Graphic Novel/Comics Terms and Concepts

Layout

Panel: A distinct segment of the comic, containing a combination of image and text in endless variety. Panels offer a different experience than simply reading text:

- The spatial arrangement allows an immediate juxtaposition of the present and the past.
- Unlike other visual media, transitions are instantaneous and direct but the exact timing of the reader's experience is determined by focus and reading speed.

Frame: The lines and borders that contain the panels.

Gutter: The space between framed panels.

Bleed: An image that extends to and/or beyond the edge of the page.

Foreground: The panel closest to the viewer.

Midground: Allows centering of image by using natural resting place for vision. The artist deliberately decides to place the image where a viewer would be most likely to look first. Placing an image off-center or near the top or bottom can be used to create visual tension but using the midground permits the artist to create a more readily accepted image.

Background: Provides additional, subtextual information for the reader.

Graphic weight: A term that describes the way some images draw the eye more than others, creating a definite focus using color and shading in various ways including:

- The use of light and dark shades; dark-toned images or high-contrast images draw the eye more than light or low-contrast images do
- A pattern or repeated series of marks
- Colors that are more brilliant or deeper than others on the page

Figures

Faces: Faces can be portrayed in different ways. Some depict an actual person, like a portrait; others are iconic, which means they are representative of an idea or a group of people. Other points to observe about faces include:

- They can be dramatic when placed against a detailed backdrop; a bright white face stands out.
- They can be drawn without much expression or detail; this is called an "open blank" and it invites the audience to imagine what the character is feeling without telling them.

Hands/Feet: The positioning of hands and feet can be used to express what is happening in the story. For example, hands that are raised with palms out suggest surprise. The wringing of hands suggests obsequiousness or discomfort. Hands over the mouth depict fear, shame, or shyness. Turned in feet may denote embarrassment, while feet with motion strokes can create the sense of panic, urgency, or speed.

Text

Captions: These are boxes containing a variety of text elements, including scene-setting, description, etc.

Speech balloons: These enclose dialogue and come from a specific speaker's mouth; they vary in size, shape, and layout and can alternate to depict a conversation. Types of speech balloons include those holding:

- External dialogue, which is speech between characters
- Internal dialogue, which is a thought enclosed by a balloon that has a series of dots or bubbles going up to it

Special-effects lettering: This is a method of drawing attention to text; it often highlights onomatopoeia and reinforces the impact of words such as bang or wow.

Definitions of features

Panel – Panel refers to the framed image. It offers the reader a perspective or point of view on the subjects also known as the camera angle. Sometimes panels do not have borders, creating a unique effect where the subject seems to stand outside the storyline.

Splash – Splash is a kind of panel that spans the width of the page. If it runs off the page entirely, it is known as a 'bleed'.

Voice over – Narrators have the possibility to speak directly to the reader through a voice over. Usually this is done with a hard line separating the narrator's speech at the top or bottom of a panel from the image within the panel.

Speech bubble – These are frames around the characters' language, a kind of 'direct speech', where the characters speak for themselves. If these appear as clouds, they represent the character's thoughts. If they appear in jagged lines, the character is shouting.

Emanata – This term refers to the teardrops, sweat drops, question marks, or motion lines that artists draw besides characters' faces to portray emotion.

Gutter – This refers to the space between panels. Readers tend to 'fill in the blanks' and imagine what happens between panels, a process known as 'closure'.

More aspects to consider

Style — The artist's drawing style can be discussed using several terms. Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, shows that there are four 'scales' of style: complex to simple, realistic to iconic, objective to subjective, specific to universal.

Color — The colors that an author uses will affect the reader's experience as well.

Narration – Keep in mind that comic books allow the writer to show and tell at the same time, meaning there can be a combination of direct narration and indirect narration.
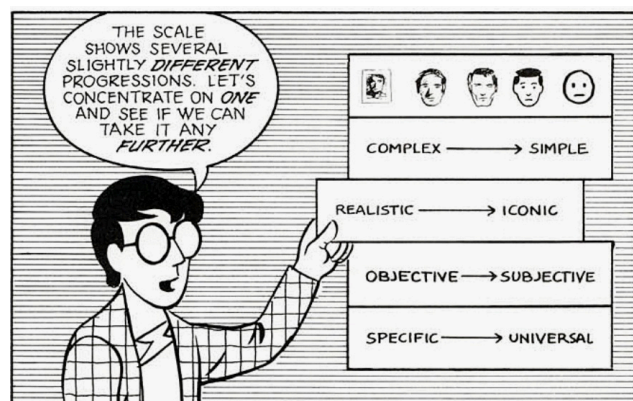
© Scott McCloud, 1993

Time – Graphic novels and comic books do not have to tell a story in a linear way. Besides the use of transitions between panels artists can explore multiple moments in one panel, like a collage.

Graphic weight – This term is used to discuss the amount of contrast in an image. Are blacks offset with whites? Are there many shades of gray in between? With regards to color images, one can look for the degree to which colors are vivid or opaque.

Foreground – Where is the subject or the point of focus for the reader? If the subject seems closer to the reader, in the front of the scene depicted, it stands in the foreground.

Midground – If the subject stands in the middle of the scene that is depicted, then it is in the midground. Placing a subject off-centre can also be used to create visual tension.

Background – The objects in the background (not usually the subject) help add contextual information for the reader.

Camera angle – If the panel were a photograph, where would the camera stand in relation to its subject? How far away from the subject is the camera? Is it a long shot, medium shot, or close up? At what angle is the camera pitched? Is it a bird's eye view, a high angle, eye-level, or low angle? All of this will have an effect on the reader's understanding of the subject.

Transitions - There are six types of transitions that artists use in comic books, all of which have a different effect on the reader. Transitions refer to the process of closure (where the reader mentally 'fills in the gaps') in the gutter, between panels.

1. Moment-to-moment

2. Action-to-action
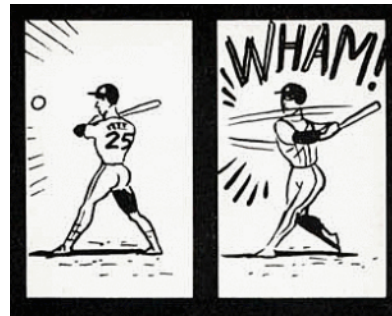
3. Subject-to-subject

4. Scene-to-scene

5. Aspect-to-aspect

6. Non-sequitur

Test your understanding

Apply the terminology that you have learned to the following page from Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi. Give a detailed analysis of the stylistic and structural features that she uses. Explain their effects on the target audience . Why has she made these artistic choices?