CHOICE OF MOMENT

DECIDING WHICH MOMENTS TO INCLUDE IN A COMICS STORY AND WHICH TO LEAVE OUT.

CHOICE OF FRAME

CHOOSING THE RIGHT DISTANCE AND ANGLE TO VIEW THOSE MOMENTS -- AND WHERE TO TRIM THEM.

CHOICE OF IMAGE

RENDERING THE CHARACTERS, OBJECTS AND ENVIRONMENTS IN THOSE FRAMES CLEARLY.

CHOICE OF WORD

PICKING WORDS THAT ADD Valuable INFORMATION AND WORK WELL WITH THE IMAGES AROUND THEM.

CHOICE OF FLOW

GUIDING READERS THROUGH AND BETWEEN PANELS ON A PAGE OR SCREEN.

THESE ARE THE FIVE ARENAS WHERE YOUR CHOICES CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLEAR, CONVINCING STORYTELLING AND A CONFUSING MESS.
STARTING AT THE TOP, LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT EACH ONE AND HOW THEY FIT TOGETHER.

- CHOICE OF MOMENT
- CHOICE OF FRAME
- CHOICE OF IMAGE
- CHOICE OF WORD
- CHOICE OF FLOW

THESE EARLY CHOICES ARE COMICS' ROUGH PLANNING STAGE WHERE A STORY'S EVENTS ARE FIRST BROKEN DOWN INTO READABLE CHUNKS.

SUPPOSE, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT YOU WANTED TO SHOW A MAN WALKING...

THEN, LET'S SAY THE MAN FINDS A KEY ON THE GROUND, PICKS IT UP, TAKES IT WITH HIM AND COMES TO A DOOR.

SO, HE UNLOCKS THE DOOR AND THEN A... I DUNNO... A HUNGRY LION JUMPS OUT!

HERE'S HOW A SEQUENCE LIKE THAT MIGHT TAKE SHAPE IN COMICS FORM.
Even with rough sketches like these, a casual reader should now be able to "read" the action clearly.

Our choice of moment -- the selection process that led to these eight panels -- plays an important role in insuring that clarity.

The moments chosen in the above sequence represent the most direct, efficient route to communicating our simple plot.

Any number of moments could have been used to represent "A man is walking," but all we really needed in this case was one, so that's what was chosen.
Each panel furthers the "plot."

"A man is walking."

"He finds a key on the ground."

"He takes it with him, then he comes to a locked door."

"He unlocks the door."

"Then a hungry lion jumps out."

And in this case, eight panels is what we needed to get the job done.
WHEN CLARITY IS YOUR SOLE PURPOSE --

-- YOUR STORY'S MOMENTS SHOULD BE LIKE A DOT-TO-DOT PUZZLE. REMOVE ONE DOT AND YOU CHANGE THE SHAPE OF THE STORY.

OR IF THAT'S NOT THE CASE, MAYBE THAT PARTICULAR "DOT" WASN'T NEEDED IN THE FIRST PLACE.

EACH PANEL SHOWS A COMPLETE ACTION, BECAUSE WE'RE ADAPTING A PLOT THAT'S ANCHORED ENTIRELY IN ACTIONS.


IF THE PLOT CALLED FOR THE MAN TO "SLOWLY" REACH DOWN, A CERTAIN NUMBER OF EXTRA "DOTS" MIGHT HAVE BEEN NECESSARY TO SHOW THE FINDING OF THE KEY --

-- BUT BECAUSE WE'RE ILLUSTRATING THE FACT OF THESE ACTIONS, RATHER THAN THEIR QUALITY, ONE PANEL PER ACTION SEEMS TO BE ENOUGH.
CHOICE OF FRAME
IS THE STAGE WHERE YOU DECIDE
H0W CLOSELY TO FRAME AN
ACTION TO SHOW ALL THE
PERTINENT DETAILS --

-- OR HOW FAR TO
PULL BACK TO LET
THE READER KNOW
WHERE AN ACTION IS
TAKING PLACE --

-- AND MAYBE
GIVE A SENSE OF
BEING THERE
IN THE PROCESS.

IT'S
THE STAGE
WHERE YOU
DECIDE HOW
COMPOSITIONAL
FACTORS LIKE
CROPPING,
BALANCE AND
TILT AFFECT
YOUR READERS'
IMPRESSIONS OF
YOUR WORLD --

-- AND
THEIR SENSE OF POSITION
WITHIN THAT WORLD.
The choice of moment for our original example was pretty simple (just straight action to action) --

-- and the choice of frame for those panels was too.

Two out of the eight panels featured close-ups to show a few important details --

-- but otherwise, the action was shown from a fixed middle distance and fixed viewing angle.

Our tale could have been shot from many angles and distances, but by offering a view of the action that barely changes --

-- the reader is encouraged to focus on what does change, such as the position and attitude of the character, as well as his unchanging forward stance --

-- instead of being distracted by needlessly varying shots, irrelevant to the narrative.

Readers like change and variety, so it's tempting to vary angles a lot. Just make sure that the changes in your artwork --

-- aren't distracting readers from more important changes taking place in your story.
THAT SAID, SOME SCENES REQUIRE FREQUENT CHANGES OF FRAME, SUCH AS THE FLIP-FLOPPING ANGLES OF SUBJECT TO SUBJECT TRANSITIONS USED TO CAPTURE THE RHYTHM OF TWO PEOPLE IN CONVERSATION.

WHY DO I HAVE TO GET MAULED BY THE HUNGRY LION?!

BECAUSE IT'S FUNNY!

TO YOU. MAYBE.

I'M TIRED OF BEING A THROW-AWAY CHARACTER.

BUT, LOOK AT ALL THE PANELS YOU'VE BEEN IN!

YOU MEAN I HAVE TO KEEP DOING THIS?!

IT'S ONLY PAGE 21!

HEY, AT LEAST YOU GET TO APPEAR AGAIN. THIS IS MY LAST PANEL EVER!

OH, DOUS...

SNIFF.

AND THERE'S NO NEED TO KEEP EVERY PANEL AT EYE LEVEL.

A "WORM'S EYE" VIEW CAN GIVE WEIGHT AND GRANDEUR TO OBJECTS --

AND CHARACTERS --

-- WHILE GETTING ABOVE A SCENE CAN GIVE READERS ACCESS TO A WEALTH OF INFO ABOUT A SETTING --

-- AND A SENSE OF "RISING ABOVE IT ALL" EMOTIONALLY AS WELL.
CONCEPTS LIKE
"A MAN IS WALKING" DON'T REQUIRE
PULLING BACK THE FRAME MUCH, BUT IF YOU
WANT YOUR READERS TO KNOW WHERE
THAT MAN IS WALKING --

-- YOU MAY WANT TO
INVEST SOME SPACE IN A
WIDER VIEW.

READERS
NEED THAT
INFORMATION
ESPECIALLY WHEN
MOVING FROM
SCENE TO
SCENE --

-- HENCE
THE TRADITION
OF THE
ESTABLISHING
SHOT: A BIG
LONG-SHOT PANEL
OR TWO AT THE
BEGINNING OF EACH
NEW SCENE, USUALLY
FOLLOWED BY SOME
MIDDLE GROUND AND
CLOSE-UP PANELS
OF INDIVIDUAL
CHARACTERS.

UN-OH.
LOOK AT
THE TIME!

ALMOST
DAWN... I
BETTER GET
ON THE ROAD.

REMEMBER
TO SAY HI
FOR ME.

IF I HURRY, I CAN MAKE IT THERE
BY SUNDOWN.

DON'T HURRY
TOO MUCH.

DRIVE
SAFELY,
OKAY?

DON'T I
ALWAYS?
ON THE OTHER HAND, BECAUSE READERS WANT AND EXPECT THAT SENSE OF PLACE, A CLEVER STORYTELLER CAN CHOOSE TO DELAY THE ESTABLISHING SHOT TO INCREASE SUSPENSE --

-- OR TO MIRROR THE THOUGHTS OF A CHARACTER WHO'S TEMPORARILY UNAWARE OF HIS OR HER SURROUNDINGS.

DRAWING DETAILED ESTABLISHING SHOTS CAN BE HARD WORK BUT THEY'RE WORTH THE EFFORT IF, BY DOING SO, YOU CAN CREATE A STRONG SENSE OF PLACE IN THE IMAGINATIONS OF YOUR READERS.

LOOK FOR MORE ON THIS TOPIC IN CHAPTER FOUR.
Choosing how to frame moments in comics is like choosing camera angles in photography and film. There are differences — such as the role that size, shape and position have on comics panels.

— But to think of that frame as the reader’s camera is a useful metaphor.

This is the device by which you can grab the reader by the shoulder, guide them to the right spot —

“Now look.”

— And tell them “you are here…”

Readers will assign importance to characters and objects placed in the center —

You can’t kill all of us, Frank.

Not that he’s suggesting anything!

— And some comics artists oblige by putting their most important subjects there.
BUT THAT CENTER CAN ALSO POINT US TOWARD LESS TANGIBLE IDEAS, SUCH AS THE MOTION OF AN OBJECT --

-- A MYSTERIOUS ABSENCE --

-- A DISTANCE ABOUT TO BE CROSSED --

-- A DISTANCE CROSSED ALREADY --

OH, SPEEDY! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? EVERYBODY'S BEEN GOING CRAZY LOOKING FOR YOU! MORNING'S IT'S SO TERRIBLE, BUT HE'S GONNA BE OK...

I KNOW. I JUST HAD TO SEE YOU.

-- OR THE UNSEEN OBJECT OF A CHARACTER'S ATTENTION.

THOSE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE REASONS THAT AN ARTIST MIGHT CHOOSE A SEEMINGLY OFF-CENTER COMPOSITION. WE'LL CONSIDER OTHERS LATER.

HERE IT COMES.

Next up is your choice of image: creating pictures to fill those frames and bring the world of your story to life visually.

After all that planning, choosing, arranging and sketching things out, here's the part of the process where you get to pick up your pen, brush or digital stylus and finally draw something!

No matter what style of image you choose, your pictures' first and most important job is to communicate quickly, clearly and compellingly with the reader.
THE NEXT ASPECT OF CLARITY IN COMICS STORYTELLING IS YOUR CHOICE OF WORD.

WORDS CAN BE A POWERFUL ALLY IN THE STRUGGLE TO COMMUNICATE.

THEY BRING WITH THEM AN UNPARALLELED LEVEL OF SPECIFICITY.

THERE'S NO IMAGE SO VAGUE THAT WORDS CAN'T LOCK IT INTO A DESIRED MEANING.

"On the bright side, I got my caffeine. On the not-so-bright side, we got mugged on the way home."

AND SOME SPECIFIC CONCEPTS AND NAMES CAN ONLY BE CLEARLY EXPRESSED THROUGH WORDS.

OH, HEY, LOOK! IT'S KELLY DONOVAN, TWIN BROTHER OF THE GUY WHO PLAYED XANDER ON BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, PLUS HUMPHREY BOGART WEARING A FREDDIE MERCURY MASK AND A ROBOT DUPLICATE OF FORMER U.N. SECRETARY-GENERAL BOUTROS BOUTROS-GHali!

TRY DOING THAT WITH JUST PICTURES!

I WAS IN A COUPLE OF EPISODES...

PLAY IT, SAM. I BRING YOU SELLER'S MESSAGES OF PEACE.

SPECIAL THANKS TO KELLY DONOVAN (SEE ART CREDITS, PAGE 258).
Words can be used to compress a story, summing up vast changes in a single caption as seen in scene-to-scene transitions.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far far away... A long time later, and much much closer...

And of course, words take center stage when reproducing the fine art of conversation.

Well, you know what they say, "The best things come to those who wait."

Makes me wonder if "they" work for DMV...

So who're you waiting for, anyhow?

But in comics, the two have to work together seamlessly enough that readers barely notice when switching from one to another.

I have a whole chapter on this subject, but for now, suffice it to say that the secret of communicating clearly with words is just to let words do what words do best --

-- and when a picture is the better solution, to let them get out of the way.
Finally, after choosing just the right moments, frames, images and words, all that's left is your choice of flow: how you guide your audience through your work from beginning to end.

Between panels, your choice of flow will rely on the unwritten contract between artists and readers which states that panels are read left-to-right first, then up-to-down* --

* And that within each panel, the same principles will apply to captions and word balloons.

It also means being on the lookout for any part of the creative process that can help -- or hinder -- that flow.

* OR RIGHT-TO-LEFT IN SOME CULTURES, OF COURSE.
THE EASIEST WAY
TO AVOID PANEL-TO-PANEL CONFUSION IS
TO JUST KEEP IT SIMPLE, BUT IF YOU LIKE TO
MIX THINGS UP, KEEP A LOOK OUT FOR CERTAIN
INHERENTLY CONFUSING ARRANGEMENTS
LIKE THIS ONE --

-- IN WHICH HABIT
WILL SEND YOUR
READERS LEFT TO
RIGHT, LEAVING
THE LOWER LEFT-
HAND PANEL
UNREAD --

-- AND PRODUCING
JUST ENOUGH
SPLIT-SECOND
CONFUSION TO YANK
READERS OUT OF
THE WORLD OF THE

SURE, THERE ARE WAYS
TO COMPEL READERS’
EYES TO MOVE IN THE
RIGHT DIRECTION.

-- UNLESS, OF
COURSE, YOU WANT
TO GO THE
EXPERIMENTAL
ROUTE, AS I
SOMETIMES DO,
BUT THAT’S A WHOLE
OTHER BOOK!

ANOTHER SOURCE OF
"WHICH COMES NEXT?" CONFUSION OCCURS
WHEN PANEL ARRANGEMENTS ARE OBSCURED
BY TOO MANY "FOURTH WALL" BREAKS
AND BORDERLESS IMAGES.

JUST MAKE
SURE YOUR LAYOUT
IS SERVING YOUR

-- INSTEAD OF
THE OTHER WAY
AROUND --

THE COMPOSITIONS AND
MOTION IN YOUR FRAMES CAN HELP GUIDE THE
READERS’ EYES, BUT MAKE SURE THEY'RE BEING
GUIDED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION!
HOW YOUR CHOICE OF FRAME CHANGES FROM PANEL TO PANEL CAN ALSO AFFECT THE READING FLOW.

BY ROTATING THE VIEWING ANGLE TOO FAR BETWEEN PANELS, CHARACTERS CAN SEEM TO SWITCH PLACES, CREATING CONFUSION.

THOSE WOODS ARE HAUNTED! WE MUST RETREAT!

IT'S TRUE! THERE'S NO TIME TO LOSE!

I'LL TELL THE CAPTAIN! AND I'LL START THE TANK!

WAIT!! WHO SAID THAT?!
YOU DID. YOU MORON!

CONSIDER SHOWING YOUR WORK-IN-PROGRESS TO A FRIEND TO CATCH SUCH MIX-UPS IN THE ROUGH PLANNING STAGE -- AND IN THE FINISHED ART, OF COURSE.

DUDE, THIS GIRL'S BREAST DOES NOT LOOK RIGHT.

THAT'S SUPPOSED TO BE MY DAD!

CHOICE OF FLOW IS PARTIALLY ABOUT CLEARING YOUR READERS' PATHS OF OBSTACLES TO A SMOOTH READING EXPERIENCE.

EQUALLY IMPORTANT THOUGH, IS HOW THE SIGHTS ALONG THAT PATH DRAW THE READERS' EYES.

NOT ALL PICTURES ARE CREATED EQUAL. READERS FOCUS ON AREAS OF CHANGE AND RELEVANCE TO THE STORY--

-- WHILE BACKGROUND DETAILS AND REPEATED ELEMENTS JUST FADE FROM VIEW AND ARE IGNORED.

LOOKING AT THE TABLE-CLOTH IN THAT LAST PANEL?

DIDN'T THINK SO.

FUMP!
There's no way to force readers to take a specific path. But with experience, you can reliably predict what they'll pay attention to -- and be distracted by -- and use that knowledge to your advantage.

Your readers are humans, just like you and me, and we all sort information the same way.

Every day, our five senses take in an overwhelming amount of information, yet we quickly separate out what we care about from the chaos and direct our attention toward it.

And at the end of the day, it's that flow of selected moments that we remember --

-- and all those other sensations are left on the cutting room floor.

In comics, you can do a lot of that "cutting" beforehand to ensure that the flow of images readers see are exactly the ones you want them to see, in the order that best serves your storytelling goals.
Together these five kinds of choices are what communicating through comics requires --

**CLARITY**

--- and communicating with clarity means making reader comprehension your ultimate goal.

**CHOICE OF MOMENT**

**Goals:**
- "Connecting the dots." Showing the moments that matter and cutting those that don't.

**Tools:**
- The Six Transitions:
  1. Moment to Moment
  2. Action to Action
  3. Subject to Subject
  4. Scene to Scene
  5. Aspect to Aspect
  6. Non Sequitur
- Minimizing panel count for efficiency, or adding panels for emphasis.
- Character of moment, mood and idea.

These aren't "steps" that have to be taken in some predetermined order.

**CHOICE OF FRAME**

**Goals:**
- Showing readers what they need to see. Creating a sense of place, position and focus.

**Tools:**
- Frame size and shape.
- Choice of "camera" angles, distance, height, balance and centering.
- The "establishing shot." Revealing and withholding information.
- Directing reader focus.

Most comics artists juggle all five as needed.

**CHOICE OF IMAGE**

**Goals:**
- Clearly and quickly evoking the appearance of characters, objects, environments and symbols.

**Tools:**
- Every artistic/ graphic device ever invented.
- Resemblance, specificity, expression, body language and the natural world.
- Stylistic and expressionistic devices to affect mood and emotion.

**CHOICE OF WORD**

**Goals:**
- Clearly and persuasively communicating ideas, voices and sounds in seamless combination with images.

**Tools:**
- Every literary and linguistic device ever invented.
- Range, specificity, the human voice, abstract concepts, the evocation of other senses.
- Balloons, sound effects and word/picture integration*

**CHOICE OF FLOW**

**Goals:**
- Guiding readers between and within panels, and creating a transparent and intuitive reading experience.

**Tools:**
- The arrangement of panels on a page or screen. The arrangement of elements within a panel.
- Directing the eye through reader expectations and content.
- Using moment, frame, image and word in tandem.

Decisions having to do with moment, frame and flow are likely to be made in the planning stages of a comic, while image and word decisions are usually being made right up to the finish line --

--- but you'll find these choices can fit into any number of working methods.

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* See Chapter Three: "The Power of Words" for more on different types of word/picture integration and other techniques related to choice of word.