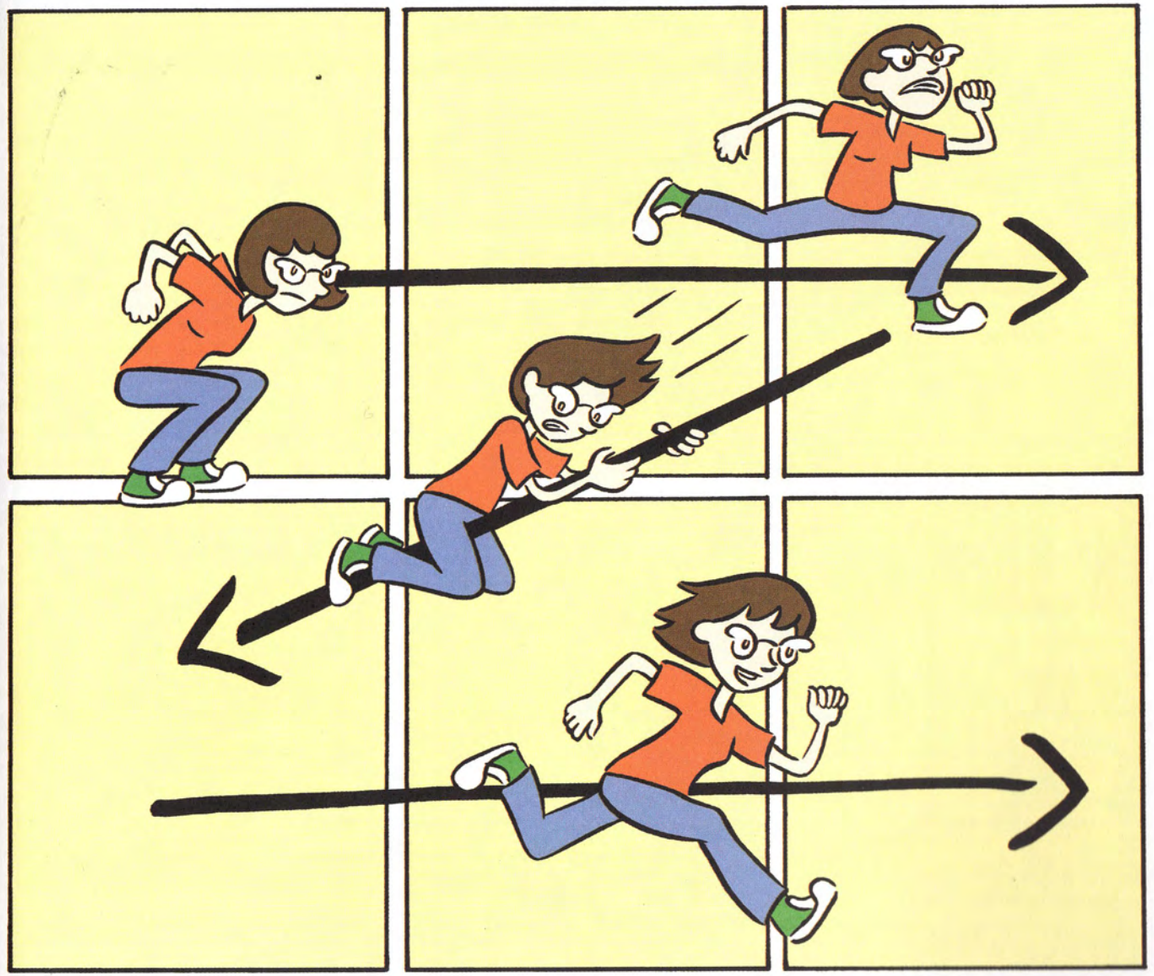
Page Building

UNIT 2

PAGE DESIGN—SOUNDS BORING, RIGHT? You're probably ready to start drawing comics already. But a basic understanding of the page is necessary if you want to make comics that work. The art of page building—how you place a panel within a tier, a tier within a page, and a page within a spread—is an essential part of cartooning. Through careful design you can set the tempo of your page and make certain moments magic. So dive right into Unit 2—page design isn't as boring as you might think.



LAB 9 Page-Building Basics

Materials

- kitchen timer
- paper
- pencil or pen

The comic book page is made up of a sequence of images. Each of these images is usually (though not always) contained within a rectangular border. This rectangular border, and the image within it, is what we call the panel. It is the most basic element of the comics page.

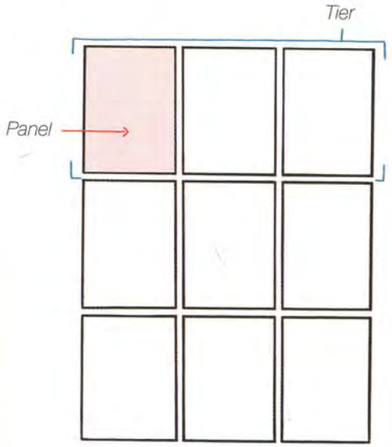
Panels are arranged into horizontal rows called tiers. Tiers have their own unique function on the comics page, which we will discuss in detail in Lab 15.

There are a few hard-and-fast rules to building a page of comics, and a lot of general guidelines—though both rules and guidelines are meant to be broken when there's due cause.

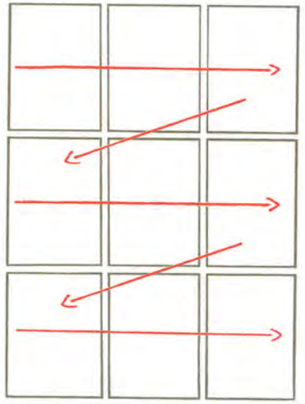
The rule of directional flow is one of those hard-and-fast rules. In most Western cultures we read comics the same way we read prose: left to right, top to bottom. If you're a fan of manga, or Japanese comics, you know that their comics (like their prose) read from right to left. Directional flow is not a rule you can break lightly. It can be jarring to read prose in one direction and images in another, and going against the grain may confuse your reader. So, for the purposes of this book, it's recommended that you go with the flow: left to right, top to bottom.

Tip

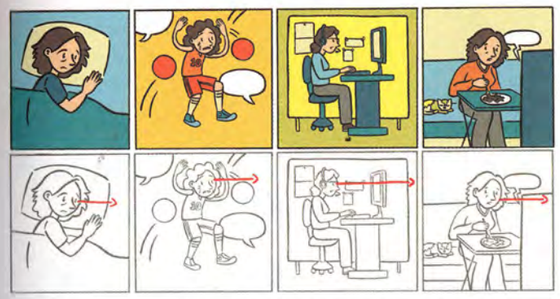
The rule of directional flow is not to be broken lightly. It can be jarring to read prose in one direction and images in another.



Most comic book pages are made up of panels and tiers.



The rule of directional flow: left to right, top to bottom



You should also maintain a left-to-right flow within your panels.

Not only should your panels be placed in a left-to-right sequence, but you must also maintain this flow *within* your panel borders. Your images themselves should reinforce the left-to-right movement. For example, if you draw a character walking, it's a good idea to have him walking to the right, not the left. Even still objects such as a face, a hand, or your character's eyes can benefit the reading flow if they're drawn pointing to the right.

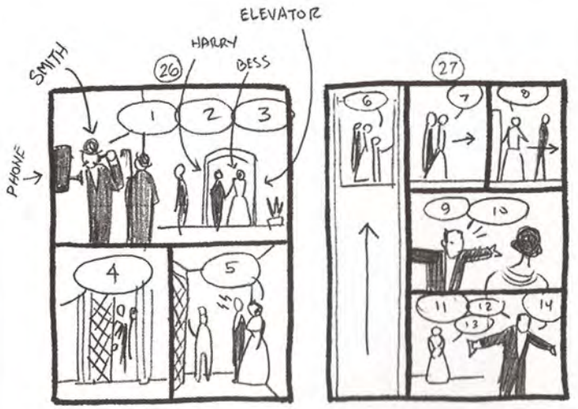
Word balloons also need to be positioned in a left-to-right sequence (more on lettering in Lab 34).

Of course, there are appropriate moments to break the left-to-right rule—perhaps you want to interrupt the reading flow slightly or maybe you want to suggest the idea of going backward.

There are a lot of things to keep in mind when you're building a page of comics. How do you keep them all straight? You need a good blueprint before you start drawing, and we call those blueprints thumbnails. Thumbnails are simple preliminary sketches of your pages. They allow you to work out your page design before you do any painstaking drawings. Thumbnails aren't meant be pretty—this process is all about visualizing information, not making art. Simple drawings or stick figures will do the trick.

Let's Go!

1. You are going to thumbnail a two-page retelling of a story we all know: Little Red Riding Hood. Feel free to interpret or abbreviate the story as you'd like. Set your timer for 2 minutes. Spend that time thinking about how you can fit the story into two pages. Feel free to take notes, but don't start drawing yet.
2. After your 2 minutes are up, take a piece of letter-size copy paper and fold it in half. Each half will be a page of thumbnails.
3. Set your timer for 10 minutes and start drawing. If after 5 minutes you haven't completed one page of thumbnails, you're probably making your drawings too elaborate.



These thumbnails were drawn by Jason Lutes for the graphic novel Houdini: The Handcuff King. *Jason handed off the thumbnails and a detailed script to Nick Bertozzi, who illustrated the book. In collaborative projects a lot can get lost in translation, but clear thumbnails go a long way toward visualizing the comic book that's inside your head.*

LAB 10 Page Size and Reduction

Materials

- T-square
- bristol board
- pen
- clear ruler
- proportion wheel (optional)

"Try to think of the comics page as a chunk of creative real estate. Everything from the panel borders to the gutters to the lettering style is fallow ground that can be cultivated for greater impact."

—Jon Chad

Traditionally, comic book pages measure 6⅔ × 10¼ inches (17 × 26 cm). If those numbers are hard to memorize, just remember 6 × 9 inches (15 × 23 cm). Comic art generally measures about that size on the printed page, though it's drawn a lot bigger than that. Why draw big? It's easier to create detailed work at a larger size, and your inking will look tighter once it's reduced.

Many professionals draw comics at 10 × 15 inches (25.4 × 38 cm), which is a larger ratio of 6 × 9 inches (15 × 23 cm). You can even buy pre-ruled bristol board pages at this size. You might find this size is too large for you, or maybe you want a comic page whose proportions won't fit in a 6 × 9-inch (15 × 23 cm) ratio. How do you pick the perfect size for your art?

Before you start drawing your comic page, ask yourself these questions:

What size will your printed comic book be?

If you're self-publishing, then you're likely using a photocopy machine with letter-, legal-, or tabloid-size paper (we'll go over this in detail in Lab 43). If you're having your book professionally printed, then your print shop can suggest several standard page sizes. It's a good idea to determine the size of your printed page before you start drawing.

How will you transfer your comic art to the printed page?

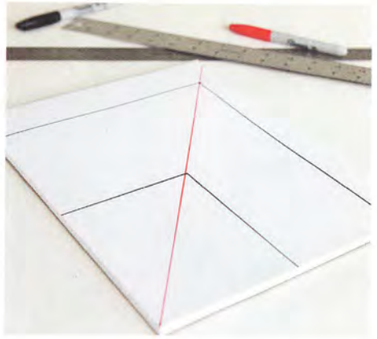
Most likely you will use either a scanner or a photocopier for this step, with a scanner offering more professional results. Most scanners have a maximum scan size of 8½ × 11 inches (21.6 × 28 cm). If you're working at larger size, you'll have to scan your page in sections. If you draw large, you may want to invest in an oversize scanner.

Most photocopiers can accommodate a maximum size of 11 × 17 inches (28 × 43 cm), though few can match the image quality of a scanner.

Let's Go!

1. Once you've determined the size of your printed page, rule out a box that exact size in the lower left-hand corner of a bristol page (this step will be easier if you use the bristol while it's still in the pad). Draw your box right on the edge of the bristol, so there are no margins on the left and lower sides (the left and bottom sides of your box are actually the sides of the paper). Use a T-square so the sides of your box are parallel and your corners are at a 90-degree angle.

2. Grab a transparent ruler or any other straightedge (your T-square will work here, too). Line up your ruler so it bisects both the lower left and the upper right corner of your box. Make a diagonal line between these points that extends to the edge of your paper.



3. Mark any point on that diagonal line. Using your T-square, make a horizontal line that intersects that point, and a vertical line that intersects it. You have now made a new box that is the same ratio as your first.

Tips of the Trade

A tool that is handy when determining reduction or enlargement, especially when using a photocopy machine, is the **proportion wheel**. Measure either the height or the width, whichever is the longest dimension, of your original art. Then take the same measurement of the printed page. On the inner wheel look for the number that matches the measurement of your original art. Turn the inner wheel until that number matches the measurement of your printed page on the outer wheel. In the window, you will see an arrow pointing to the percentage of reduction or enlargement.

LAB 11

Stick Figure Strips

Materials

- paper
- T-square
- pencil
- pen

It's easy to be enamored with drawing facility, but comic books are more than a sequence of pretty pictures. In comics, clarity is more important than draftsmanship. If your drawings have clarity, if the information they contain is clearly readable, then simple drawings will do the trick.

Cartoonist Matt Feazell studied art in college and is able to pull off a commercial style, but he found more satisfaction in drawing stick figures. He has been drawing stick figure comic strips starring Cynical Man and his friends for more than thirty years now!

Tips of the Trade

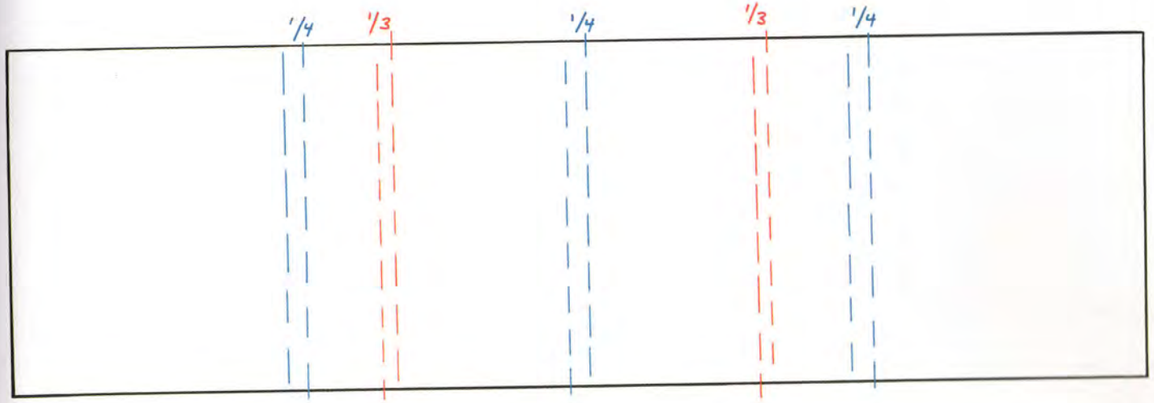
Comic strips are often drawn 13 inches (33 cm) wide and divided into three panels, making each of them 4⅓ inches (11 cm). But how do you measure a ⅓ inch (0.85 cm) when rulers are only marked with ¼ inch (6 mm), ⅛ inch (3 mm), and 1/16 inch (1.5 mm)? If you have a ruler marked with centimeters as well as inches, this is easy: ⅓ inch equals 0.85 cm. A centimeter is divided into 10 millimeters, so that's halfway between 8 mm and 9 mm. If you don't need to be exact, ⅓ inch is a little under the ⅜-inch (1 cm) mark on your ruler.

Let's Go!

The following exercise will prompt you to create a comic strip, like the comic strips you can find in your newspaper or online. Comic strips are different from comic books. The comic strip is an abbreviated and self-contained form. A story or joke must have a beginning, a middle, and an end in just two to four panels. By contrast, a comic book or graphic novel can stretch a story over any number of pages.

Most comic strips are drawn at about 4 × 13 inches (10 × 33 cm) and then shrunk for print. If you want to draw your strip at a larger or smaller size you can use Lab 10 (page 40) to find the proper ratio. You can also make a photocopy of the comic strip template below and enlarge it to a comfortable drawing size. Use a light box to transfer the template to your paper. Trace the dotted lines if you want to divide your strip into thirds or fourths.

1. You will draw a comic strip with a beginning, a middle, and an end—all in stick figures. In the first panel or two, set the stage: establish the setting, the characters, and the scenario. For example: a little girl is selling lemonade on a nice summer day.
2. In the middle panel add the "and then..." moment. Introduce something new to the strip that disrupts the balance in the previous panel(s). It could be something intangible, like a piece of dialogue or a sudden realization, or it could be something physical, like a character or an object. For example, a vampire suddenly appears at the lemonade stand.
3. In the final panel draw a reaction to the "and then..." moment. To give your strip a punch line, make that reaction counter to what we'd logically expect. Now, if our vampire had just said something we'd expect, such as, "I want to suck your blood," the reader would feel a little cheated by this ending. Playing with the reader's expectation is a big part of humor.



LAB 12 Repetition, Repetition, Repetition

Materials

- T-square
- paper
- pencil
- photocopy machine
- scissors
- glue stick
- pen

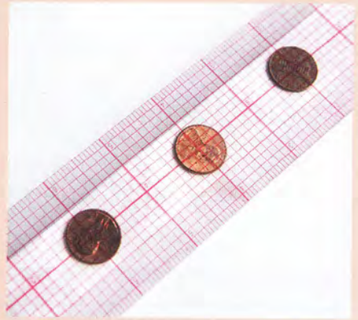
The shape, size, and number of panels on your page will change the character of your story. In this unit we'll look at many different ways to arrange your panels. But to start, let's use a simple page composition: a nine-panel grid. This kind of layout is what Ivan Brunetti calls the Democratic Grid—each panel is the same size, therefore they each have equal weight and presence on the page. Despite its rigid structure, the nine-panel grid is a fairly common page layout and it has been the foundation of many remarkable comics (Jaime Hernandez's *Flies on the Ceiling* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* are prime examples).

"A cartoonist is someone who does the same thing every day without repeating himself."

—Charles Schulz

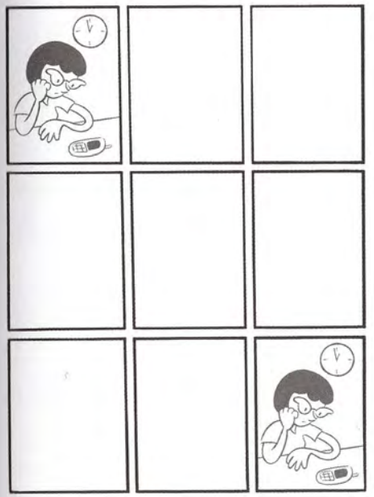
Tips of the Trade

It's easy to smear your ink when you're ruling out the panel border, especially if you're using a nib or technical pen. Keeping your ruler edge elevated off the paper helps; your ink won't bleed under the edge or smear when you move the ruler. You can purchase rulers with an inking edge or you can easily modify an ordinary ruler. Just tape a few pennies, evenly spaced, underneath your ruler.



Let's Go!

1. Using your T-square, make a grid of nine panels. Make your grid three tiers tall and your tiers three panels wide. Make all your panels the same size.
2. Measure one of your panels. On another piece of paper, draw a panel that exact size. In that panel draw an "in-between" moment—a low-action moment with no dialogue that can serve as a bridge between actions. For example: our character sits by the phone, waiting for a call.
3. Use a photocopy machine to make three copies of your blank grid.
4. Next, make at least nine copies of the panel you drew.
5. On one of your blank grids, cut and paste at least two panels somewhere in the grid. You can place them wherever you please, but consider options A, B, or C as shown below.
6. Fill in the blanks to build a story around your repeating panels.



A. *You can bring a story full circle by starting as you began.*

B. *A series of identical panels can stretch out a moment.*

C. *In a composition like this you can create two parallel sequences. The second sequence could occur in the past, or at the same time but in a different location. Or it could occur within the character's head.*

LAB 14 Panels and Pacing

Materials

- paper
- pencil or pen
- T-square

Each of these panels are the exact same size, making for a succinct and evenly paced tempo. If we play with the size and composition of our panels, we can stretch or shrink time to fit the story we're trying to tell.

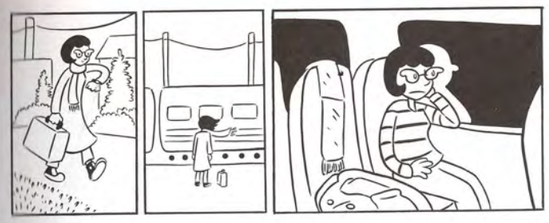
"In comics you see the drawing, you see words, you see rhythm, you see the story. It's a space where you can do any kind of work if you conceive it that way."

—Lorenzo Mattotti

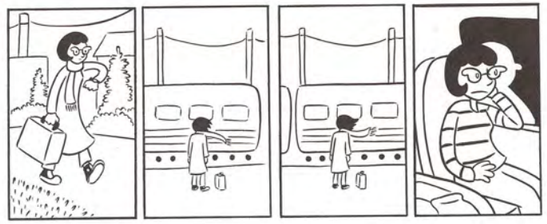
Let's Go!

Create a comics page with five panels or more, with these constraints:

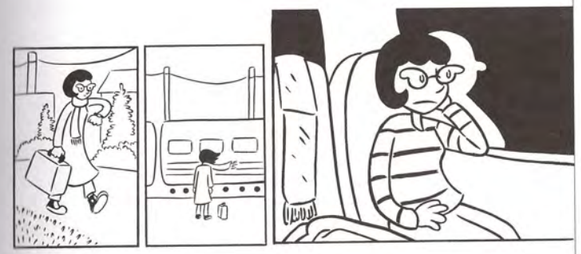
1. At least three panels should contain short moments.
2. One panel should contain a long moment.
3. Make one of the panels silent.



One way to create a longer pause in the reading experience is to draw certain panels bigger. A big panel tells the reader, "Look at this, this is important." It's not uncommon to create a panel that takes up a whole tier, or even a whole page (the latter is sometimes called a splash panel).



Repeating a panel will stretch a moment out. In some cases, this means copying and then pasting an identical panel onto your page (this works best when there is absolutely no change or movement in the panel). In other cases, you will have to redraw the panel, keeping the basic design but adding some small changes. This sort of panel repetition gives the comic a slow-motion effect.



You can even draw a panel so large that it's not contained within its border. An image that extends to the edge of a page is called a bleed. Bleeds are particularly useful when you want the reader to examine the environment you've drawn. Your world feels more open when it extends to the very edge of the paper.

Another way to make the reader linger on a panel is to make that panel silent. Text automatically imposes a certain reading pace on a panel (we read the text, we move on). A silent panel has a timeless quality that invites the reader to drink it in.

LAB 16 Cartoonists without Borders

Materials

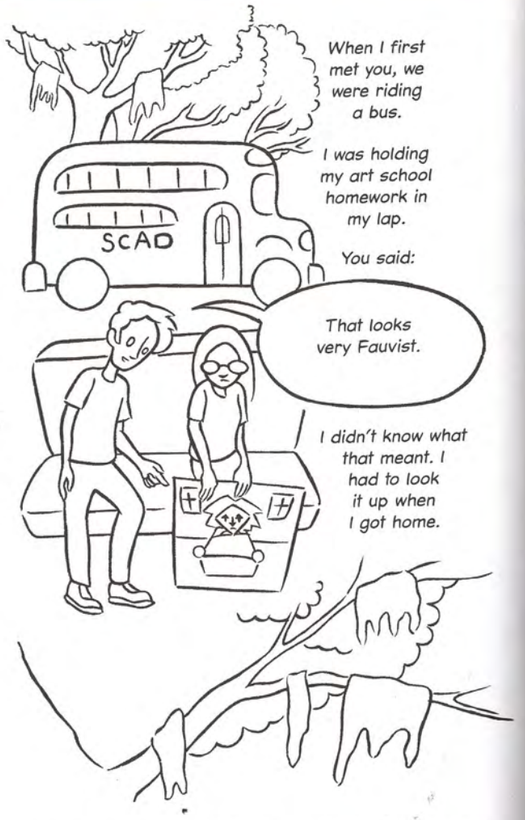
- paper
- pencil or pen

"Never put in a single line that isn't necessary ... If you have to stop and figure out a picture for about three minutes, then you've lost the thread of the story."

—C. C. Beck

Up to this point we've been using a lot of grids (nine-panel grids being a favorite of mine). A grid may offer the sort of structure you're looking for as a storyteller. It's a very accessible format—nearly any reader, even those new to comics, can digest and understand it. It also gives your comics a steady tempo (which is the right choice for some comics, but certainly not all).

The grid has its strengths, but you can tell clear and effective stories without it—and without panel borders, even!



I drew this comic without panel borders. Since I placed the text and images in a left to right, top to bottom composition, there is no confusion about reading order.

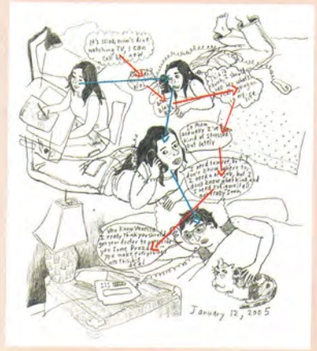
Let's Go!

1. Recall an ordinary exchange from your day: a conversation with a friend, a co-worker, or a family member.
2. Edit down a portion of that conversation to three to six panels.
3. Draw a one-page comic without panel borders. Draw your panels in a layered manner, so they are not distributed in a rigid grid design. Be sure to follow the rule of directional flow—left to right, top to bottom.
4. Show your comics to some friends. Are they able to read it without getting confused?

Tips of the Trade

You might think that without a grid or panel borders that a page of comics becomes an unreadable mess. But if you follow the rule of directional flow, your reader will know exactly where to look.

Vanessa's Davis's diary comics are often sketched in a layered fashion, without panel borders. Because the panels are arranged from left to right, top to bottom, the comics are very readable. The reader's eye will naturally follow a trail of repeated images and design elements. This repetition of faces and word balloons shows your reader the way to go.



LAB 17 Turn the Page

Materials

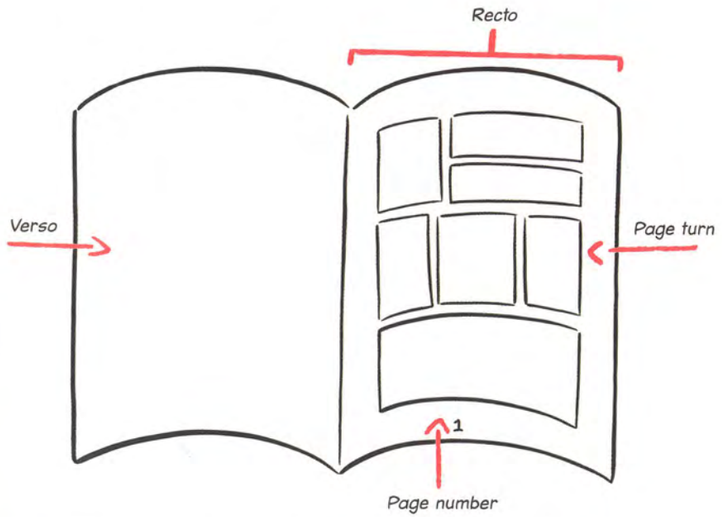
- letter-size copy paper
- pencil
- eraser

"I really need to be thinking more about spreads, not pages. The spread is the 'basic unit' of comics."

—Ben Towle

Up to this point, most of these exercises have considered the page as an independent unit. But this isn't how we read comics—not in the world of print, anyway. When bound into a book, a page is read as part of a two-page spread. It matters whether a page falls on the left-hand side (verso) or the right-hand side (recto). A verso page is read after one turns a page, and a recto page is read before. The act of turning a page plays an important part in pacing your comics.

The point at which we physically turn the page of a comic book is called, not surprisingly, a page turn. Placing a cliff-hanger moment at a page turn can enhance the drama of your story. The anticipation of the unknown and the physical action of turning the page can deliver a powerful payoff. Placing the "reveal" in the middle of your page may ruin the surprise.



A book, comic or otherwise, usually starts on a recto page. The recto pages are given odd page numbers, while the verso page has even.

Let's Go!

1. Fold a sheet of paper in half.
2. Choose one of the comics you've made in the previous labs. Reenvision it as a four-page sequence. You can stretch out time, or change and extend the original story.
3. Thumbnail two spreads, using the front and back of your paper. Make use of the page turn.

Tips of the Trade

When you thumbnail a comic—a long comic in particular—you'll need to create a system for recording where the page turns fall. Jason Lutes (see Lab 9) draws very small thumbnails in his sketchbook and underlines the page turns. James Sturm (see Lab 20) uses a binder with plastic sleeves, so he can easily see how the two-page spread will look and where the page turns will fall. Below, I adopted his method for a graphic novel project of my own.

A page turn from the first two pages of Berlin, by Jason Lutes. In this sequence, Jason does something very clever; the act of turning the page mimics the act of his character opening a door.

UNIT 3

Storytelling

SO YOU HAVE THE BASICS OF PAGE BUILDING DOWN, and now it's time to draw some stories. But where to start? My best advice: start small. Put that comics opus you've been dreaming about since you were thirteen on hold for a while. Any runner will tell you that starting a marathon without proper training is a recipe for disaster (many suggest a full year of training before your first race). Consider these labs as your training regime.

The following exercises are designed to jump-start your stories. A few of them have you starting from scratch, with little more than a memory, an image, or a bit of text to work from. And they don't require prior planning—in fact, planning would work against you. Instead, they call on your imagination, life experience, and ability to improvise to allow your story to grow organically. Don't overthink these exercises, and don't worry too much about whether your comics are "good." Treat these exercises as a form of play, and you'll create stories that will surprise you, ones you never thought you had in you.

LAB 18

Drawing without Stopping

Materials

- notebook paper
- kitchen timer
- pencil
- ruler
- pen
- bristol board

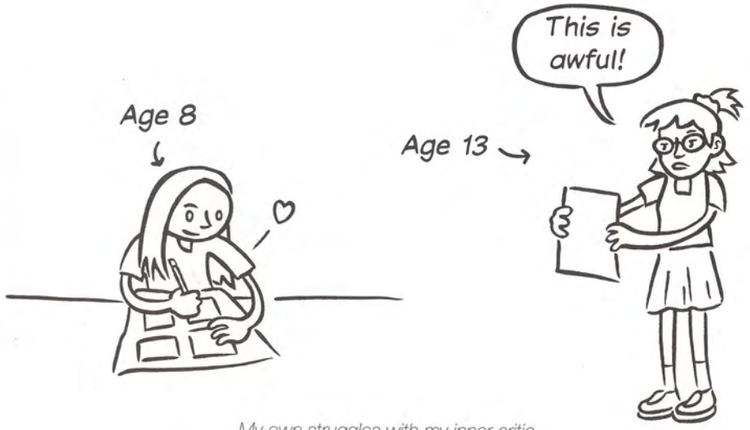
"Is this good? Does this suck? I'm not sure when these two questions became the only two questions I had about my work...I just know I'd stopped enjoying it and instead began to dread it."

—Lynda Barry

I don't know about you, but my worst critic has always been me. The desire to make "good" art can motivate, but there is a flip side—the fear of making "bad" art can immobilize, leaving you too afraid to make art at all.

There's another way to think about art making, one free of judgment, thinking, or planning. This is a playful sort of art making that's closer to the way children draw. You probably drew this way when you were younger—nearly everyone did. It was just for fun, without thinking about the final outcome. As we grow older, it's harder to hold on to this playfulness.

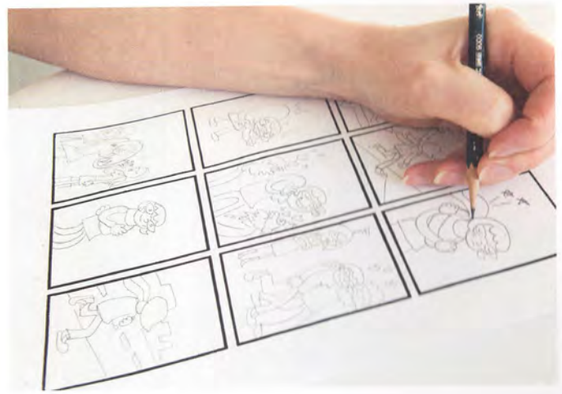
The following exercise was inspired by the teachings of Lynda Barry (who was inspired by the teachings of Marilyn Frasca). Lynda's book *What It Is* perfectly captures this struggle of making "good" art and offers several exercises that prompt students to create free of judgment.



My own struggles with my inner critic.

Let's Go!

1. Pick a time of day when your mind will be fresh, your body rested, and you won't be distracted. For me, this is in the morning, before going to work.
2. Grab your notebook paper and set your timer for 5 minutes. Write "I'm afraid of..." at the top of your paper. Underneath, make a list of things that scare you. Keep writing for 5 minutes, without stopping. If you can't think of anything, write the word *fear* until you have something, or doodle little shapes in the margins. The important thing is to keep your pencil moving.
3. Look at your list. Did anything surprise you? Pick a fear that you would feel comfortable exploring in words and pictures.
4. Create a nine-panel grid.
5. In your first panel, draw a moment when you might begin to feel the fear you picked. Start by drawing yourself, then fill in the blanks around you. Draw without stopping—always keep your pencil moving. Keep your drawings loose and sketchy. Don't erase. If you can't think of anything to draw next, trace some lines you've already made.
6. After that first panel, your story can move in any direction: reality, fantasy, or something in between. Keep drawing without stopping until you've filled your nine panels. Don't plan or think ahead, except for this: as you reach your ninth panel, try to give your page an ending that feels complete.
7. Put your comic away for a week, and don't look at it or read it. After a week, take a look. What do you think of the story you made?



LAB 19

Show OR Tell

Materials

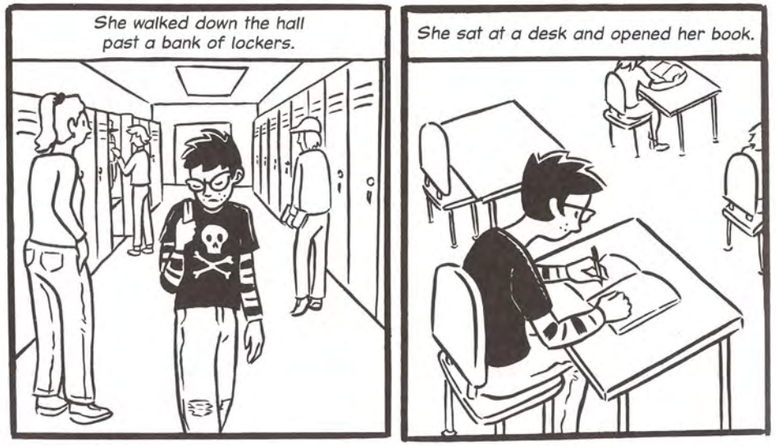
- notebook paper
- pencil
- kitchen timer
- pen
- bristol board

Contrary to what most people think, when we talk about writing comics, we're not just talking about all the letters that go in the word balloons. Cartoonists write with both words and pictures and each are capable of delivering information. In the best comics, words and pictures complement each other, creating a story that's greater than the sum of its parts. You want to avoid redundancy in your words and pictures; it makes for a stilted and boring type of storytelling. A good rule of thumb is show OR tell, but don't show AND tell. Like every rule, the rule of show or tell is meant to be broken, when there's good reason—some stories evoke a certain tone that is enhanced by redundancy.

How can you tell whether your words and pictures are redundant? Try reading the comic two ways—once with your hand covering the text, and again with your hand covering the pictures. Do you get the same story either way? For more on redundancy, or "duo-specific word/picture combinations," as Scott McCloud calls them, I recommend reading chapter 3 of Scott's book *Making Comics*.

Tip

Try reading the comic two ways—once with your hand covering the text, and again with your hand covering the pictures. Do you get the same story either way?



These captions have been altered to deliver redundant information. Would you want to read the rest of this story?

If the narration of my short comic *Never Go Home* were removed from the images, it would look something like this.

When I ran away, I never had a plan. I just wanted to get out and get away.

Get away and never come back. I thought this was possible.

Of course, it wasn't.

By itself, this suggests a story, but not the whole story. We have just a hint of who the character is and no sense of place.

If we look at the pictures only, we are able to see the character, his actions, and his place in the world. Through facial expressions we get some sense of his state of mind, but without the text we don't know why he is walking alone, in the middle of the night. When the images and the words are brought together, we get the whole story.

Let's Go!

1. Grab your notebook paper. Make a list numbered one through five.
2. Drawing from your own experience, list five memories you associate with the word *lost*. Briefly summarize these memories in one sentence each. It could be a time when you were lost, felt lost, or watched *Lost* on TV. Any memory is fair game, as long as it has a strong sense of place. Start writing, and don't stop moving your pencil until you have your list of five memories. If you can't think of anything, keep writing the word *lost* until you think of something.
3. Select the memory that is most vivid to you. Write about that memory for 5 minutes straight, without stopping. Write in the first person, present tense (*I am walking alone in the financial district, and I can't find my train*).
4. Select four to six sentences from your writing to narrate a page of comics. Write them on your bristol board in a left to right, top to bottom manner, but don't use panels.
5. Create images to complement those words without being redundant.