a conference and noticed that in many restrooms, very detailed, diagrammed instructions were posted on how to wash your hands. Why were such posters necessary? Was there a widespread problem with the technique in hand washing? Was it simply supplied by the government instead of "employees must wash their hands"? I had no idea. So I wrote this Tweet shown in Figure 5.14.

To be clear, I wasn't actually troubled by these signs. They're good reminders, and it's probably accurate to say that many people *don't* wash their hands thoroughly enough, but it was a message meant in jest. The Tweet is 151 characters so it's over the limit. Let's take a few different approaches to edit down the contents of the Tweet and compare that to how you might apply it to your comic story.

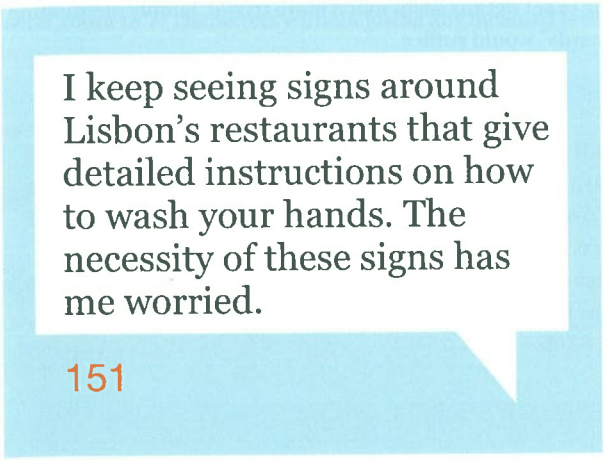


FIGURE 5.14
Initial Tweet.

Remove Unnecessary Details

The first thing you can do is remove descriptions, adjectives, and other notes that aren't important to the Tweet. The signage isn't exclusive to restaurants and even if it were, that point isn't important for this message. Nor is it important to specify "your" hands—only that there are signs for how to wash hands. These edits bring the Tweet down to 132 characters (Figure 5.15).

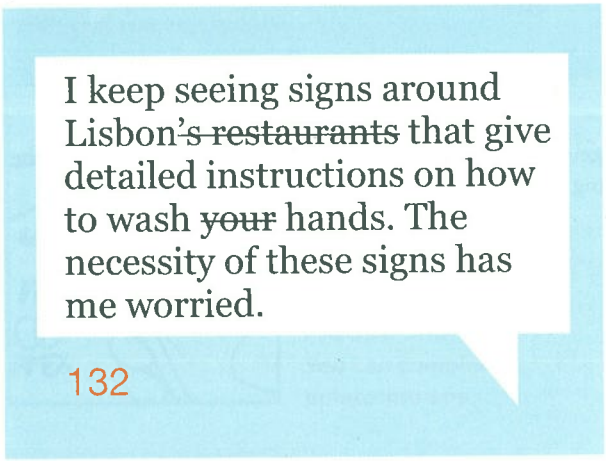


FIGURE 5.15
Remove unnecessary details.

The same can be applied to your comic story. The Square product accepts all major credit cards, including the usually less supported Discover and American Express cards. That could be considered a feature worth mentioning, but put into the context of a story about a credit card processing system that fits in your pocket, the exact details seem much more trivial. Simply mentioning "all major credit cards" would suffice.

Be Direct

So 132 characters is not bad, and it fits within the 140-character limit, but I thought I could do a lot better. Let's listen to our high school English teachers (or Microsoft Word) and switch out some of the sentence structure and use the active voice. I'll use "giving" instead of "that give," "hand washing instructions" instead of "instructions on how to wash hands," and "worries me" instead of "has me worried." And just like that, I have a 98-character Tweet (see Figure 5.16)!

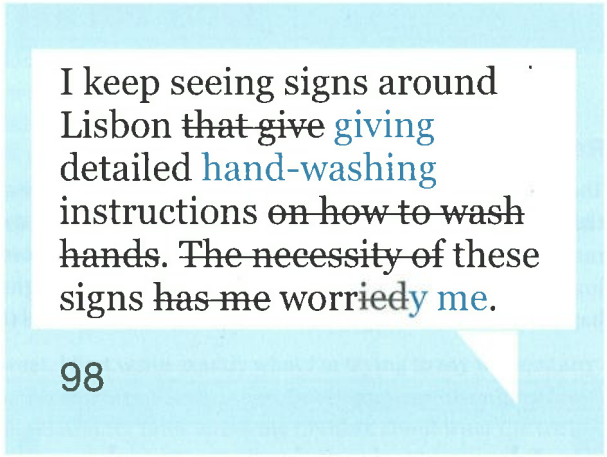


FIGURE 5.16
Using the active voice solves the problem.

It's important to get right to the point in your comic, too. No panel should be wasted on anything other than conveying the use case for your product.

Combine Points

I'm doing pretty well now with the Tweet because 98 characters *are* concise and direct. Yet I think I can reduce the size even further by combining the two sentences. They're highly related, so why separate them? This brings the character count to 77 characters without losing any meaning (see Figure 5.17)!

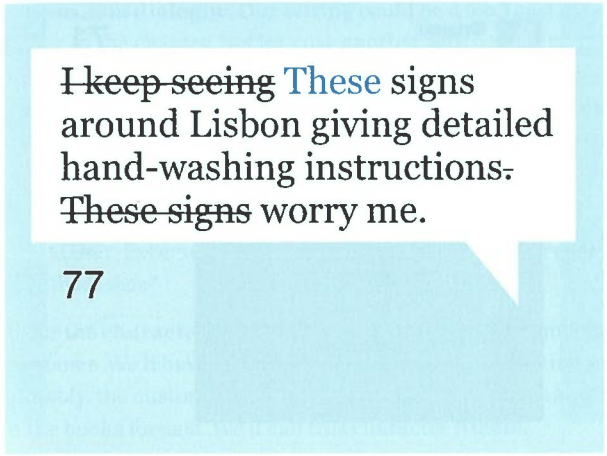


FIGURE 5.17
Combine points.

Combining points is one of the most powerful things you can do with comics. A panel does not equal a single feature or action; it's a scene in and of itself that includes a background, a foreground, actions, dialogue, and even passage of time. Let's say it was actually important to showcase the specific credit cards that Square accepts. You can show, in one panel, how Square is a mobile payment system, it works on a phone, and it accepts every major credit card (see Figure 5.18).

FIGURE 5.18
You can combine points into one.

Show Don't Tell

At 77 characters, I thought I'd done pretty well, but Russ Unger, a fellow speaker at the conference in Lisbon, made the same observation about the hand-washing signs and had this to say in Figure 5.19.

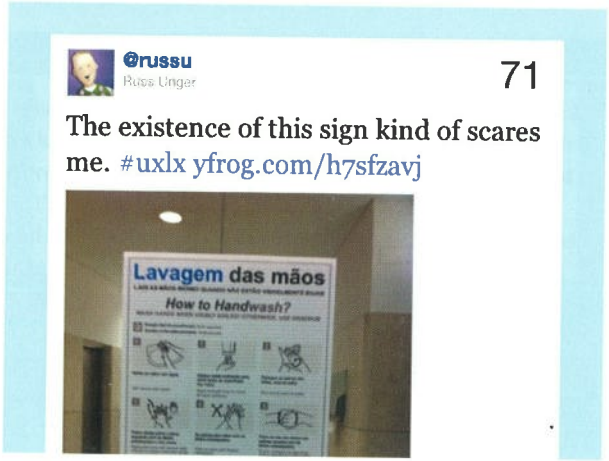


FIGURE 5.19
Russ Unger's Tweet.

Not only did he manage to include the identifier of the conference "#uxlx" (which stands for User Experience Lisbon), but even with that, he was able to keep his Tweet down to 71 characters! The reason is because he didn't describe the signs, but simply attached a photo of one.

Comics are illustrative, as well as descriptive. Wherever possible, you should try to show the reader the subject rather than talking about it. Instead of saying it accepts all major credit cards, you can show the four company logos. Instead of talking about how portable it is, you can simply show it in use on a phone. In fact, some comics do such an incredible job of illustrating the point, they barely even require words to accompany it.

Writing the Square Script

Now that we've explored how to create a script for a comic, let's revisit the essential features we want to highlight with Square and determine an appropriate script:

- Free App on iPhone, iPad, Android.
- Free card reader device that plugs into the mobile device's headphones jack.
- Accepts Visa, Mastercard, American Express, 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.

Remember the properties of a story we care about are **setting**, **characters**, **actions**, and **dialogue**. Our setting could be a food cart, like I illustrated earlier in the chapter, but let's use another setting that is equally mobile and perhaps more accessible to professionals. In the last chapter, we decided that the story would be in the context of a tradeshow or conference. The specific tradeshow doesn't matter. In fact, it would probably be better not to use a real tradeshow name because that would alienate those who don't recognize it. Thus, our **setting** will be generically "tradeshow."

```
SCENE: Exterior of a conference center. Sign reads "Annual
Tradeshow"
```

As for the **characters**, we have two we care about: the merchant and the customer. We'll have the merchant sell books and call that person **Lou**. Presumably, the customer is someone attending the tradeshow and interested in the books for sale. We'll call this character **Nicole**.

The only thing left to determine will be the actions and dialogue. The story we want to tell is one where a customer is buying books from this merchant and uses Square to pay for it. The setting already helps establish how the product allows someone to accept credit cards from anywhere.

One way to start is by showing Nicole browsing through the books and then asking to purchase them. But instead of showing Nicole browsing, why not skip straight to the payment? If we start with Lou asking for a payment, the reader will infer that Nicole is interested in buying the books, and we can tell the story more efficiently.

```
SCENE: Exterior of a conference center. Sign reads "Annual
Tradeshow"

LOU

That'll be $60 for the two books.
```

Notice that the scene is showing the exterior of the conference center so you can't actually *see* Lou yet. We're both establishing the setting and starting the dialogue of the story. Through the next panels, the reader will figure out who's talking from the context.

Once Lou asks for the payment, we want to highlight that any major credit card is accepted. We also want to show the reader what the device looks like and how small it is. To do this, we should show a close-up of the reader and the phone.

SCENE: Interior of conference center in front of a book cart. Lou is standing with Nicole, who's holding two books.

NICOLE

Do you take credit cards?

LOU

Sure! Any card you like.

LOU *swipes Nicole's card through the Square reader*

Notice how we used dialogue to illustrate how any card was accepted. Sometimes, we can simply talk about the features. An alternative approach would be to show the credit card logos, but in this case, showing would involve a lot of logos and a few words are more efficient.

After the card has been swiped, we can reinforce how portable the solution is by showing the customer signing her signature on the phone. Once again, we can use dialogue to supplement this with additional information. In this case, we highlight how the merchant Lou can send a receipt digitally.

LOU *hands the phone to* NICOLE

LOU

Just use your finger to sign your receipt, and I can text or email it to you.

The last piece is to show how the merchant can review sales from a Web interface. We'll show this by cutting to a different scene, Lou's office, and bridging the two panels with a simple caption.

SCENE: Interior of an office. Lou is sitting in front of his computer, which shows some charts from Square.

CAPTION

Later...

LOU

Let's see how many books I sold today.

And that's it! We can tell from reviewing the script whether we've covered all the major features. The script acts as a great foundation for the comic we're going to draw. You can imagine how a comic like this could be used either to explain the idea of Square before it was built or to explain the product to potential merchants afterward.

Collaborative Experience Storyboarding

Craighton Berman is a product designer, illustrator, and creative director whose practice focuses on using visual thinking to shape ideas. His design work is in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, and he contributes illustration work to Dwell, Details, and Core77. Craighton uses a process called Collaborative Experience Storyboarding, where he defines products and services with his clients by creating comics together.

What inspired you to try using comics?

I come from an industrial design background, where we are trained to rapidly visualize ideas for products. This skill is amazing for working through features and form, but often falls short in expressing broader experiences. In doing research on storytelling, we stumbled across a DVD-extra that revealed Pixar's unique collaborative approach to storyboarding. They treated movie storyboarding like a design process: brainstorming, critique, iteration, and a focus on getting all the details just right. The parallels to experience design are uncanny!

What's it like to create comics with your clients?

Typically, I use this process in a workshop setting where there might be a dozen clients with varied backgrounds. Despite the diversity of views, storyboarding becomes a common language for exploring ideas. Its flexibility allows it to be used in multiple ways: as a tool to think about the current experience of users, as a framework for brainstorming new ideas, and as a vehicle for shaping future experiences. This process lets them think broadly about opportunities, instead of generating a list of features. I've found that by having teams create storyboards together, it prompts decision-making and fosters clarity of a design vision.

How do you create the comics?

First, we identify a character and setting: who is this user and where does their experience take place? We try to make these as specific as possible and avoid generic marketing personas. We then try to tell this user's "current state" story: what is this experience like for them right now? We will collaboratively write this script on Post-It notes, with one piece of action per sticky (this allows everyone to contribute) and a small doodle of the scene.

Once completed, we can then visually analyze the experience to identify pain points or opportunities in the current experience. We will often tag these spots with small Post-Its, essentially creating a list of brainstorm-starters. Then we brainstorm dozens of ideas (visually) around each of these areas and then vote on our favorite ideas. The final challenge is to fit the best ideas back into the script. This forces everyone to make decisions on what the overall experience should be like, instead of ending with a laundry list of brainstorm ideas.

Once the teams are done, we pitch the comic to each other and critique the new experience, with the goal of providing feedback for iteration. All of this is done in a tight time limit of just a few hours—the power is in the iteration and experimentation. In the end, after a few days of this process, we've created dozens of scenarios for a new product or service. Each of these comics is essentially an "experience prototype," co-created with the team of people who will be deeply involved in implementing these ideas later, so everyone has a shared vision of what the experience should be like.

Summary

Before drawing comics, it can be helpful to define some elements of your story in words:

- The setting where the story is taking place.
- The characters (human or otherwise) involved in the story.
- The dialogue spoken between characters.
- The actions taking place in the story.

Once these elements are defined, you can organize them into a script similar in format to those used for movies or plays. The more detailed your script is, the easier it will be to create the comic (or give it to another person to create).

In addition to what the story is, you also need to consider how you're telling the story and whether you're telling it as efficiently as possible. You can combine multiple points into one panel, remove extraneous details, and focus on showing what's happening rather than telling in words. With some practice, you'll find that a lot of your story can be communicated with very few panels.