Comic Writing:

Scripting/Formatting

& Working with an Artist

By Midnight

It can be argued that comics are more influential now—and certainly more mainstream—than ever before in the history of the medium. Each year, multiple big-budget Hollywood blockbusters hit theaters, raking in huge profits for the studios. And most of these films have something in common: they're based on comics. A decade ago it would have been unimaginable that so many comic-based films would be released in a single year. In 2016 alone, we've seen *Batman v. Superman*, *Deadpool*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Suicide Squad*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and *Dr. Strange*.

Even television has fully embraced the idea of producing comic-inspired shows. *The Walking Dead* may be one of the most successful to date, but a non-stop line-up of programming like *Gotham*, *Supergirl*, *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *iZombie*, *Daredevil*, and *Shield* have proven successful enough to get renewed for multiple seasons.

While breaking into the mainstream comic industry may be more difficult than it had been a few decades ago, there are currently more avenues for an unknown writer to get their work out there. The cost of digital printing has come down substantially over the last decade, allowing comic creators to self-publish small quantities of their work, while the option of publishing online as a web-comic is now viable to most.

But, before *any* of that can be considered, actually *writing* a comic is required. For this tutorial, I'm going to focus on strictly the writing/formatting aspects. I'm also going to assume that the writer is *not* artistically inclined—therefore, I will also be offering tips and suggestions on working with an artist.

It all begins with an outline…

You might be able to get away with diving headfirst into writing a novel or screenplay without

much of an outline—and though I personally *don't* take that approach, it's a method that works for some writers. However, crafting a decent comic script isn't *just* about writing…it's also, in a sense, *directing*. A developed outline will save you time and countless headaches later on.

Outlines will differ depending on your specific story. Are you writing a comic one-shot, a mini-series, or a full-blown ongoing title? For now, let's assume that we're working on a single issue or chapter. Of course, the most important aspect of the outline is to frame the plot points that you want to occur in that issue. Also, which characters will appear, are there specific locations where the story takes place, will an antagonist be introduced and, if so, how many panels or pages will be allocated to their appearance?

One of the fundamental differences to comic scripting is that, unlike novels or screenplays, you're not just describing scenes—here you actually have to map them out, like a film director would a shot list. In a novel or screenplay you can easily state that a character pulls out a gun and aims it at someone. But comics are a series of sequential panels and, as a writer, that needs to be taken into consideration. Going back to the character with a gun example—in one panel does the character reach for the holstered weapon, pull it out in panel two, and fire in panel three while a dialogue balloon hovers nearby?

Another important aspect is to always be mindful of page count. Will the dramatic first appearance of a main character take up an entire page? Will an action sequence take up three pages, or more? It's often *not* a good idea to clump too much dialogue in one panel either, so pacing is equally critical. Also, due to space limitations in a comic, it's ideal to consider only using dialogue that really counts—either for furthering the plot or enhancing the characters—extraneous dialogue tends to get a bit rough in comics. Remember, comics are primarily a visual medium. Some early comic writers tend to get a bit wordy with dialogue, and while dialogue is a necessity, the "show, don't tell" adage that is so often repeated by seasoned screenwriters applies doubly here.

Another concept that seems to elude some comic writers is keeping the tone consistent to the visual style you'll want from your artist. Are you writing an American-style comic, or one that adheres closer to a manga? Though both are comics, regardless of terminology, they employ different storytelling methods. Western comics favor a more illustrative style, while manga aims for a cinematic approach. Typically, Western comics have more dialogue, which is in the service of *telling* the story. On the other hand, many manga titles employ less dialogue and rely on visuals for the purpose of *moving* or *furthering* the story. There are inherent differences in composition, flow, frame layout, and overall pacing between both as well. It's important to know what style you're striving for early in the outline stage.

In the same way that screenplays have an act structure, so should a comic. If it's the first issue, consider when the protagonist and antagonist are introduced. The always important "world-building" aspects can't be forgotten either, especially if it's a science fiction or fantasy setting. Another important element to consider is how the issue will end? Will you leave your reader wanting more by dropping a cliffhanger on the last page, or will the story be neatly wrapped up? In fact, some comic writers try to include some form of minor cliffhanger at the bottom of *every* page, urging the reader to turn to the next one. This is especially useful for webcomics, and more so if you're only updating once a week— you *always* want the reader coming back to see what will happen next.

And, lastly, few elements are more important than deciding your page count during the outline phase. Unless you're pulling double-duty as writer and artist, you'll likely either be working with an artist via collaboration or outright hiring them. Whichever the case may be, remember that the more pages an artist has to draw, the longer the project will take to complete (and could also become rather costly). It's usually far easier to stretch a story out longer, particularly in comic format where visuals are so instrumental in conveying the writer's intent, but it takes far *more* work for a writer to condense a story to a lesser page count. In my own experience with *Danger Zone One*, I try to settle on 27 pages per chapter and work my outlines accordingly. And still, in each comic script I've written, there are always elements that get removed from the finished piece, much to my disappointment. However, in the long run, it's usually for the best, as it tightens the story and—from a financial standpoint—is less costly than over-embellishing and turning out a 50 page chapter. Of course, writers who are also skilled artists don't have this problem (nor do writers who are collaborating with a willing and dedicated artist —but believe me, those can be difficult to find).

Formatting the comic script

First off, there is no right or wrong way to write a comic script. It's all fair game, as long as the artist can comprehend your ideas—which, hopefully, are conveyed in clear, concise descriptions. Despite comic books being around for quite a while, there has never been an " industry standard" for writers on how to format them, even at corporate giants like Marvel and DC. This is a drastic departure from screenwriting or even novel formatting. That said, there are two tried-and-true ways a comic script can be written.

The first method is more complex, but I vastly prefer it. For this, the writer breaks down nearly every aspect of the comic, page-by-page and panel-by-panel. I've included a reference page from a future *Danger Zone One* script below:

PAGE 1

PANEL ONE

Two criminals, one dressed in a skull mask and the other in a monster mask, sit on beat-up ripped chairs in an old run-down apartment. These criminals, from here on, will be referred to as **Skull** and **Monster**.

Skull is looking through a magazine—we can see from the attractive, barely dressed girl on the cover that it's a "men's magazine". The title of the magazine, if we see it in this panel, can be: FEROX.

Monster tugs uncomfortably at his mask.

MONSTER: Do we always have to wear these stupid masks?

SKULL: Don't let the boss hear you say that. Y'know how he is…

I've included references of the Skull and Monster masks, along with an idea of what the apartment can look like, in folder **Page 1/Panel 1**.

PANEL TWO

A criminal wearing a devil mask enters the room. He'll be known as **Devil** from this point forward.

DEVIL: Everything's set to go. Where's Mr. Jack?

A reference of the Devil mask is in folder **Page 1/Panel 2**.

PANEL THREE

Angle on Monster.

MONSTER: Ain't seen the boss all mornin'.

PANEL FOUR

Angle behind **Mr. Jack** as he enters the room. We only see his back here, and not his face.

MR. JACK: I'm here gentlemen. Now that all is in order, we can begin.

A reference of Mr. Jack, as you previously had drawn him on the test page, is in folder **Page 1/Panel 4**.

PANEL FIVE

Full reveal of Mr. Jack. This should be a low angle, making him look scary and menacing for his grand appearance. He rubs his hands together, as if gleefully ready to start up some trouble.

MR. JACK: The good people of Pallad City will be getting a Halloween to remember…
(Word Balloon 1)

MR. JACK…one that will scare them right out of their skins! (Word Balloon 2)

Note: Feel free to either make these two balloons connect together, or completely separate. Whatever you feel works better for the panel.

Notice how there's a large, bold page header to signify the page number. There are also panel numbers, breaking down the action and dialogue in each. Try not to make your panel descriptions too lengthy. The more your artist needs to read, the more likely they are to forget something…it happens all the time. Also, if your artist's first language isn't English, lengthy descriptions can become incredibly problematic. I've dealt with numerous artists, some of which had a very weak understanding of the English language, and have learned the hard way that it's *always* best to write in the most simplistic terms imaginable. Remember, the only person who will typically see your script is the artist (unless you're working in a professional capacity and have an editor overseeing your work). But, even so, always tailor your script to the artist's needs. In truth, even if your artist is a native English speaker, *still* try to use simple descriptionst—you'll be thankful you did later on…

In the above comic script I've also made mention of image references. When I send the script to the artist I also send a folder of reference images or links. Sometimes I have a specific visual idea for a setting, character, or scene that would be too difficult to convey in words. The best aid for this will always be reference photos that can be attached in a folder for the artist to see.

The sample script above also has dialogue examples. Let's look at "Panel Five" where Mr. Jack's lines are described as being broken into two word balloons. I did this because I didn't want one balloon overflowing with text, which can look sloppy. Always be aware of how much you're trying to fit into each balloon.

And speaking of word balloons, be mindful if they require any special traits. For example, is the character shouting? If so, maybe the balloon should have jagged edges. Or, if the dialogue is coming through a a speaker or cell phone—do you want to have an electronic-looking balloon to emphasis that? Thought balloons sometimes have fluffy, cloud-like edges—is that required for a panel? Don't

forget to mention it in the comic script. Heck, maybe your character is speaking, but isn't in the panel. If that's the case, you'll want a word balloon pointing off-panel. Your script needs to be as clearly defined as possible, and never assume that the artist will figure it out or "get it" on their own.

Sound effects are typically mentioned in the script too. For example, a metal pipe hitting against a steel girder might result in a KLANG! Sound. Describe it in the script for the artist to draw it (this is more true for manga-style work, whereas Western comics have those lettered in later).

Okay, so I previously mentioned that there was an alternate method to writing your comic script. This way will *only* be successful if your artist is adept at storytelling and, figuratively, on the same page as you are. Unfortunately, few of us meet our artists in person and we primarily deal with them via email (this is true nowadays even in the professional comic industry), so this process puts a significant amount of faith in your artist's abilities. Personally, I've never done it this way, but it does allow more freedom for the artist to interpret the scenes.

In this method, the writer scripts out a description, page-by-page, but usually *doesn't* include panel breakdowns or even, in some cases, dialogue (which gets added in later by a letterer).

I've included an example of this method below. This example was taken from issue #3 of Top Cow's *Battle of the Planets* manga mini-series, which included a script sample at the end of the issue, written by David Wohl and drawn by Edwin David:

PAGE 1
Let's start this book off with three straight splash pages of action; so here in the first one we will have a splash of the team. Well, four of the five of them anyway, looking concerned at something that's off panel that we'll see on the next page. They're standing in front of the ruins of what was once the mega mech-tacular (last issue) and the Phoenix should be seen like 50 feet above them. So I think this shot should be a worm's eye view looking up at the team looking cool yet concerned and behind them, up in the sky, is the Phoenix.

I did find *some* instances where Wohl writes in panel descriptions, but they are few in number and brief. For instance, regarding page 4 of the comic, he writes:

Panel 1 (small): Mark tells the team that they have their work cut out for them. Princess says she needs to use her vehicle right now and…

Panel 2 (small): ...summons it from her wrist communicator.

While I'm not a fan of this scripting style, I concede that the *Battle of the Planets* comic turned out remarkably well. Edwin David, the artist, did a fantastic job bringing the story to life. Sadly, I have yet to find an artist that I would trust with this method—but that's not to say that others won't.

<u>Working with an Artist</u>

If you thought writing the script was the tricky part, it pales in comparison to the task of finding the right artist and, ultimately, working with them. The majority of the tips and information here will be more relevant to those writers who are hiring one, as opposed to collaborating with one for no pay.

First off, how do you find an artist? Thanks to the marvels of the modern age, the Internet has made finding artists remarkably easy. That said, discovering an artist that fits your project *specifically* is another matter. DeviantArt is a great avenue to find talent, but don't neglect basic Google searches—after all, some artists strictly post on their Instagram or Tumblr accounts. Keywords worth trying are "comic artist for hire", "commissioned comic art", and "comic/manga commission". Also, most websites that feature submitted artwork also have forums. Sign-up and ask around, you never know where it might lead.

Don't get discouraged if it takes some time to find an artist. It's always better holding out a little longer, instead of settling for a less than desirable choice. After all, if your comic is 20-something pages, you're stuck with that artist for—at least—that issue (changing artists mid-issue isn't something you'll want to do).

Once you find an artist that you're interested in working with and hiring, make sure all of the payment details are ironed out first. Find out if they accept PayPal, or wire transfer, etc. Will they be paid prior to starting the project, or 50/50 before and after pages arrive, or only once finished pages are submitted. You don't want this to become a problem later on. Also, if you're ever planning on selling the work, make sure it's clear to the artist that this is a commercial work-for-hire project (unless you plan to offer them a percent of the profits). A contract can also be written, depending on the scale of the project.

Another very important step, before committing to a project with your artist, is to hire them for just a test page. This can even be the first page of your script. You want to make sure that their artwork is compatible with your story and, just as importantly, make sure that they can translate your written script to the actual comic page. Also, it's likely that you'll have a specific page template that you'll

want them to follow—including page size, bleed area, font selection/size, and so on. If you're printing physical copies this is an even bigger issue, as you need to determine early on the size of the finished physical book. There's more leeway on webcomics, but who knows—maybe one day you'll want to create a print edition of your webcomic, so it's something to always be mindful of.

The test page also helps to confirm if the artist can handle drawing your characters and if they're adept at creating backgrounds, shading/toning (if applicable), and even word balloon placement. I've dealt with artists in the past that were incredible at drawing characters, particularly female ones, but couldn't draw *anything* else.

Once you have an artist that can draw a satisfactory test page, congratulations—you're on your way! And always insist that you see sketch pages *prior* to the finished pages. It's always easier to fix errors in the sketch stage than on a finished work, especially if it's been inked and toned.

But, unfortunately, there are always unpredicted issues that could—and will undoubtedly—arise. One of the most prominent afflictions that a writer must deal with when working with an artist is the inevitable delays. This is something to consider early on, by working out a schedule with your artist (ex. pages 1-10 done in one month, or two pages per week, etc).

Regardless, there will eventually *still* be some delay on the artist's part (I have yet to see it not happen). A reasonable delay can be tolerated, but don't bow down to repeated excuses. Take it from experience—I've dealt with it firsthand (numerous times). I've had artists who were five pages behind deadline, yet continuing to post their personal fan art on DeviantArt and Facebook (and this was *after* they were paid, no less). Always be professional, but don't let an artist take advantage of you. The "fair, but stern" axiom is useful here. In one instance, I've had to go through my bank to dispute a payment charge to a Filipino artist, due to him being two months behind on a comic project and then seemingly vanishing from the Internet. As one might imagine, as soon as the funds were removed from his bank account he miraculously reappeared, apologetic of his inept, unprofessional conduct. Needless to say, the artwork that had taken him months to complete was quickly done in a matter of days. Don't buckle under excuses (and I've heard my share of them). Some excuses may be valid, many are not. The three-strike baseball rule can be put to good use in situations like these. Something else to look out for is art quality. Your artist might draw a great test page and really put a ton of effort into the first few pages—make sure that future pages maintain this same quality. I've worked with more than one artist that produced some great early work, only for the quality to decline later on. That sort of laziness on their part should not be allowed by a paying writer.

Also, if you're working with an artist on a single comic issue (or in the case of a manga, a chapter-by-chapter basis), don't expect them to stick around two or three issues/chapters down the road. They

may want to move on to other projects of their own, or take a hiatus. One of the problems with many work-for-hire artists is that, no matter how much you're dedicated to your own work, they will *never* be as dedicated to the project as you are.

All of this may sound discouraging, or particularly risky, but don't get dejected—there *are* dedicated, talented artists out there. It's just best to know what you could be up against at an early stage and avoid the pitfalls that could cost you both valuable time and money. Tread carefully when scouting your artist and, upon settling on them, make sure that they'll be a suitable candidate for your story. Do this and you'll likely be rewarded by a comic that you can be proud of.