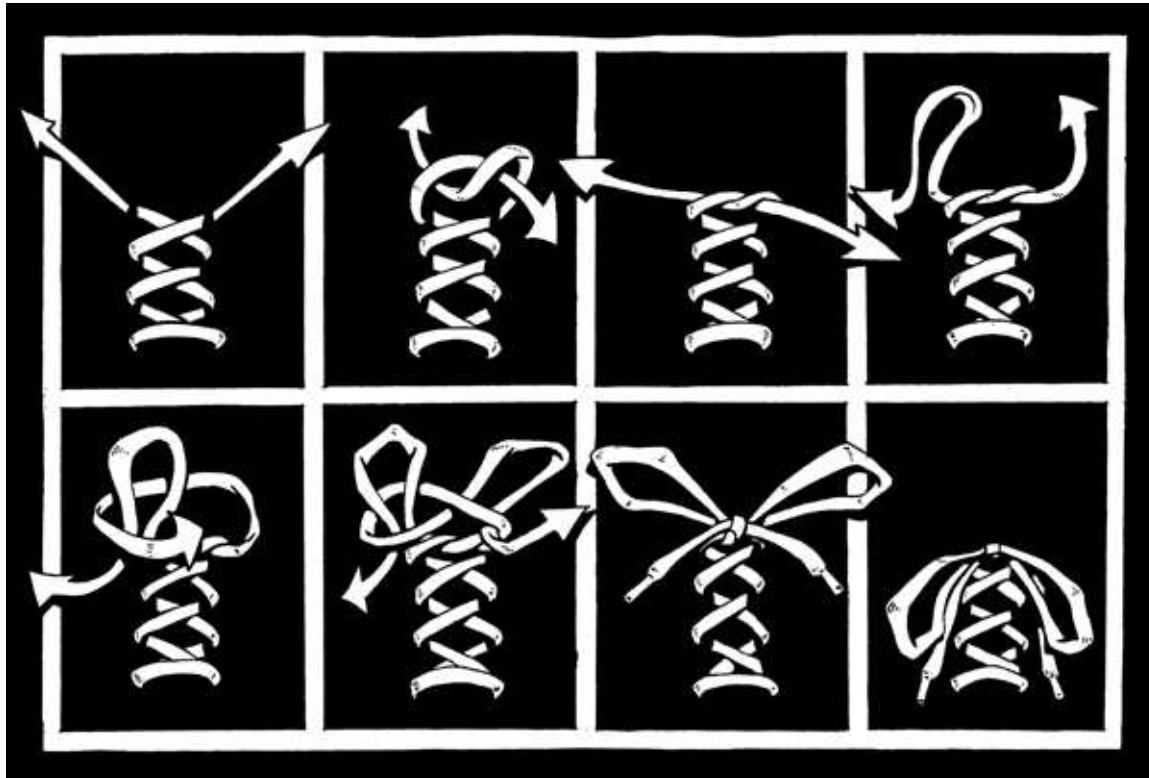


Design vs. Drawing

One of the first assignments I give in my introduction class is to ask students to create a one-page comic, using no words, that explains to a reader how to tie a shoelace. I ask them to imagine giving their comic to an alien that speaks no earth language (but needs its laces tied!). There is something incredibly humbling about this assignment. It makes students very aware that knowing how to do something is very different from being able to draw it.



Shoe-tying art by Mark Baziuk

The students' drawings usually succeed or fail, with little in between. The students that fail tend to fail miserably. They are more concerned with trying to make an interesting drawing. They include all sorts of extraneous information, employ all kinds of distracting panel configurations, and often need to get their "character" involved.

The students that succeed do so because they think like graphic designers. They zero-in on the information that needs to be conveyed and make sure that's what is front and center.

As the old saying goes, it is okay to decorate construction but it is not okay to construct decoration. Comics are more about designing than drawing. A cartoonist does not have to draw well to be successful. Many of the comic strips that appear in the daily newspaper are proof of that. One may argue that the drawings of Cathy Guisewite or Scott Adams are charming or

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quirky, but few would attest to their rendering skills. The drawings don't have to be rendered well to succeed, but they do have to be clear.

This assignment shows how difficult it is to convey information visually even when you have a clear objective. Without a clear sense of where you are going, the task is that much harder. When working on a story, I know I shouldn't start creating "finished" pages until I feel my objectives are clear.

-- Contributed by James Sturm