

NACAE

National Association of Comics Art Educators

Editing

If the pictures in a comic merely echo the text, then it usually means it's a poor comic. It's important that the visuals and the text relate different information. How these two elements play off each other is what makes comics so special. It's important that the drawings are not just illustrating text but telling the story themselves.

For a recent project, I read a lot of Japanese baseball comics. From the images alone I was able to absorb most of the narrative from subtle check swings to dramatic strikeouts. Even off-the-field action, blooming romances and failed investments, were clearly told. These were exciting stories even though I couldn't read a word of it. Images are a universal language.

One of the books I have all my students read is *On Directing Film* by David Mamet. It's a slim but highly informative volume and is as appropriate for a cartoonist as it is for a filmmaker. He discusses, among other things, how a story is often told in disparate images. An example: "I'm sitting at a bus stop. There is a full moon. A woman yells from a window from across the street. A fire alarm is pulled." This beginning of a story amounts to a shot list. This juxtaposition of images moves the narrative forward and gets the reader interested in what happens next.

This book is basically a primer on the art of editing. When I ask students what skills are involved in making a comic they'll mention the drawing, typography, staging, costuming, designing, writing, inking, coloring but never mention editing. I believe that this is as important an aspect of making comics as anything else. It is given short shrift because comic artists are too concerned with getting something that looks good fast. They don't understand that making pretty pictures is secondary to writing clearly with pictures.

Using cuts allows readers to make their own associations between each panel, and become more fully invested in the story. Comics have a long history of being horrendously blunt and underestimating the reader's capacity to infer. A cartoonist does not have to follow a character from panel to panel in order to tell a story or express a mood.

You can try to show frustration by rendering a frustrated expression in a single panel. But to differentiate between frustration, anxiousness, or fear is difficult. Students try to do it one shot because they feel it is the least time-consuming solution and perhaps the most obvious. Perhaps it is better to show frustration in a series of shots: 1) the garbage can overflowing with crumpled paper, 2) an overflowing ashtray, 3) a hand slamming down a telephone receiver.

The following exercise would be equally appropriate for an introduction to filmmaking or video class. No words are allowed for this assignment so it forces the student to tell his or her story visually.

Show the following sequence of events using only pictures:

You wake up and realize you have overslept and are now late for class. You rush out of your home towards school only to discover that it's Sunday.

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- * Each image should be on its own 6" x 6" square drawn on 8.5" x 11" copy paper.
- * Finished artwork should be done with a sharpie fine point marker.
- * Stick figures are fine as long as the reader can discern what is happening in any given panel.
- * This exercise is not about drawing; it is about storytelling.
- * Minimum six panels. No maximum.

The challenges here are obvious. How do you show late and rush in purely visual terms? How do we tell the protagonist is a student? That it is Sunday?

The reason I have each image on a separate piece of paper is so that when the class looks at the work we can remove or rearrange panels. The class also will suggest additional panels and discuss how each decision impacts the story. I've seen improvements made by turning a single panel into five panels and a thirty-panel story reduced to seven.

A story is a journey to a destination. Each image is a certain amount of distance traveled. Some journeys are direct and brisk; others are more leisurely paced. How you edit a story determines whether you take your reader on a perilous ride or a surreal one. As an editor, you serve as your story's navigator.

-- Contributed by James Sturm