

Writing Graphic Fiction¹

Graphic stories are a lot like comic books. In both cases, authors tell stories primarily through pictures, usually with dialogue and narrative captions.

That's what we're going to try this unit. **Don't worry—you don't have to be great at drawing.** Stick figures are fine. Even if you are great at drawing, don't strive for visual perfection. We're still going to **concentrate on good story structure (properly constructed acts and scenes), strong characters, character arcs, etc.** You can perfect the drawings later.

Step 1. Decide what kind of story you're telling

The first thing you'll need to do is narrow down what kind of graphic story you're writing. What genre? Adventure? Fantasy? Mystery? Superhero? Romance? Sci-fi?

As we learned in writing our fantasy and mystery stories, graphic stories come with **genre expectations**. That is, your audience will have certain preconceptions based on the kind of story you'll write. For example, a western adventure will almost always have a loner sheriff, a woman in distress who eventually falls in love with the sheriff, and a dangerous villain who gets outgunned in the big showdown.

Such expectations affect everything from the type of art you use to the way you structure your story. Yes, you can vary them (maybe a needy sheriff who can't shoot straight), but the variations work only because we have the expectations in the first place. So, be aware of them.

Step 2. Pick a main character

Of course, you don't just need an idea of genre and plot. You'll also want to establish **who** your story is about. Having a solid grasp of your main character, side characters, their personalities, and even their physical attributes is important before you even begin writing; after all, stories are about characters before they're about anything else.

Step 3. Use a story graph (the kind we've been using for other stories) to outline of the core "beats" (events or actions) of the story.

Before you just start drawing, it's a good idea to outline your story using a story graph because these graphs help you determine the story's essential beats. **Knowing these beats ahead of time will help you decide on which drawings you'll need (Step 4) – and will save you from wasting a lot of time drawing unnecessary pictures (aka, panels) later.**

Step 4. Decide which drawings and dialogue you need to tell the story

This is the tricky part. Your finished story will have to include panels for all of the story beats necessary to tell the story, but obviously you don't have endless time and space to illustrate every single thing. So choose wisely about:

- How many and which characters are in a scene at once
- The types of locations your scenes are set in
- How much of your story is action, dialogue, introspection, etc.



¹ Original: <https://blog.reedsy.com/how-to-write-a-graphic-novel/> / Revised by Joseph Sigalas

- How many scenes you need to convey the plot effectively.

Above all, don't clutter your pages. **You have one action per panel, so pick only the most important ones.** Comics aren't movies, and the space you have to work with is limited. In a single panel, Batman can run into a secret hideout *or* punch Joker in the face. He cannot run into the hideout *and* punch Joker in the same panel. If your storytelling is strong, people will know what happens in between.

Step 5. Pick a visual style

Odds are good that your favorite graphic stories have visual styles that drew you to them. But if you think the visual "language" you love is something that "just happens," think again! Deciding on a story's "look and feel" is a *decision*.

Your visuals (drawings) must match the overall tone of your graphic story. For example, if you're going for a story about a gritty character in a rough city, you'll probably want to use washed-out (if any) colors to match the relatively harsh tone; that tone won't fit, however, if you write a story that takes place in toy stores or parks on a bright spring day. The reverse is true, too – if your tone is cheerful and upbeat, you'll probably want to choose brighter colors to match.

Take a look at **Figure 1** below. Notice the differences in the coloring and tone of the drawings? You'd never find these two pages in the same comic. Each specifically matches the tone of its story.



Figure 1. See the difference in the visuals? Use different tones for different stories. (Image credit: Andy Baker).

Step

6. Draft your story (including the pictures or panels)

For this draft, your story should include AT LEAST 12 AND NO MORE THAN 25 PANELS. This first draft is where you'll combine the images, captions, and dialogue together. At this stage, don't stress over pictures, formatting, or exactly how you're going to fit everything into a single panel. Just map it out by writing/drawing a series of rough "thumbnails" (or "storyboards") for each page.

Similar to when you outlined your story, determine the following:

- how many panels you think will be on each page
- what specific action happens in each panel
- a rough idea of the text (captions and balloons).

This exercise will show you how much space you'll need to get your story across, which in turn helps you assess if your pacing is right. If your scene takes too many panels, try rearranging things to convey the same meaning in less space. This is a valuable skill that will not only make your graphic story stronger, but it will also help you pace regular stories as well.

At the end of the day, the format may be different, but the fundamentals of storytelling are the same. You could do everything "technically" right when laying out your panels and formatting your graphic story script, but if the pacing and storytelling aren't strong, it won't matter.

Step 7. Revise and fine-tune your visuals

Now that you've got your story down, it's time to really refine your vision.

Go over your manuscript again, this time with a fine eye toward your panel descriptions. A writer should think of a graphic story much in the same way you would script a silent movie, such that the story could still be understood even if all the word balloons and captions were to fall off. With that in mind, making sure each panel is a strong visual that moves the story along is job #1 in a graphic story script; the words should come after."

If you're intimidated by this prospect, remember the "show, don't tell" rule and consider the following questions:

- How would you convey that a scene is sad, or joyous, or righteous?
- What sort of images, colors, and settings feel like those moods?
- What actions are your characters taking to reflect their thoughts and feelings?

Step 8. Tighten your dialogue

Before you turn your manuscript over to an illustrator, it's important to make sure your script is as tight as possible. You don't want to waste time ventriloquizing your entire story, only to have your illustrator come back to tell you that your pages are too cluttered. Learning how to think in pictures will help, but the other big thing you can do is go through and **trim your dialogue** to be as clean as possible.

The reason? Dialogue takes up *a lot* of space. Graphic stories need dialogue that is short, precise, and powerful. As you're drafting your story, ask yourself:

- Is there a more concise way for a character to say that?
- Does your character *need* to speak, or can a facial expression carry the reaction better?
- Does each line move the story or character arcs forward?

Step 9. Finish your story

Put the finishing touches on your story by making sure **all** of the captions and dialogue are correctly punctuated and that all words are correctly spelled. Seriously. Don't blow it now!

If you can, scan or copy your story to turn in to Dr. Sigalas. Then, announce your accomplishment to your family and take a bow when they applaud. Strut around the room and blow kisses if you want. You did it!
