Adventures in Storytelling: An Editor’s Guide to Better Fiction

By

Rachel E. Frank

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2018
Table of Contents

Introduction to the Graphic Novel 1
Works Cited: Essay 24
Works Cited: Graphic 30
Graphic Novel: Cover to Postface 34-93
Resume 94
Introduction to the Graphic Novel

I’ll never forget my first graphic novel. I was 29 at the time, and my coworkers were obsessed with the upcoming Watchmen movie; they wouldn’t shut up about it. Curious, I did some stealthy research and discovered that the movie is based on a popular graphic novel from the 80s. To be honest, I’d never heard of it before then; graphic novels weren’t really on my radar. As a kid, I read my Dad’s dusty old copies of “Casper,” “Hot Stuff,” and “Sabrina the Teenage Witch” and enjoyed the fun stories, but I wasn’t really a comic book fan.

Watchmen changed all that. Here was a sophisticated fictional story, layered with texts and images. The anti-superhero storyline comprised the main narrative, but I noticed additional texts woven throughout. There were essays and journal entries written by story characters, and, most intriguing of all, a story within the story: a comic book about pirates being read by one of the characters. Wow, I thought. That’s neat. Fascinated by this blend of genres, narratives, and imagery, I sought out more graphic stories, from V for Vendetta to Neil Gaiman’s Sandman series. I couldn’t get enough.

Years later, in graduate school, I finally figured out why graphic narratives are so compelling. In my first semester, I was dazzled by exciting new trends in the writing world. Terms like “multimodal” composition, electracy, and “remix culture” danced through my head. Within academia and out in the real world, people were mixing words, images, sounds, and videos in new ways. They were “remixing” media and composition, turning the idea of traditional composition on its head.
Graphic novels and comic books have always been multimodal, mixing words and images in subtle ways that add extra layers of meaning to the story. This multimodality is why I found *Watchmen* so compelling, and why graphic narratives continue to fascinate readers.

As an outside-the-box thinker and writer, I soaked up these new ideas like a sponge. In fact, this flexible approach to content was the reason I chose Kennesaw State University’s MAPW program in the first place. Most creative writing programs require you to specialize in one area, but such a narrow focus never appealed to me. Kennesaw’s emphasis on “professional writing” struck a chord because I believe professional writers should train in a wide variety of genres. In any genre, a versatile writer is a good writer.

Nick Sousanis’s graphic dissertation “unflattened” my perspective on writing even more, and sparked my interest in a graphic thesis of my own. I still loved reading graphic novels and comics in my spare time, but I never considered the possibility of an academic graphic novel until I read Sousanis’s *Unflattening*. His work represents the seemingly impossible: a rigorous academic argument rendered completely in comics format. In the past decades, graphic narratives have infiltrated education in a big way, but academia is still quite traditional when it comes to dissertations and theses. A graphic dissertation is a game-changer for comics and academia – and it impressed me so much that I decided to attempt my own.

**Significance of Work**

This work capitalizes on, and contributes to, the graphic novel zeitgeist. In recent years, graphic novels have exploded in popularity. Public and school libraries regularly stock graphic novels, and the Library of Congress houses a 6,000-issue collection of comics, the largest in the United States (“Comics Collection”). Most significantly, comics
have made huge inroads in education, quite an accomplishment for a medium historically viewed as a lesser form of literacy. As Weiner and Syma observe in *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art*,

“In the past 10 to 15 years, the use of sequential art in education has exploded. Teachers in secondary and elementary schools, professors in universities, and instructors of all kinds are using comics and graphic novels to illustrate points about gender, history, sociology, philosophy, mathematics, and even medicine. It is no longer a question of whether sequential art should be used in educational settings, but rather how to use it and for what purpose.” (3)

This phenomenon dovetails with another academic shift: from traditional literacy to “multimodal” literacy. Multimodal texts create meaning by combining different “modes:” words, video, audio, images, etc. In a keynote speech at a CCCC conference in 2004, Kathleen Blake Yancy observed that "Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change. Even inside of school, never before have writing and composing generated such diversity in definition. Never before has the proliferation of writings outside the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside. Never before have the technologies of writing contributed so quickly to the creation of new genres” (Yancy 1).

Graphic novels are a natural partner for this new multimodal literacy; as Alissa Burger suggests, “Our contemporary culture is one of dynamic multimodal and interactive texts, a trend which extends well beyond the classroom, and for which graphic novel reading will serve our students well” (Burger 2). Ample scholarship exists on the successful use of graphic novels in academic classrooms (for example, Burger; Carter; Frey & Fisher; Miller; Syma & Weiner; Jacobs). Students engage with graphic narratives actively and
enthusiastically, especially reluctant readers who struggle with traditional literacy. But this radical new pedagogical approach isn’t as unprecedented as it seems; the very first teacher to use comics in his classroom was Rodolphe Töpffer, a Swiss educator and artist who pioneered narrative comic strips in the mid-1800’s. In fact, as Professor Sergio Figueiredo suggests, Töpffer may be the original comics scholar: “Töpffer’s essay may also be the first formal study of comics, particularly in terms of examining methodologies of multimodal composition, rhetorical significance, and printing and publishing technologies” (Figueiredo).

In a translation of his “Essai de Physiognomonie” included in “The Rhetorical Invention of Comics: A Selection of Rodolphe Töpffer’s Late Reflections on Composing Image-Text Narratives,” Töpffer suggests that those with little formal artistic training can make comics, what he calls “literature in prints.” He observes, “but there are books and there are books, and many very profound, many very worthy of admiration for the beautiful things they contain, which are not usually quickly perused by the largest number of people. Of the most mediocre, provided that they are sound in themselves and engaging for the strong of spirit, they often exercise a better understanding of an action and, in this regard, are more advantageous” (Figueiredo). In other words, simple art can create effective graphic narratives, making graphic storytelling accessible to a broad audience.

Modern comics scholarship has flourished in recent decades. Comicsresearch.org hosts a large collection of comics-related student research; as of this writing, there are almost 300 comics-related theses and dissertations listed on their site (Comicsresearch.org). And some students aren’t just writing about comics; they’re writing in comics. Jason Helms’ avant-garde doctoral dissertation, *Rhiz|Comics: The Structure,
Sign, and Play of Image and Texts, explores the interplay of images and words in a literal sense, mixing words with visual elements, including comics sections. Helms says he chose comics as his subject because they “perform the same basic operations all other media do, but more obviously, more basically...on every page of a comic, readers are forced to move rapidly, recursively from text to image. Comic readers consciously and unconsciously read images and see text (and vice-versa)” (Helms 3).

Unflattening, published in 2015, is the first fully graphic dissertation. In it, Nick Sousanis challenges the primacy of words over images. According to Sousanis, "Traditionally, words have been privileged as the proper mode of explanation, as THE tools of thought. Images have, on the other hand, long been sequestered to the realm of spectacle and aesthetics, sidelined in serious discussions as mere illustration to support the text--never as equal partner" (Sousanis 159). Sousanis’ main argument is that scholarly methods of knowledge creation are “flat” and prevent us from thinking outside the box; he suggests comics as one way to “unflatten” our perspective. In support of this theory, Sousanis crafts a dense visual argument that intertwines with his verbal argument and showcases comics’ “amphibious” ability to create complex shared meanings.

Scholar Dale Jacobs is a major advocate of using comics in composition courses, but he objects to the assumption that comics are simply a vehicle for teaching print literacy. He suggests that we view comics as complex multimodal texts rather than “debased or simplified word-based literacy” (Jacobs 3). In other words, comics aren’t simply illustrated stories: the interplay of text and images creates additional layers of narrative meaning that enhance traditional literacy. Jacobs adds, “If we think about comics as multimodal texts that involve multiple kinds of meaning making, we do not abandon the concept of word-
based literacy, but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies” (Jacobs 3).

These “other literacies” are spatial, gestural, and symbolic, and they have been explored outside the scholarly realm by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud. Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* legitimized and helped define the comics medium. Eisner coined the term sequential art, “a literary medium which narrates by the arrangement of images and text in an intelligible sequence” (Eisner 159). Eisner likens this “arrangement” to a language with its own grammar: “In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language—a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the ‘grammar’ of Sequential Art” (Eisner 8).

Scott McCloud expanded on Eisner’s theory, defining comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). McCloud’s work challenges the idea that comics are a lesser form of literacy; he argues that comics craft a complex narrative through the interrelationship between panels. For example, the gutter, the seemingly innocuous white space between panels, is vital to the reading experience. Panels represent seemingly disconnected moments, but reading across the gutter provides “closure” and “allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). This makes comics highly participatory, a “dance” between readers and creators. Linguist Neil Cohn takes Eisner and McCloud’s notion of “comics grammar” a step further, going on a deep dive into the realm of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols.
The theories, practices, and histories I’ve outlined in this section shaped my graphic novel in various ways. (I’ll discuss those influences in later sections.) Ultimately, I consider my project a contribution to the ongoing development of comics scholarship, multimodal composition, and multimodal literacies.

Methods and Process: Aesthetic influences

Many works influenced the aesthetic of my graphic novel, but none more so than *Understanding Comics* and *Making Comics* by Scott McCloud. McCloud’s seminal works took a serious look at comics and made the medium accessible. His style, which mixes humor and a conversational tone with rigorously researched content, is akin to my own, honed by years of writing creative nonfiction for HowStuffWorks.com. Visually, I paid homage to McCloud’s work in small ways: I emulated his bespectacled “narrator” character, inserting myself in the story as he did. The little Star Trek symbol on my narrator’s t-shirt reflects my own nerdy interests, like McCloud’s lightning bolt Flash t-shirt.

The book most directly relevant to my own work, *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*, strongly influenced my idea of graphic narratives about writing instruction. I was impressed by how the textbook employs a cartoonish aesthetic, conversational tone, and strategic use of color to make an intimidating topic like rhetoric accessible and fun. Jeff VanderMeer’s *Wonderbook: An Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* was another big influence on my style. Although the book isn’t fully graphic, it blends words and art, which makes it wonderful to look at and fun to read. I appreciate the book’s design; it provides content in a variety of forms, from essays by famous writers and editors to cute animated characters who help “guide” readers’ progress.
I attempted to create similar variety in my own novel with funny stick figure “guides,” asides, quotes from authors, and varied visuals. However, the overabundance of words still felt overwhelming to me as a reader, something I factored in when creating my own instructional text.

I admired a number of graphic novels for their aesthetic simplicity. I liked Roz Chast’s “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” for its sketchy, hand-drawn style and hand-drawn lettering; it reminds me of Töpffer’s work. There is something charmingly personal about imperfect aesthetic styles, and I resolved to emulate Chast in this regard. Ozge Samanci’s *Dare to Disappoint: Growing up in Turkey* has a similar, hand-drawn, hand-written charm, although she intersperses her own writing with typed fonts. In future drafts, I would like to explore this combination of hand- and digital-lettering. I also admire the simple style of *Maus*, the Pulitzer-prize winning graphic memoir by Art Spiegelman. In fact, Spiegelman first drew chapters of Maus using copy paper and a fountain pen.

Graphic works like *Fun Home* by Allison Bechdel and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi influenced the tone of my content. I liked the intimate style of their narratives and how it immersed me in unfamiliar worlds. Reading Chris Ware’s *Acme Novelty Library #20* and *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid in the World* was a surreal experience. His works are fascinating visual experiments that play with the temporal and spatial aspects of comics, but I found their narratives disorienting at times. His nontraditional style made me realize that a more traditional, straightforward style was best for my purposes.

Randall Munroe’s web comic, *xkcd*, had a huge influence on my aesthetic. Munroe inspired my use of stick figures to help illustrate topics and add humor, just as they do in
his comic. Stick figures work especially well because they are so cartoonish and are good at representing universal concepts. Munroe’s book, *Thing Explainer: Complicated Stuff in Simple Words*, also shaped my visual thinking. *Thing Explainer* is a graphic guide to complicated systems and objects (the space shuttle, for example), and Munroe’s illustrations are highly detailed. To counteract this visual complexity, he uses those same stick figures to add humor. This playful approach makes reading about complicated things fun, and I kept it in mind as I formulated my chapters on fiction (especially the more complicated techniques).

Nick Sousanis’s dissertation *Unflattening*, which sparked my own graphic project, provided me with some aesthetic food for thought. His dissertation showcases what a talented artist and a talented writer can achieve in the graphic writing medium. His visual work is dense and complex, on par with his verbal argument, which makes sense; Sousanis’s goal is to demonstrate comics’ ability to create complex visual arguments. However, some of his drawings are difficult to understand at first glance; like complex verbal arguments, they must be studied and unpacked. While I admired the precision and beauty of his imagery, my goal was the opposite of Sousanis’s: to reach a non-academic audience with simple images. Thus, McCloud’s style was more appropriate for my needs.

**Methods and Process: Tools**

I employed a wide variety of tools in the production of my graphic novel. I relied on recommendations from Jessica Abel and Matt Madden and McCloud, online comics creators, and product ratings to find the right tools for the job. However, I discovered that one size does not fit all when it comes to comics materials; trial and error is a vital part of the process.
For thumbnail sketches (the initial rough sketches of panel layouts), I first used 11x17 graph paper (Bienfang). Folded in half, this worked well for drawing rough sketches of the story layout, panel by panel. For the sketching itself, I experimented with a range of pencils, using mostly HB (equivalent of a #2 pencil) and the harder “H” leads (2H, 3H, 4H). Pencils on the “B” end of the spectrum are softer and leave a darker line, which makes them harder to erase. Also, early in the process I decided to keep my line art simple and not mess around with shading or contrasts. Thus, B pencils weren’t useful to me. Occasionally, I used a Pilot pen or a regular pen to draw thumbnails because it’s a quick, messy process that doesn’t require erasing.

For sketching drawings and building up my linework (called “penciling”), I did a lot of experimenting with pencils. First, I tried non-photo blue pencils (Caran d’Ache). Artists use non-photo blue pencils because the marks don’t show up in scans. The blue pencils worked well on sketch paper, but when I switched to smoother paper, they were too waxy to ink over properly. Tipped off by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden in Drawing Words and Writing Pictures, I switched to light blue erasable pencils (Prismacolor Col-Erase). However, these pencils didn’t mark well on the Bristol board either. In the end, I decided on H pencils for sketching and refining drawings.

For my paper needs, I started with sheets from an 8.5x11 sketchbook. This was cheap and available, and plenty of comics artists use simple sketch paper (McCloud suggests starting with copy paper in Making Comics). Sketch paper is reasonably heavyweight, so it doesn’t tear as easily as thinner paper. After my first chapter, as I began to understand the concept of comics reproduction and drawing larger than your published size, I switched to 11x17 smooth Bristol board (Strathmore). This is the paper that
professionals use, and I found it much nicer to draw on. Bristol board is thicker than sketch paper and designed to absorb ink better than normal paper. I had trouble with the Pilot pens smearing on the Bristol board, so I switched to 11x17 graph paper (the same type I used for sketching) temporarily, until I purchased better pens. Ultimately, the graph paper was too thin and tore easily when erasing, but I liked the grid, a classic drawing aid that helps artists with proportions and even spacing.

Next, I pondered inking tools. I decided not to try out the more complicated inking devices: brushes and nib pens. As a beginner, I felt the learning curve would be too steep and messy. I started out with a Pilot v7 Precise rolling ball pen, another Scott McCloud recommendation. However, I found that Pilot pens run out of ink quickly, sometimes smear on smooth paper, and take forever to dry. My second choice was a disposable technical pen, the highly recommended Sakura Pigma Micron. These professional-grade pens use archival-quality ink (useful for posterity), and they dry so fast (under a minute) that smearing isn’t a problem. I used the 08-size (0.5 mm) for lettering and panel borders, and the 05, 03, and 01 sizes for the finer details. I switched to the Sakura Graphic 1 calligraphy pen’s thicker line to ink my cover, table of contents, and selected text boxes and drawings. Overall, I liked the smooth, consistent line of the Sakura pens.

Getting rid of pencil lines is vital for reproduction, so I tried out various types of erasers. At first, I used a regular pink school eraser, but it tore the thin paper and left marks on everything. Next, I tried out two different erasers recommend by the professionals: white plastic erasers and kneaded erasers. Both types erase more cleanly than a school eraser, and you can mold the kneaded eraser into tiny pieces for finer erasing. By accident, I discovered a third type of eraser in a variety pack: art gum (Prismacolor). These erasers
are very soft and crumble easily, but they remove pencil marks better than any eraser I’ve ever used.

When making corrections, I used a Wite-Out Pen (as I mentioned, Pilot pens smear on Bristol board). Professionals use a special white paint and a brush to fix inking mistakes; this seemed complicated and potentially messy, so I tried Wite-Out first (specifically, a Wite-Out pen). Comics creators don’t generally recommend Wite-Out because it reacts with ink, but I found it worked fine on small lettering errors and stray lines. However, I experienced the expected problems (bleeding and a raised texture) when I tried to ink over text.

For my coloring needs, I chose markers, crayons, and colored pencils. I colored my first cover, table of contents, and page numbers with Sharpies. I didn’t like the results, however, so I switched to colored pencils and crayons for the second iteration. While I considered digital options, I felt that nondigital coloring would match the simple, hand-drawn look of my comic better than digital color.

When laying out pages, you need a good straight edge, so I opted for a 24-inch T-square (Staedtler). In the beginning, I used the T-square with a table, but this setup strained my back. I decided to invest in an inexpensive drawing board (Martin Adjustable Angle Parallel drawing board). I also bought an 18-inch inking ruler (Westcott) for measuring page dimensions and inking borders. Inking rulers have a raised edge that prevents ink from getting trapped underneath, which is handy when making comics. Pencils are ideal for drawing panel borders; mechanical pencils leave the lightest marks and don’t need to be sharpened.
When it was time to revise my pages, I decided to use a light box (Huion 19x14 A3 light pad). You can build your own simple version, but I needed one with a light powerful enough to trace through two layers of Bristol board. I used the light pad to trace my drawings from first-draft chapters onto fresh Bristol boards.

Initially, I didn’t use a specific tool for lettering; I drew words by hand using mechanicals pencils. However, this process was laborious, caused hand strain, and produced text of inconsistent size and spacing. Late in the process, I took Abel and Madden’s advice and used a lettering guide and rule (Alvin), a classic comics lettering tool. This little plastic device lets you draw guidelines for even, well-spaced letters.

Finally, for my scanning needs, I alternated between a small home printer/scanner and an industrial-size model (sometimes at Kinko’s, sometimes at my husband’s office).

**Methods and Process: Process**

In making my comics, I relied heavily on advice from McCloud’s *Making Comics* and Abel and Madden’s *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*. In the beginning research phase, I researched each chapter topic exhaustively and took extensive notes. I read a lot of books on fiction craft, but I also referenced reputable online sources: blogs and web sources by seasoned authors and editors (these sources are listed separately in my works cited page). Next, I wrote multiple drafts of each chapter using a script format. Scripts are commonly used in comics writing; they make it easy to “chunk” content into manageable pieces, which is very important when considering how much text to put in your panels. As Abel and Madden note, there are different types of scripts: “Some people write a script in just words first and then make rough thumbs as they go along… Others do their scripting
in the thumbnail sketches” (Abel 32). I opted for the former, creating at least four drafts per chapter, tightening the content and writing as much as possible.

In comics, it’s important to figure out your content before you do any drawing or laying out panels. “Because the interaction between drawing and writing is somewhat complicated, the best way to start any comic is to plan ahead and think it through before setting pen to paper” (Abel 32). Once the script was finalized, I started sketching thumbnails. On graph paper folded in half, I roughly sketched ideas (thumbnails) for the visual layout of the panels: drawings, words, word balloons, narrative boxes, etc. Thumbnailing tends to be a quick, messy process, but it is essential to planning out panels and creating a coherent visual narrative. During the thumbnail-creating process, I searched Google Images to brainstorm ideas for images. I also used it as a “figure drawing” reference, especially for hands and mouths in various positions.

Next, I measured out the panels using my T square, ruler, a pencil, and the edge of my desk. For the dimensions, I first drew at print size (8.5x11) because that’s the size paper I was using. The standard comic book page is 6.75x10, with a live area (the area where content lives) of 6x9. Later, when I understood more about proportions and how comics are reproduced – drawn larger (150% is standard) – I realized that the 8.5x11 paper wouldn’t work. Shooting for the standard 6x9 “print” size, I measured a 10x15 “live area” on the Bristol board using my ruler and T square: 1/2-inch margins on the left and right sides of the page, and one-inch margins on the top and bottom. I measured 1/4-inch “gutters” (the white space between panels), a standard size as well. In the first chapter, I was creative with panel layout, varying the number and shape of panels on my pages, but I quickly realized that a traditional 6-panel grid was more manageable for a beginner like
me. And, as Abel and Madden argue, there are advantages to uniformity: “Creating panels of uniform shape and size will give your comic a steady rhythm that you can punctuate and accentuate through repetitions and variations from one panel to the next” (Abel 71).

Once the thumbnails were complete and I was satisfied with the general narrative arc of my chapter, I sketched in greater detail, fleshing out the drawings. Next, I penciled in words. As I mentioned before, you have to be careful not to overload word balloons or text boxes with text; it throws off the panel’s balance. I had trouble with this in early drafts, but the lettering guide helped me break up the text into more manageable segments. Even so, some of my chapters are still too text-heavy, an issue I will have to address in subsequent drafts.

For the lettering process, I initially drew my words free-hand. However, I experienced legibility issues: too-small text, words running together, spacing issues, etc. After considering my options, I decided to standardize my letters using the Ames lettering guide. As I mentioned above, this tool lets you draw guidelines that create consistent letter spacing and size. I followed Abel and Madden’s suggestion to set the tool to line “5,” an average lettering size for comics. To make the guidelines, you set the tool on top of a T-square hooked to a straight edge, insert your pencil in the holes, and drag the guide across. Each setting lets you draw three lines for letters, a reasonable number for a comics panel. Abel advises drawing little marks at the end of the lines to avoid drawing letters in the wrong places, as I did several times. Mechanical pencils work best for this lettering process, but they break easily; I killed many a mechanical pencil in the process.

While some people finalize their sketches with a darker line, I sketch light and then finalize my images in the inking stage. There’s a refining quality to inking, at least in my
experience. Using pens (first the Pilot and then the Sakura pens), I went over all the pencil lines with ink: panel borders, words, and drawings. As far as I know, there’s no “standard” order for inking parts of a page; it varies from artist to artist. I alternated, inking words, speech balloons, and panel borders at different times. This was partly to minimize hand strain; inking words is hardest on your hands (you tend to press down harder), while panels and drawings are easier.

Although I made sure the language in my scripts was tight before the production process, I noticed further refining happening as I began to ink words. I suspect this is because inking is laborious, so you don’t want to ink more than you have to. Waiting for ink to dry is a standard part of the process; you don’t want to move to another panel element before the one you just inked is dry, or you’ll smear it with your hand. The Pilot pens took several minutes to dry completely, which caused some smearing issues. Fortunately, the Sakura pens dried very quickly, and I was able to move from word balloon to text to drawing at a fast pace.

Once all the pages were inked (and dry), I erased all the pencil lines. This is a messy process that’s also hard on your hand, but it’s unavoidable when using regular gray pencils to draw your panel content and borders. I used a combination of white vinyl/plastic erasers, kneaded erasers, and art gum erasers for this process, and all of them were effective.

To scan the finished pages, I first used a small Canon printer/scanner (when I was drawing on 8.5x11 pages), but I switched to an industrial copier when I began using larger (11x17) paper. Figuring out how to reproduce my pages has been an interesting, sometimes frustrating experience. When I used the industrial copier, I didn’t have access to my digitized files, so I printed out 8.5x11 copies of the original art and digitized those with my
home scanner. Later, I tried out the scanner at my husband’s work and was able to save my
digital files. Based on the recommendations of Abel and Madden, I scanned all my art at
600 dpi and saved my files as JPEGs.

For the coloring process, I tried out markers, but I didn’t like how bright and harsh
the colors looked. I toyed with the idea of digital coloring, but in the end, I opted for a
hand-colored look, using colored pencils and crayons. I decided to limit color to the cover,
which is more consistent with the style of other black-and-white graphic novels and
cheaper to print (should I choose to publish my novel one day).

The final stage of my process was revision. Based on feedback from my academic
advisors, I redrew images, revised and reduced text, and generally tried to improve the
visual and verbal flow of my narrative. Redrawing all of my images would have been
needlessly time-consuming, so I opted for tracing in many cases. Using a commercial light
box, I placed my original art on the surface, put a fresh piece of Bristol board on top of it,
clipped the pages in place, and traced the images with a mechanical pencil. Retracing the
first chapter was the most challenging because of the size; I had to adapt 8.5x11 pages to
11x17 Bristol board. Also, the images were too small for the larger panels on the Bristol
board, so I had to do some redrawing anyway.

Goals and Challenges

When I first dreamed up this project, I had several ambitious goals in mind. First
and foremost, I wanted my project to be a capstone in the truest sense: a project that
reinforces everything I’ve learned in the MAPW program. I designed it as a “final exam”
of sorts: a way to test out my skills and improve them as needed. I deliberately chose fiction
craft and editing as the focus of my project because I have a strong professional interest in
editing fiction. Although I learned many techniques and tips in my classes, fiction is a complex topic. They say if you know a topic well enough to teach it, you really know it, so that’s the goal I set for myself: to teach my “readers” and thereby improve my own skills.

This tactic worked, but it also challenged me to write my own fiction. For my chapters, I had to come up with examples and snippets of illustrative text on topics like point of view, showing and telling, conflict, and dialogue. Although I have a strong editorial grasp of fiction, I’m still a novice when it comes to writing the stuff. My examples were awkward at first, but I refined them during the revision processes, and overall, I feel more comfortable writing fiction now.

Even though Töpffer claims that comics writers only need basic drawing skills, I was still nervous about my drawing skills. My goal was to draw well enough to express visual concepts clearly, so that readers would be able to interpret them without issues. Overall, I think I succeeded in this effort; my academic readers appreciated my visual humor and were able to follow the visual narrative without problems. In fact, I was surprised by how well the drawing process went, given that I hadn’t drawn in years.

But, I did experience some drawing-related frustrations during the process. I had trouble drawing physical features accurately: hands, eyes, and mouths in particular. In some of the panels, I just couldn’t get the hands or eyes or mouth right, no matter how much I tried. However, with more practice, I’m sure my anatomy-drawing skills will improve. In general, my images still need work; there are more comics techniques that I could incorporate, and I would like more of my images to create their own meaning rather than rely on word-based visual puns and illustrations.
My third goal was to set a McCloud-like tone in my writing and art. McCloud strikes a perfect balance between humorous and informative, and I wanted to emulate that style. His style is much like my own, both personally and professionally, and I honed my creative nonfiction chops at HowStuffWorks.com. Based on reader feedback, I feel I achieved the desired tone, and I am pleased with the overall aesthetic of my work.

My overarching goal was to demonstrate the advantages of graphic narratives, and I think I succeeded. The visual elements of my narrative add layers of meaning that words alone can’t. They also entertain readers, which is especially important when tackling a complex and potentially intimidating topic like fiction. The inherent word limit of comics panels forced me to break my content into manageable chunks, and I think this improved my story as well. The challenge, of course, is that drawing a comic by hand is time-consuming and physically demanding; hand, eye, and back strain are serious concerns (just ask McCloud). Inking and lettering are especially taxing, and I suspect that’s the reason letterers and artists are often separate occupations in comics. Creating comics digitally is probably faster and easier on your body, but there are specialized skills needed, and sometimes specialized equipment.

Revising comics pages is a challenge because of the conjoined nature of words and images. There are little correction tricks – white paint, Wite-Out, and digital corrections – but if your issues are content-based, you may have to redo pages. Tracing helps reduce time-consuming redrawing, but it still takes time. This is why Abel and Madden were so adamant about planning ahead; there’s no “undo” button when creating comics by hand.

My ultimate challenge in creating a graphic guide on editing fiction was word-related. A book on writing instruction requires more words than a typical graphic narrative.
You need examples to explain the text, and in fiction, examples that are too short won’t be effective. An image- or concept-based book (like *Understanding Rhetoric* or *Understanding Comics*) doesn’t have these limitations and is easier to show visually. These are the questions that I struggled with: How do you come up with images for word-based concepts? And what about the examples? After going through this process, I understand why a book like mine doesn’t currently exist on the market. That doesn’t mean it’s impossible; despite some ongoing issues with the amount of text, I was able to cut down on words and still demonstrate fictional concepts effectively. It’s just a matter of balance and breaking up content effectively.

**Value of Work to Program**

In addition to the goals already mentioned, this graphic capstone’s larger focus was to showcase the possibilities of Kennesaw State University’s Master of Arts in Professional Writing program. Thanks to the MAPW’s broad focus, I acquired an impressive range of writing skills, from creative writing to composition and rhetoric. These skills are evident in the complex, layered narrative that has resulted, and that reflects well on the program. As the first graphic capstone in the history of the MAPW program, my work highlights the flexibility of the MAPW capstone. By blending writing genres and disciplines, as well as many other influences, students can potentially create unique scholarly work. Ideally, this capstone will encourage future MAPW students to “dare greatly,” attempting outside-the-box projects and testing the limits of their knowledge.

**Coursework Influence**

I designed my capstone to incorporate the various writing skills I gained in the program, so naturally, my coursework infused every aspect of the project. My advanced
fiction writing class taught me the elements of fiction writing, both as editor and writer, informing the content of my novel. Feedback during fiction workshops taught me how to write with an audience in mind, and how to tell a story. In the graphic novel, I tell readers a story about writing and editing fiction. Although I consider my work a novel, my creative nonfiction coursework still underpins the project’s approach and style. The graphic novel’s instructional format was inspired by my technical writing class, where I learned to present technical information clearly and efficiently, with audience considerations in mind. In fact, I learned about Scott McCloud in this class, a monumental influence on my thinking.

My document design class influenced the design of my novel, from layout considerations to page design. In fact, the course sparked a general interest in design and led to the creation of this graphic capstone. In my social media writing class, I learned about remixing forms of media and the shift to visual narratives and imagery in general, lessons that are directly applicable to this project. My web writing class honed my appreciation for rhetorical considerations like pathos, ethos, and logos, as well as audience and usability considerations. These influences filtered into my project on many levels, from the friendly, understanding tone of my narrator (ethos and pathos) to the rigor of my arguments (logos). My editing class provided the skills to write a novel on editing, including editorial work on a writing magazine. This experience was particularly influential in shaping the focus of my graphic novel, as well as the content.

**Literature Review**

In terms of graphic literature, there is a wide range of content available to today’s readers. There are graphic memoirs like *Maus, Persepolis*, and *March*; a series of “graphic guides” on everything from game theory to epigenetics; graphic biographies like *Gonzo*;
and even graphic novels based on Shakespeare’s plays. There is fiction like *V for Vendetta*, *Ghost World*, and *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Boy in the World*, and unusual offerings like *Citizens of No Place* and *Graphic Canon*. You can even find graphic novel coloring books.

As for instructional and academic graphic narratives, many of these types of texts are starting to emerge. There is a small selection of academic work in graphic format: Nick Sousanis’ *Unflattening*, Losh and Alexander’s *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*, Jessica Abel and Matt Madden’s *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*, and Jason Helms’ *Rhiz|Comics: The Structure, Sign, and Play of Image and Texts*.


With my own graphic narrative, I hope to contribute to both the academic and popular collections of graphic writing instruction – and to add something unique. My work is different from the graphic literature currently available because it tackles fiction-writing
from an editor’s perspective, an angle I haven’t seen thus far in graphic narratives on writing instruction. As a fan of books on editing fiction and other types of writing, I would love to see graphic-format editing books (including my own) appear on bookshelves and in classrooms soon.

**Final Thoughts**

Designing a graphic novel has been my most challenging writing project to date, a herculean task that has taken a physical and mental toll. But, it has also been the most fulfilling project I’ve ever attempted, and now that my writer’s brain is firing on all cylinders, I want to keep going. What other types of graphic content could I come up with? Traditional fiction? Experimental Chris Ware-like stuff? Or maybe a hybrid graphic-traditional novel? These days, the genre possibilities are only limited by your imagination. I still love reading graphic literature, but now my perspective has shifted. Instead of merely a content consumer, I now see myself as a content creator. The creative floodgates have burst, and suddenly, I want to tell all kinds of stories, graphic and otherwise – layered narratives that grip readers and haunt them for years to come, just like *Watchmen* haunted me.
Works Cited: Essay


Darwin, Emma. “Over-Done, over-Written and over here.” *This Itch of Writing,* May 2011, emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/2011/05/over-done-over-written-and-over-here.html.


Hardy, Janice. *Understanding Show, Don’t Tell (And Really Getting It)*. Janice Hardy, 2016.


---. *Point of View in Fiction*. Tongue Untied Communications, 2016.


Works Cited: Graphic Novel Resources


Darwin, Emma. “Over-Done, over-Written and over here.” *This Itch of Writing,* May 2011, emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/2011/05/over-done-over-written-and-over-here.html.


Hardy, Janice. *Understanding Show, Don't Tell (And Really Getting It).* Janice Hardy, 2016.

---. *Understanding Conflict (And What It Really Means).* Janice Hardy, 2017.


---. *Point of View in Fiction*. Tongue Untied Communications, 2016.


ADVENTURES IN STORYTELLING

RACHEL FRANK
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graphic Novel</strong></td>
<td>Preface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S-T</strong></td>
<td>1. Show &amp; Tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. POV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Writing Tight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postface</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface: Adventures in Graphic Storytelling

In recent years, graphic novels and comics have exploded in popularity. Libraries can’t stock them fast enough, teachers and professors are using comics in their classrooms, and, oh yeah, the Library of Congress boasts a massive collection. They’re kind of a big deal.

When it comes to genre, the sky’s the limit: You’ll find graphic memoirs, nonfiction (everything from cellular biology to civil rights), fiction (experimental and traditional), dissertations, and everything in between. There’s even a graphic textbook, *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*. Considering how poorly comics have been viewed for much of their history, a graphic textbook on a traditional topic like rhetoric is a game-changer.

It’s not surprising, though: Comic books have always eased reluctant readers into reading. Comics blend pictures and words to create an immersive reading experience. An intimidating topic like rhetoric is perfect fodder for graphic storytelling – provided with visual AND verbal instruction, students learn better (especially visual learners) and have more fun in the process.

Graphic books on writing instruction are becoming increasingly popular, both in and out of the classroom. Scott McCloud’s *Making Comics* in 2006 started it all, and then came Matt Madden and Jessica Abel’s *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* in 2008 (with a sequel in 2012). *Understanding Rhetoric* popped up in 2013, and Jessica Abel’s *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* followed in 2015. Even though Jeff VanderMeer doesn’t use a comics format in *Wonderbook: An Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*, the book still explores the visual possibilities of writing fiction via various types of art and images.

These are exciting developments, but there’s still a lot of room for exploration in this burgeoning field. This graphic work, for example, explores fiction from an editor’s perspective – an angle I haven’t seen yet in any published books and hope to see more of in future.

Gives the phrase “adventures in storytelling” a whole new meaning, doesn’t it?
INTRODUCTION SUPEREDITOR!

Hi, there. I’m Frankie...

Okay, I’m not really a superhero of any kind...

... but I do know a lot about writing and editing fiction.

As a former magazine editor, I used to read submissions by budding fiction writers. They often had great story ideas —

-- but they didn’t always know how to translate those ideas into great STORIES.
Often, newbie fiction writers produce enthusiastic drafts that are full of potential but lack structure.

"It was a dark and stormy night. There was a loud noise outside, and suddenly, an alien appeared! It was green and scary and had big eyes. And..."

Editors love fiction too, and we want to help, but wading through drafts like these can be frustrating.

-- even to experienced writers! But never fear: writing fiction doesn't have to be frustrating for you or your editor.

It's not surprising that new fiction writers struggle with craft. All these rules and techniques can seem scary--

Show don't tell
Needs more conflict
O PACE YOURSELF
PLOT
POV ERRORS
Suspense!

Come with me, and I'll show you how to write (and edit) better fiction... no tights or capes required.

An adventure in storytelling!
CHAPTER 1: SHOW AND TELL

You might have heard the following advice floating around out there in writing circles:

SHOW DON'T TELL!

Why would you want to show a story instead of tell it? Isn't telling kind of important to, um, STORYTELLING?

Short answer: YES. In the past couple of centuries, telling was the preferred style of fiction.

TELLING

Writers of classics like "Moby Dick" and "A Tale of Two Cities" felt free to TELL to their hearts' content.

"Call me Ishmael. Some years ago -- never mind how long precisely -- having little or no money in my purse and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the..."

But tastes have changed, in large part due to the influence of cinema and television.
The modern preference is for a more visual, "cinematic" style. And like movies, showing uses scenes.

These scenes allow us to experience the story in a more interactive way.

Janet Burway says it best: "Fiction tries to reproduce the emotional impact of experience."

But how do you "show" using words? We'll look at some examples. First, a passage that uses telling (for contrast).

Joe stared angrily at the table, avoiding eye contact with his boss. Mr. Paul had just insulted Joe in front of his colleagues, and Joe was furious. Mr. Paul was a terrible boss, always yelling at everyone. Joe hated him, and he hated his job. So he decided to quit.

"Smith! Where are those figures?" screamed Mr. Paul.  "Here they are, sir." Joe slid the folder across the table.  "About damn time! I asked for them a week ago."

Joe clenched his jaw. "Yes, sir, but then you asked me to re-do them. Twice."

"What? Are you calling me a liar, Smith?"

All around him, Joe could hear his co-workers, shuffling papers, clearing their throats, and staring down at the table in silence, just as Joe was doing. Joe's face flushed, and he averted his eyes. "Yes, sir. I am. He stood up. 'And by the way... I quit.'
See how this scene immerses us in the story more than the telling version? Now, we can feel Joe's anger.

Notice I snuck in a bit of telling about his co-workers' reaction. I did so to save time and space in my example, but in a real scene, you could show those reactions.

Parts of a story that involve conflict and emotion (we'll talk more about those things in chapter 3) should be shown--

-- so you can really hook your readers, and keep them immersed in your story world.

Now let's take a closer look at how showing and telling play out on the sentence level.

TELLING:
Joe stared angrily.
Joe was furious.
Joe hated his job.

SHOWING:
Joe clenched his jaw.
Joe flushed.
Joe averted his eyes.

In the showing example, the reader infers that Joe is angry from his body language. We just saw a few, but there are many ways to express anger physically.
Words like ANGRY, SAD, RUDE, BORED, and DEPRESSED are abstract concepts. They tell us about emotion but don't provide specifics that we can sense.

I'm angry.

Really?

Biting your lip, clenching your jaw, punching a wall, wrinkling your nose, biting your nails -- these are tangible physical actions that show emotion.

Whoa, she's mad!

Here are some more "telling" words to watch out for:

**ADVERBS**
Sarah shouted rudely at Joe.

**ADVERBS IN DIALOGUE**
"Whatever," said Joe sarcastically.

**TO-BE VERBS**
Joe was shy.

**HELPING VERBS**
Sarah had trouble being patient with Joe's shyness.

"Shutup, Joe!" said Sarah.

Joe rolled his eyes.

"Whatever."

Joe blushed. "Oh... h-hi, Sarah."

Sarah tapped her toe. "Come, Joe. Spit it out."

In a nutshell, showing lets your readers "see" your story -- and take part in it.

Hey, did you notice that dialogue is a big part of showing? I did. More on that in chapter 4.
It allows them to fill in the gaps for themselves -- and feel like you respect their ability to figure things out.

So, does this mean telling is a no-no? The BAD GUY?

The Darth Vader of the fiction world?

Nope. Telling has its own role to play in fiction. It's just a bit misunderstood (like Vader). We'll examine telling next.

As editor and author Marcy Kennedy says, "Showing and telling is all about balance."
Telling gets a bad rap because writers use it as a crutch. It's easier to write narration than to craft a detailed scene.

And to be fair, telling does have some disadvantages: author intrusion, "info dumping," and bombarding readers with dull exposition.

Jon was mad:
He hit his
Sister.

"Ow." Sally
rubbed her arm.
"What was that for?"

This is why "show don't tell" became such popular writing advice. But all writing guidelines have their limitations, and guess what? Too much showing can cause issues, too.

Consider this: "shown" scenes often require more words than "told" narrative, so a story that was 100% shown would be a bloated blob--

--flabby with details, slow, and likely to crush readers under its ponderous bulk.

That's why judicious telling is useful: it lubricates your story and keeps it moving smoothly.
Instead of fighting each other, showing and telling should work together to create a strong story...

So, when is telling the correct choice for your story? I'll show you some examples.

Hi, friend. Let's destroy all the humans.

Re-showing the same information would annoy readers and waste words, so how about a quick recap instead?

"You'll never believe what I saw," said Jenny. She told them about the zombie-vampire alliance, and their plan to destroy humanity. "No way," said Jeff.

Here's a classic "telling" situation: you've just revealed info to one character in a scene, and now she needs to pass that juicy gossip to other characters.

Or what if your characters all know stuff that your reader doesn't? Instead of awkward and contrived "As-you-know-Bob" dialogue to get the info across --

Dr. Bob: We've been working secretly for years now.

Umm, yeah. I know that.
-- how about a dash of telling? It moves the story along and lets readers focus on more important details.

"Dr. Bob and his fellow mad scientists had worked for Dr. Evil secretly for ten years."

Here's something to keep in mind: save your showing for big, emotional plot points and character developments.

Transitions are another place for telling. When characters are moving from point A to point B and nothing exciting happens, just give a summary.

Telling also works for transitions in time. Don't inundate readers with the boring details of mundane routines unless there's some drama in it for them.

"Telling is also a great way to set up an important scene."

Dr. Evil called a meeting in his secret lair.

Meeting Scene

Save your telling for the connecting moments in between.

Transitions are another place for telling. When characters are moving from point A to Point B and nothing exciting happens, just give a summary.

He scrambled out of bed, threw his alarm clock against the wall, leapt cursed, "Mornin's! He promised to get up."

Telling also works for transitions in time. Don't inundate readers with the boring details of mundane routines unless there's some drama in it for them.
People often rag on telling because it lacks the style and emotion of showing, but tells can be creative, too.

Basic Telling

“Joe Bob walked quickly down the hot sidewalk, shifting from foot to foot.”

**BETTER TELLING:**

“Joe Bob hopped down the scorching sidewalk, shifting from foot to foot to avoid touching the griddle-like pavement.”

Editor Arlene Prunki reminds us to make our telling “vivid” with strong verbs.

He was an unhappy man.

His sour attitude poisoned the air around him.

Authors like Terry Pratchett are master storytellers with a mesmerizing style, so their telling doesn’t feel boring.

Tell me more.

Telling is the most “show-y” when you filter it through a character’s perspective.

“(Joe Bob hopped down the sidewalk like a deranged frog, barely touching the griddle-like barely touching the pavement, sure he would burn his feet clean off.”

The more engaging your voice, the more telling you can get away with.

“...And then Jack chopped down what was the world’s last beanstalk, adding murder and ecological terrorism to the theft, enticement, and trespass already mentioned...”

Until you get a handle on telling strategically, it’s easy to overdo it.
Here's a fun idea from Marcy K: go tell-crazy in your first draft. Don't worry about showing until later--

-- when you can replace those telling words and phrases with scenes (as appropriate).

The "trick" to good showing and telling, says Janice Hardy, is to "weave your tells in with your shows so readers never get the sense that the author is butting in to explain something to them."

Great advice, but actually striking that balance can be hard. The show-tell ratio varies from story to story, depending on various factors.

Fortunately, you'll get better at this balancing act in time. Your "writer sense" will alert you when it's time to show and when it's time to tell.

My advice? Ditch that tired old saw and adopt a new mantra: "Show and tell."
CHAPTER 2: POV

Now that you got showing and telling, let's tackle another misunderstood topic: POV. That's short for point of view.

For such a little word, POV can be a hard topic to pin down. In fact, point of view may be the most confusing craft technique for fiction writers.

I suspect that's because point of view is a complex topic. When you break the concept down into simpler parts, POV is easier to understand.

Point of view is the perspective, or viewpoint, from which a story is told. POV comes in three different types, or "persons":

1. First person is the classic "I" narrator. A character tells the story from his (or her) personal perspective. *

   "Call me Ishmael..."

   MOBY DICK
   Herman Melville

   * He or she is often the main character, but not always.

2. Second person is a more interactive technique. The narrator addresses the reader, calling him (or her) by name.

3. Third person is more distancing. The narrator tells the story from a distance, often using "he" or "she" as a pronoun.

   Once upon a time...
   "I'm Buzz. Here's my story..."  "You are running..."

First person is a popular point of view, and writers don't have trouble with it (for obvious reasons).
Second-person POV is addressed to you, the reader, which turns you into a character.

"You're running down the stairs, feet slapping against each step. You hear heavy footsteps behind you..."

Some editors advise against writing a story in second-person POV because they worry that it won't be commercially viable.

Third-person POV is where things get complicated. Even editors don't agree on how to categorize it. Some say third person is an omniscient POV, while others say third person and omniscient are distinct POVs.

In spite of these words of caution, you should also know that some writers have used second-person POVs to wonderful effect. So, don't be afraid to try it out yourself.

Third-person POVs can be 1st person, 2nd person, 3rd person, or omniscient.

Plus, second person requires your readers to agree with the notion that they are the character. But if the character is unlikeable or offensive, readers might not play along (or keep reading).

You might recognize this POV from "Choose Your Own Adventure" books. Outside that genre, second person is more unusual, especially in fiction.
Omniscient point of view features an all-knowing narrator who can dip into multiple characters' heads and comment on the story. Because this POV uses third-person pronouns, I consider it a third-person POV.

Little did she know that Dante was her brother!

Here's an example:
Bill stared at the small slip of paper in his palm. He could barely read it, his hand was shaking so bad.
"Breathe, Bill. Just breathe." It was her number, he was sure of it. Well, almost sure.
"How did she find me?"

Notice how this POV lets us enter Bill's head? We feel what he feels, and we only view the story from his perspective (including limited insight into story events and developments).

Third-person POV comes in a third flavor: objective. This POV is often called the objective point of view.

An objective narrator doesn't comment on story events or dip into characters' heads. She or he simply presents us with the facts, kind of like a video camera.
Third-person limited also goes by the term “limited omniscience,” or as I call it, “omniscience lite.”

Once upon a time, omniscient point of view was the fashion—

“Truth is not universally acknowledged...” It was the best of times... Happy families are all alike...

A word of advice from writer Nick Mamatas applies here:

“Point of view is itself a matter of fashion and sensibility—what is point of view and how it works in fiction depends partly on your point of view.”

Third-person point of view can trip up writers because of all those distinctions, but it also gives them more storytelling options.

— but just like telling gave way to showing, point of view preferences have changed with the times. Modern readers prefer first- and third-person perspectives.

A word of advice from writer Nick Mamatas applies here:

“Point of view is itself a matter of fashion and sensibility—what is point of view and how it works in fiction depends partly on your point of view.”

Even so, there are advantages to adopting a popular point of view.

### 3rd Person Point of View

**Pros**
- Popular
- Modern reader preference
- Trendy

**Cons**
- Requires more research
- More difficult to write

Editors and publishers like readers like
Readers like first- and third-person POVs because both types immerse readers in the emotional experience of characters. They don’t just want to read the story -- they want to be in it!

Omniscient POVs, in contrast, are comparatively distant.

The concept of “distance” in narratives is directly tied to POV considerations. NARRATIVE DISTANCE is the relative intimacy between your readers and your characters/narrators.

This continuum impacts every aspect of your story. The “feel” of your narrative will vary depending on which way you slide.

At the most distance, you have the objective narrator, who just reports the facts. While this POV lacks intimacy, it’s detached perspective can work well in some stories.*

At the least distance, we find DEEP point of view. We’re so deep inside a character’s head that we almost merge with him.

* Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”
Charlotte Webb climbed up the hill in pink heels. She wheezed as she walked, and drops of sweat dotted her forehead. She stopped, took off her thick sweater, and tied it around her waist, wrinkling her nose.

Charlotte resumed her climb, and soon she arrived at the house at the top of the hill. Old shutters were falling off the windows, and piles of dog excrement littered the sagging porch. Charlotte gagged and covered her nose with a hankiechief.

"Bunch of animals," she muttered, wiping off the doorknob with her sleeve and pressing it multiple times. An old woman opened the door, frowning. "Yeah? What you want, lady?"

Here's an example of the objective point of view, the most distant, narratively speaking. Notice how removed the language feels? And how Charlotte's personality only comes across through her dialogue and actions?

Now let's reimagine that scene in deep POV, the least distant perspective (other than first person). Notice the emotion, the internal dialogue? Charlotte's personality infuses the prose.

Charlotte staggered up the impossibly steep hill in pink Louis-ouisins, wheezing like a dying engine, she could feel drops of nasty sweat dotting her forehead, her back.

"Gross," she stopped and peeled off her fine cashmere sweater, tying it around her waist. Her nose wrinkled. "God, it's so sweaty..."


"Bunch of animals," she muttered, wiping off the doorknob gingerly with her sleeve, jabbing the button several times. "C'mon, hurry up... An old crone cracked open the door, frowning.

These examples are two ends on the spectrum. There's a lot of room to play in the middle, depending on how intimate you want your story to feel.

Deep POV is trendy in today's fiction because it mimics the immersive experience of movies and TV (so much that books told in this POV sometimes become movies).
But that doesn't mean you can't tell an amazing story from a more distant POV. J.K. Rowling uses omniscient POV to Killer effect in her Harry Potter series.

To counteract the distance, make sure your narrator has a captivating "voice."

For instance, on the planet Earth, man always assumed he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much — the wheel, New York, wars and so on — whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time.

As I said before, don't be afraid to experiment. Clever writers have figured out how to combine POVs in ingenious ways, so why can't you?

Some authors mix third person with first. Others employ multiple first-person narrators and still others combine ALL the types.

Nick Mamatas is a POV pioneer. In addition to using multiple first-person POVs in his novel "Bullettime," he uses first-person plural ("we") in his story "Sensation." His narrators: a collective of sentient spiders.

You'll need a strong grasp of POV fundamentals before you can wield it like Nick Mamatas. But, you have to start somewhere so mix it up and try out different types.
A word of caution: when writers mix POVs types, they don’t do it willy-nilly. There’s a method to their madness.

Every type of POVs comes with a set of rules, and you’ll want to abide by those guidelines.

POV RULES
Use the right pronouns
No switching
No transferring
No sharing info POVs can’t know

This isn’t because editors are big meanies who hate free-spirited writing. Rather, they stand that poorly used POVs distract readers and can even break the narrative “spell.”

That’s a huge deal in fiction. If you yank readers out of your story with inconsistent narration, they won’t be too happy with you—or your work.

So, let’s talk about how to use point of view consistently in your writing, and how to spot POV errors.

“What a hot mess...”

“Head-hopping” is a classic POV mistake. The narrator leaps from one character’s mind to another in quick succession.
Here's an example:

Paula glanced at Raj and then averted her eyes. She felt tears in the corners of her eyes.

How can I face him after what I did?

Raj clenched his jaw. He wanted to tell her that he loved her.

That he forgave her, but he was so angry that he couldn't say a word.

Paula sighed. "Raj, I'm so sorry..."

Raj blinked back tears. "Paula... I think it's over."

What's the point of view here? We're in Paula's head, then Raj's, then back to Paula, and then we're with Raj again. This is a POV problem.

Why? Because it splits your loyalties. Should you root for Raj or Paula? All that back-and-forth shifting creates emotional whiplash.

Readers of fiction have a deep desire to connect with characters in stories, but they find it hard to connect with more than one person at a time.

When switching from one POV type to another in the same story, you must signal the shift with a transition. You can use a chapter break--

-- or a section break, like so:

Joe reached for his gun and shot the rabbit. He walked over and picked it up. He squinted. "Nice big one. She'll make a good stew." [BIG SPACE/LINE BREAK]

OR: * * *

Tom slumped over the small sink in his kitchenette, sponge in hand. He needed to finish the dishes before Marla got home, but his back twanged like a snapped rubber band.

When'd I get so damn old?
A physical separation on the page helps readers mentally separate characters, allowing them to focus on one "person" at a time.

Another common POV violation occurs when characters or narrators share information that they shouldn't have access to.

If Pete tells another character that his aunt Betsy is having an affair, yet you've already told readers that Pete and Betsy haven't spoken in years, you've got some "spladinin'" to do.

A related POV violation involves using language that doesn't match your character's style, background, or level of education.

Say you're writing a first-person
POV from the viewpoint of "Pete.
"Pete's" knowledge of story events and people is limited to his own experiences, personality, and his physical location in the story.

Unless you've established that Pete is psychic, or that he secretly spies on his aunt, this is a POV error. In other words, don't put plot information into characters' mouths if the characterization doesn't warrant it.
Let's revisit our Aunt Betsy character.

Say she grew up poor, dropped out of school, and only reads trashy tabloids. She loves cigars, whiskey, and swearing at people.

Let's imagine a scene between Aunt B and good old Pete:

"Peter Joseph, come here this instant."

Pete stumbled into the room, almost tripping on the dog.

"What's the matter?"

"How dare you accuse me of such a vile act? I'm appalled."

Pete blushed. "I swear, I didn't do anything. Cross my heart."

Aunt Betsy sniffed. "I should hope not, young man. Well, nevermind. We shan't speak of it further."

She walked to the kitchen.

"Would you care for some tea, dear?" she called over her shoulder.

Based on your knowledge of Aunt B, you probably noticed that her diction and manner of speaking is way off base. This is clearly someone else's Aunt Betsy!

I suspect the scene would go more like this:

"Pete! Get your ass in here." Pete stumbled into the room, almost tripping on the dog.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't you play dumb with me, boy. I know what you done."

Pete blushed. "I swear, I didn't do anything. Cross my heart."

"You're a damn liar, Pete Jones. And everybody's gonna know it."

She flung an empty whiskey bottle at him.

"You lousy, no-good..."

Word choice and pov work together to create a sense of mood and character.

This pov rule also applies to a character's general knowledge. Aunt Betsy can't spout random technical facts to make a plot point work.*

"Now, Pete, before I check this bottle at you, let me calculate the trajectory, taking air resistance, angle, and..."

*unless she's a secret tech savant.
Like any limited-perspective character, the only knows what she knows. And that's really what POV boils down to: knowledge. How much you want your narrator to be able to reveal in your story will impact your choice.

POV is still a tricky topic, so if you don't quite get it yet, no worries. You're in good company.

Wait, is that omniscient? Or am I head-hopping?

POV is one of those topics you might have to tackle multiple times--

but your efforts will be rewarded. So, keep reading about pov, try to spot it in your favorite stories, and practice, practice, practice.

Hey, this is omniscient pov! That's nice, dear.

Honing your pov skills will pay off in your stories--both traditional ones and the wild, Nick Mamatas-style experiments you'll create one day.

I'll leave you with a final thought: Trust your pov instincts. As Jeff VanderMeer sagely observes...

"Many times, too, point of view will choose you, in a sense. You will sit down to write a rough draft, and you'll just know what character to follow and whether you want to choose first, second, or third person."

Might I suggest a Grasshopper's point of view?

Good advice, Jeff.

Thanks.
CHAPTER 3: CONFLICT

Conflict is one of the most important and exciting aspects of fiction.

Why? Because conflict is trouble. And, to quote Janet Burroway, “In literature, only trouble is interesting.”

In other words, we like to see our characters struggle. It’s part of that vicarious thrill of fiction, something that we’ve talked about before.

Some have even suggested that fictional conflict lets us process our own aggressive feelings in a safe way.

Writers sometimes misunderstand how to use conflict in their stories because it’s not just about arguments between characters or super dramatic robot battles.

Story conflict does deal with forces in opposition, but it’s more complex than a confrontation. At heart, conflict is about DESIRE.
Tommy the Protagonist wants one thing, desperately: to save his farm.

But there are obstacles in his way. Tommy is broke. Big farming corporations with deep pockets want to buy him out.

Tommy must struggle to overcome these challenges, and there's no guarantee that he'll succeed.

A fight to achieve a desired goal with no guarantee of success? Now we're talking. Our conflict is taking shape.

As I said, conflict is complex -- it's layered, like a cake. And all the layers work together to make it irresistibly tasty to readers.

We already talked about goals a bit; they're those deep desires that kick off the whole conflict arc. Goals should be as specific as possible.

Defeat the Wicked Witch

- Save the farm
- Marry Frances

- Goals:
- Motivations:
- Stakes:
- Suspense:
- Tension:
How much the character wants the goal is also important. "The intensity of the wanting," says Burroway, "introduces an element of danger."

Goals must also be urgent. If they can be put off or delayed, why should the character pursue them right away? Goals must drive characters to act ASAP, or readers will lose interest.

All of these factors will make your goals better, but ultimately, a goal is only as strong as its motives.

But why does she want to win? To show off? So people will admire her? Is it a fitness goal, or does she want the prize money?

These might be good reasons for Beatrice, but why should readers care?

But what if she wants to win because the prize money will pay for her baby brother's cancer treatments, which she can't afford otherwise?
Now the reader is likely to care, even feel nervous about the outcome of the race.

Motivations that are deeply emotional for the character -- a homeless family, a pregnant wife -- will strike a chord with readers.

The higher the stakes, the more invested readers will be. James Scott Bell argues that the stakes in any "emotionally satisfying" story must be DEATH.

Physical death makes sense for a thriller, but what about less intense genres? Comedies? Bell claims that death-as-stakes works in any genre because there are three types of story deaths:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Professional

This is where stakes come in. Stakes are the consequences for failing to attain the goal. They tighten the story's emotional grip on readers.

Or how about our character Tommy? Why does he want to save his farm? His reasons are emotional.

- Family will be homeless
- Grandfather started farm
- Wife is pregnant

Reader

Beatrice and the Big Race
A famous lawyer risks professional death if he loses a high-profile case. Lovers in a romance novel will suffer psychological death if they can't be together.

Even in a funny story, Bell says, the psychological stakes must feel just as serious to the characters, even though readers know they're not.

"The people in the comedy need to think they're in a tragedy, usually over something trivial."

James Scott Bell

This odd juxtaposition of the trivial with the serious is the heart of comedy. We know it will cause trouble, and we gleefully watch it play out in hilarious ways.

It makes sense when you consider Greek dramatic history. "Agon" (struggle) was an essential element of early Greek drama, tragedies AND comedies. It was a ritual sort of debate between characters.

Or consider Shakespeare's work: his tragedies end in death and downfall, while his comedies conclude in life-affirming celebrations and good fortune, but both hinge on conflict.

In fact, Professor Ian Johnston says "disorder" is the theme of all of Shakespeare's work. Some event "upsets the normal order, creating confusion and conflict." This model persists in many genres to this day.
But wait, there's more! The two final conflict helpers are so closely related in function that people often get them confused.

Suspense is that feeling you get in your gut when you're engrossed in a story: you're excited, nervous, on the edge of your seat. You're dying to know what happens next.

Greg Johnson calls suspense the "delay of resolution," and that delay creates an exciting emotional experience for readers.

If suspense keeps readers on their toes, tension tightens those tootsies with worry. It is "the threat of conflict," says K.M. Weiland.

Remember Tommy? He managed to raise the money to pay off his farm. Success? No, because the big farm corps have hired thugs to seduce him off. What will he do? Oh, the suspense!

A cop hunting a Killer goes down to the basement to investigate a noise. To paraphrase Alfred Hitchcock, if we let the audience know that the Killer is in the basement before the Cop goes down the stairs, every step he takes will send chills up the viewer's spine.
Here's something to keep in mind: While there is always an element of tension in suspense, you can have tension without suspense.

Maverick storyteller Steven James offers a fascinating theory about tension: it drives stories, not plot or characters.

Tension and suspense help sustain readers' interest in your conflict by intensifying the emotional aspects of your story.

Now that we understand conflict a bit more, let's look at the types of conflict found in stories.

CONFLICT:
- external
- internal
- man vs. man
- man vs. Self
- man vs. nature
- man vs. society

Story conflicts can be external, internal, or a combination of the two.

External conflict deals with outside events and phenomena. EC can be as dramatic as an alien fleet trying to destroy humanity or as subtle as a thicketed love story.
External conflict must have an antagonist, the "big bad" who thwart the protagonist's goals. In many stories, the antagonist is a human villain.

"Man vs. (Wo)man"

However, the antagonist isn't always a person. A force of nature, like a thunderstorm, can serve as an antagonist.

"Man vs. Nature"

Internal conflict, on the other hand, takes place inside the protagonist's own head -- and only there.

"Mon vs. Self"

Internal conflict is the mental struggle to make the right choice, make a change, and maybe even grow emotionally.

Prosaic say you need to weave both types of conflict into your story for maximum reader engagement.

Now that we understand the nuances of conflict, how do we work it into our own stories?
Lucky for us, many clever editors and writers have pondered that very question and have come up with some great ideas.

Dwight Swain's "Techniques of the Selling Writer" is an oldie but a goodie. In it, Swain shares his technique for building conflict: scene and sequel.

For Swain, a SCENE is a "unit of conflict lived through by character and reader." Since scenes are the meat of a fiction story, Swain's system builds in conflict consistently, from beginning to end (resolution).

However, you don't want constant, unremitting conflict -- readers would get sick of that, even in a thriller.

Every story needs narrative pauses. Your characters and readers need a moment to think about what just happened and come up with a new plan.

Swain calls these moments SEQUELS. They allow protagonists space to process story events and come up with new goals, which will lead them to more conflict (scenes).
The scene-sequel technique is great for story pacing. It keeps your story chugging along.

Another technique that will help you nail conflict is Debra Dixon's GMC. Short for Goal, Motivation, and Conflict, GMC is Dixon's definition of plot essentials.

Dixon says that the best way to build conflict into your story is to create characters with strong goals, motivations, and conflicts.

GMC: C

GMC is for good and bad guys.

Dixon suggests using charts like this one to break down your characters' GMC in detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Internal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, here's a detailed GMC chart for Frodo, the protagonist from J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FRODO</th>
<th>EXTERNAL</th>
<th>INTERNAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GOAL</td>
<td>take ring to Mordor, destroy</td>
<td>get his life back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>save world, save loved ones, save self</td>
<td>hobbits hate adventures, ring is a burden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Sauron wants the ring</td>
<td>the ring is changing him, the ring is killing him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now that you know how story conflict works, time to start practicing: cook up some juicy conflict for your characters. In other words, go make some trouble!
**CHAPTER 4: DIALOGUE**

Dialogue is a perfect topic to follow a discussion of conflict. Why? Because dialogue is one of the best tools for adding conflict to your stories.

But first, a definition: DIALOGUE(n.
1. Fictional speech
2. He said/she said exchanges between characters
3. Not your garde variety conversation
4. Words with an agenda
5. A multi purpose tool
(* In the case of the Bechdel test, she said/she said)

---

First, let’s talk about the “paradox” of dialogue. Good dialogue sounds real and makes you feel like you’re listening to actual speech--

---

-- even though you’re not. Dialogue is a carefully crafted exchange that lulls you into thinking it’s the real deal.

---

In reality, our conversations (especially small talk) are dull and unfocused.

Of course, not every real one is boring. When our emotions run high, our conversations get more interesting (but not always more focused).

---
Good dialogue focuses the talk, making it tight and compelling, and gets rid of the boring bits.

Jerk. → Did you just call me a jerk? Did you just call me a jerk?

Did I shutter? wow, talk about rude.↵

A big, fat JERK. Did you just call me fat?

What if I did? That's it... I'm leaving.

In other words, characters in fiction never have random chats. There's always a motive, and often, a clash of desires.

Sound familiar? This is why dialogue scenes are fertile soil for sowing conflict, tension, and suspense.

Direct confrontations are good, but there are subtler ways to stir up conflict in dialogue. For example, unexpected responses:

Instead of this:

"You wanna go on a hike?"
"Yes, I'd love to."

Try this:

"You wanna go on a hike?"
"God, stop asking me that."

Or you could have a character answer a question with another question, like so:

Do you want TACOS for dinner? Why would I want TACOS for dinner?

Cryptic responses like these will snag readers' attention and make them wonder what's up.

No idea. Let's keep reading!
A lot of the punch of dialogue comes from characters not saying what they mean or with holding information.

**Subtext** is the very definition of not saying what you mean, the beast lurking beneath the surface of the conversation.

I hate sailing!

I hate the ocean!

They hate each other.

Conflicts is the only thing that dialogue can do for a story. It's a multitool; you can use it to build in lots of story elements.

Dialogue can help us show our scenes instead of telling them. Remember this from Chapter 1?

Dialogue helps create the immersive experience our readers crave. They want to be in the conversation rather than read about it.
Dialogue is a natural way to build characters. Why? Because our words tell people who we (and characters) are: our biases, our opinions, our upbringing, etc.

Here's an example:

Madison sighed. "Daddy? Do I really have to wash the dishes? I, like, just washed them the other day." Her dad snorted. "The other day? Try two weeks ago, Madison."

"Whatever. Anyway, I can't... I'll totes ruin my nails."

"Maybe you'd like to pay for those nails yourself next time, young lady?"

"Daddy!" She stomped into the kitchen, muttering to herself. "Freaking tyrant..."

We can tell a lot about these two from their conversation...

Notice, too, that their speech patterns are distinct. She uses a teenage dialect and slang, while he sounds like a normal (albeit a bit formal) adult.

This is unfair! The word is "totally." Madison.

You can write unique-sounding characters with all kinds of verbal markers and quirks. These should make your characters sound different from each other and reveal who they are.

Speaking of revealing language, dialogue is great for "reveals"; surprise information and plot twists that move your story forward. Jordan Rosenfeld calls this the "Luke-I-am-your-father" technique.
Here's a more down-to-earth reveal:

Rick shifted in his seat. “Before the accident, your parents talk to you about ... adoption?”

“Same,” said Sarah. “Why?”

“Any specifics?”

Her brow scrunches up. “Just that it was local.”

Rick coughed. “Local, yeah... Skokie, actually.”

“Skokie? But I thought...”

“You were born there ... at Nana and Papa’s place.”

“Nana and Papa’s... what?”

“A father remembers his kid’s birth, trust me.”

I sped up the example for illustration purposes. In a real story, you'd want to draw out the tension even more by delaying the reveal.

Dialogue has another trick up its sleeve: It can help you avoid the dreaded “info dump.”

INFO INFO INF

INFO INFO INFO

INFO INFO INFO

INFO INFO INF

Setting descriptions, for example:

The screen door twanged, and Pete stepped into the kitchen.

“Whew! Those fumes are killer.” Jess was at the sink, scrubbing a plate and humming to a song playing on her earbuds.

“Mrs.?” he said. “Hey, Jennifer!”

She didn’t reach, so he tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hey, can I borrow your...”

“Holy sh... she spun around, plate sailing out of her hand and into the fancy Viking range. Pete eyed the dent. “Your Mom gonna kill you...”

Readers generally dislike info dumps, and they also slow down your story. Instead, use dialogue to slip in little bits of info in a more subtle way.

Notice the sneaky setting details? What the kitchen looks and smells like, implying a recent remodel. This description works better than a big info dump about a remodel, and it's more interesting coming from a character.
Dialogue helps you streamline your story in many ways, especially pacing. Pacing is the "pulse" of your story; the speed at which events unfold.

I Ideally, you want a good balance of fast and slow pacing, but new writers often err on the side of slowness. Quick-moving dialogue exchanges will speed up your scenes.

"Why are you such a pain?"
"Please. You love pushing my buttons. Always have."
"Me, a pain? That's rich."
"Well, you started it. You never liked me--"
"Can we get back to Mom's funeral arrangements, please?"
"Can we...? Wow, you take the cake."

See how fast that back-and-forth is? And when you need to slow things down, you can insert other narrative elements as needed. Your pacing needs will vary depending on genre and other factors.

Good dialogue can work wonders, but don't ruin all your hard work by formatting it wrong. We'll look at common conventions for formatting dialogue next.

As a rule, stick with plain speech tags like "said." Creative tags distract readers and draw attention to the mechanics of dialogue instead of the content.

"You're wrong."
"You're wrong," he INSISTED.

He said

"Who said you could be here?"
"Who said you could be here?" said Sally.
Beats add variety to dialogue. They also ground your characters in a physical environment, which helps you avoid “talking heads” syndrome.

People sometimes quibble over terms, but they all mean the same thing: internal dialogue is the conversation you have with yourself in your head.

This makes internal dialogue a gold mine for fiction writers. It gives us access to our characters' innermost parts -- rich fodder for stories.

While conversation between characters is a vital part of fiction, so is the conversation within them.

-- a stream of private thoughts, dreams, fears, self-delusions, and more. Our true character, laid bare.

Internal dialogue pulls readers deep into your story... "Deeper than intellect, than blood and guts," says Elizabeth Sims, "to the living marrow of your story."
This private connection between characters and readers inspires trust, adds Sim's. And trust is a powerful ally in the ongoing battle for readers' hearts.

Direct internal dialogue is a character's direct, verbatim thoughts. You signal direct thoughts with italics, like so:

Anika stared at Jonathan, her date for the evening.

Do I really have to spend all night with this dude? I hate my life.

However, this convention isn't as rigid as it used to be, so here are some more options to choose from:

- **TAG**
- **Italics**

  Tom stared at her. Am I going crazy?

- **Italics**
- **TAG**

  Tom stared at her. Am I going crazy? he thought.

- **TAG**
- **Italics**

  Tom stared at her. Am I going crazy? he thought.

These "rules" are more best practices than unbreakable edicts, but follow this one: to the letter: always write direct internal dialogue in PRESENT tense and first-person POV.*

Sam shifted his weight, but the seat still pinched. Do they think everyone is a size zero?

*This is because thoughts are immediate. They happen in the present.

Indirect internal dialogue conveys a character's generalized thoughts with third-person pronouns. You don't have to set these thoughts off with tags or italics.

Taryn bit her lip and glanced around the table.

Maybe she should try that pink cocktail. It might calm her nerves and make her less awkward.

I'm such a loser.
Notice how I used both types in that last example? They work well together in a story.

Now that the formatting is sorted, let's look at what internal dialogue can do for your story. Hint: it's just as versatile as spoken dialogue.

Internal dialogue is even better for character-building because people will only admit so much out loud, but anything goes inside our heads.

You can create an interesting contrast by pairing internal thoughts with spoken dialogue. External behavior doesn't always match internal beliefs.

Honey, I'm swamped. Can you take the kids today? Sure, no problem.

Like I don't have a million other things to do today...

Along those same lines, you can show your character's real opinions using internal dialogue.

Internal dialogue is great for showing readers why characters do what they do. And as we discussed in Chapter 3, believable actions and motivations are vital to good fiction.

I love these! But are they too tight? No, they look great.

I stole those pants for her own good! Whatever you say.
As with spoken dialogue, you can sneak in other story elements via internal dialogue.

Here's an example that filters setting and backstory through the POVs character's internal perspective:

Jessamine shivered. Her Granny Eve's house, a witty old Victorian, felt like an ice cave. There used to be a fireplace, where they'd made s'mores a billion times. Burned ones, of course.

She scanned the room. Nasty old newspaper. Rat droppings. And there in the back corner, the stupid fireplace--boarded up. Just my luck.

Be careful not to overuse internal dialogue, though--it will make your story drag. And as Mary Kenny points out, it may create a "claustrophobic" experience for readers.

Infiction, dialogue is never just random chatting--and words are never just words.

Steven James puts it perfectly:

"Words can be barbs. They can be sabers. They can be jewels. Don't let them be marshmallows that are just passed back and forth."

You gonna play that off what?
CHAPTER 5: WRITING TIGHT

Now that you're familiar with the major fiction techniques, let's take a look at your writing overall. We'll discuss ways to fix wordy prose and learn how to write tight.

Many beginner writers suffer from a bad case of "overwriting"—wordy, repetitive, flabby prose.

Overwriting is problematic for a publisher, who has to stick to established word counts for publishing fiction. The writer has to toe this line, too, or risk rejection.

Overwritten prose hinders clarity, too. Readers get so tangled up in verbiage that they can't follow your story.

First drafts are always wordy and overwritten, but that's okay. I think there are definite advantages to a loose, messy drafting style.

Editor C.S. Lakin notes that overwriting is "probably the most common flaw of fiction writing, and its tentacles reach into every aspect of a writer's story."

Editor C.S. Lakin notes that overwriting is "probably the most common flaw of fiction writing, and its tentacles reach into every aspect of a writer's story."

Overwriting is problematic for a publisher, who has to stick to established word counts for publishing fiction. The writer has to toe this line, too, or risk rejection.

Overwritten prose hinders clarity, too. Readers get so tangled up in verbiage that they can't follow your story.

First drafts are always wordy and overwritten, but that's okay. I think there are definite advantages to a loose, messy drafting style.

* Average word counts, according to the Manuscript Appraisal Agency.
Drafting fast and loose gets the raw ideas down on the page--while editing refines and improves them.

The word "revision" can strike fear into the heart of any writer. It's not easy to edit your own work.

"REVISION"

We get attached to our words and don't want to let go, even when they hurt our stories.

Here's a tip: ignore your draft for a few hours, days, or longer. This "pause" can provide the detachment you need to tackle revisions.

Also, try to think of the editing process like the pros do: as just another part of the writing process.

The reward for your efforts will be tighter writing and better stories for your readers.

* Theodore Cheney says this is also part of the process.
This chapter focuses on tightening on the small scale: single words, sentences, and paragraphs—

---

but before you start, take care of big-picture issues first. Cut or pare down larger elements if they don’t move the story forward.

CHAPTER — SCENE — CHARACTER

---

DIAGLOGUE — DESCRIPTION

---

My story

---

Once the big picture looks good, it’s time to fine-tune the writing itself. Overwriting takes many forms.

---

Redundancy is a common culprit. You repeat words or synonyms and generally use more words than necessary to express yourself.

---

I should clarify that repetition isn’t a problem when done on purpose, for stylistic effect—

---

but when unplanned or done poorly, repetition clutters your prose and looks amateurish.

---

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

---

"It was a good time, it was a pretty bad time and... if was..."
Redundancy can pop up in different forms. First, in simple repetition of words.

Then there are tautologies; they express one idea using extra words.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{baby puppies} & = \text{puppies are babies} \\
\text{usual habit} & = \text{habits are usual} \\
\text{cash money} & = \text{cash is money} \\
\text{disappear from sight} & = \text{disappear implies "from sight"} \\
\text{small in size} & = \text{small is a size}
\end{align*}
\]

These little redundancies might seem harmless, but cumulatively, they add bulk and imprecision to your writing.

"As was their usual habit, the baby puppies, who were small in size and brown in color, would disappear from sight at 5am in the morning."

Repetition can also infest your character descriptions. Here's an example:

Sam stared at Mona, his blue eyes narrowing. "Are you spying on me?"

"No, of course not," she said.

Sam narrowed his baby blues. "Uh huh, sure."

This one's a twofer: Repeating Sam's action beats narrowing his eyes, and his eye color is boring and annoying.

When you repeat something, observes Sol Stein, it loses half its impact. He calls this theory "one plus one equals a half."

\[
\text{She was a mean old bird, her mouth sour and pinched like she sucked on pickles.} +
\text{Even her eyes were ill-mannered, squinty and suspicious.} = \frac{1}{2}
\]
These two descriptions belabor the point: the old lady is mean. Stein advises cutting some of these "one-plus-ones" to improve pace.

She was a mean old bird, her mouth sour and pinched like she sucked on pickles.

Even her eyes were ill-mannered, squinty and suspicious.

And speaking of belabored syntax, let's talk circumlocutions. Dave Baker says that circumlocutory phrases "try to take the long way home."

at this point
in time
Now
In spite of the fact
Although
due to the
fact that
Because

Here are some other roundabout constructions. Watch out for these:

- Paul is a man who likes corn.
- Paul loves corn.
- New York is a city that people call the "Big Apple.
- People call New York the "Big Apple.
- The car was green.
- The car was a green one.

On their own, circumlocutions often spoil your sentences, but when they team up, they create unreadable prose.

"Gustavo was a man who loved Esmerelda, and she was a woman who loved him back. Due to the fact that Esmerelda was not of age, her father, who was the traditional type, would not allow Esmerelda to..."

Passive constructions also add length and looseness to prose. Be-verbs team up with action verbs and direct objects to form the passive voice.

Be-verbs "passify" your sentences by stealing agency from the subject. The emphasis is all wrong.

"The knife was grabbed by Betsy."
Here's a revised version with an active verb. Betsy's back in charge of her sentence, and somebody's in trouble!

"Betsy grabbed the knife. Her attacker frowned and took a step back..."

The active voice strengthens your sentences. It also hooks your readers. "The more action," says William Noble, "the more the reader gets into the story."

"Sir Ted stormed the castle, guards blazing..."

"The castle was stormed by Sir Ted. His guards were blazing..."

However, don't nix all instances of passive voice. Sometimes, passivity serves a purpose.

"The prisoner was handcuffed by the guard."

Be-verbs aren't the only verbs that loosen up sentences. Here are some others:

- She arrived at a decision → She decided.
- The car came to a stop → The car stopped.
- The man got yelled at by his boss.
- The man's boss yelled at him.
- Mr. Jones made reference to the sales report.
- Mr. Jones referred to the sales report.

"There" and "it" combined with be-verbs (there is, it is) are called expletives. Not the modern definition, of course -- the old-school meaning:

1. Empty words that add nothing but fluff to sentences.
2. Swear words, baby.

Filler words pad your sentences but don't usually add value. Helen Sword dubs them "waste words."

THIS THAT THERE

"Oh, you know what I mean."

Filler words pad your sentences but don't usually add value. Helen Sword dubs them "waste words."

1. Empty words that add nothing but fluff to sentences.
2. Swear words, baby.
Paired with be-verbs, “there” becomes a generic catch-all that does nothing but conceal the real subject of the sentence.

There are five cats on the porch.
Five cats are on the porch.

The same thing happens with “it was” and “it is.” Expletives are fine occasionally to vary sentence rhythm, but easy does it.

(It was) Sarah who won the baseball game.
Sarah won the baseball game.
(It is) time to eat.
Time to eat.

The word “this” can cause problems when used as a vague referent for a noun. “It” and “there,” too.

This was a problem she had to fix.
This = ???
She hit the ball with the bat and broke it.
It = ball? bat?

Our final fluff word, “that,” creates wordiness issues when linking clauses. You can often delete “that” in these cases without losing meaning.

Sarah is the woman that you love.
The book that I bought is very funny.

Prepositions are helpful little words that orient our writing, but they create prose pile-ups when used to excess.

When you litter your sentences with prepositions, you get out of control syntax and unreadable prose.

Bethany was of the opinion that the item from the jewelry box, a necklace made of gold, was owned by her grandmother, who came to America...
A good rule of thumb: try not to use more than three prepositions per sentence.

"She ranted about the tax increase, sure of her argument and ready for any opposition."

Excessive modifiers (descriptive words like adjectives and adverbs) can also weigh down your prose.

Even Mark Twain has a cheeky take on the subject. He says:

when you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are far apart.

A lively debate rages among writers, editors, and readers about adjectives and adverbs. Some say chuck 'em entirely, while others champion a more moderate approach.

The reason adjectives and adverbs get such a bad name? They're a lazy writer's crutch—we lean on them for our description needs when there are better ways to do it.

It's easy to go overboard with modifiers, loading up on adjectives and adverbs like we're Oprah giving out free cars.

The frail, frazzled old king jumped wildly and unexpectedly from his ornate, gem-aden...
We forget (or don't know) that strong verbs and nouns pull their own descriptive weight.

Instead of propping up a weak verb with an adverb, employ a strong, specific verb.

Jump quickly

leap spring bound hop

And instead of pairing a generic noun with a lackluster adjective, opt for a strong, sensory noun.

tall + man

a giant

generic

(image)

nude specific

(supertall)

These shambling creatures can overrun your prose like a zombie horde, sucking the life out of it.

Toby gave a demonstration of the technique.

Abstract nouns like "beauty" are okay in moderation, but beware overusing them—especially "zombie nouns," Helen Sword’s term for nouns cobbled together from other parts of speech.

Demonstrate/Demonstration

Decide/Decision

Careful/Carefulness

Suggest/Suggestion

Clarify/Clarification

Reflect/Reflection

*Zombie nouns are also called this.

Instead, resurrect the active verbs hidden inside the zombified nouns and use them to build better sentences.

Toby demonstrated the technique.

Impressed, his boss decided to promote him.
Despite the power of strong verbs and nouns, we still need adjectives and adverbs at times.

1. Add new info that verbs and nouns can’t
2. To add special flair to our writing.
3. To plant a specific image in readers’ minds.

While some modifiers add too much meaning to sentences, others add too little. Qualifiers, for example:

- basically
- actually
- sort of
- kind of
- a little

He was sort of drunk.

What does "sort of drunk" mean? It’s vague and evasive. Here the advice of writing legend William Zinsser:

"Don’t say you were a bit confused and sort of tired and a little depressed and somewhat annoyed. Be tired. Be confused. Be depressed. Be annoyed. Don’t hedge your prose with little timidities."

Delete those indecisive qualifiers, or replace them with a more specific word instead.

- He was sort of drunk.
- He was hammered/wasted.

Intensifiers are modifiers that are supposed to intensify words, but they often dilute prose instead.

- The umbrella was so wet.
- That girl is too funny.
- He was really annoying.
- Mrs. Tibbs wore a very red hat.
Replace those weak-sauce words with more specific options:

- The umbrella was drenched.
- That girl is hilarious.
- He was annoying.
  OR:
  He was vexing/infuriating.
- Mrs. Tibbs wore a red hat.
  OR:
  Mrs. Tibbs wore a scarlet/crimson hat.

These guidelines will help you tighten your writing, but break them as needed in dialogue. Real speech is full of redundancies and convolutions. Borrow a bit of that flavor as needed.

He was so out of it.

I'm gonna kill him.

Those shoes are ridiculously cute.

He's a man who likes his whiskey.

Writing that's full of flowery language -- the dreaded "purple prose" -- can bog down any plot.

Tabitha's ample bosom heaved with trepidation, and she could scarcely catch her breath. "Whatever shall I do?" she lamented.

From the smooth wooden balustrade of her father's pastoral abode, she surveyed the verdant fields that sprawled the landscape. She trembled violently at the sight of the venerable forest yonder.

Notice the overload of description, the telling instead of showing, the "fancy" words? This kind of pretentious drivel drives readers mad.

ample bosom
lamented
abode
verdant
heaved with trepidation
balustrade
YONDER

In general, too much detail will balloon your writing. Here's a common sin: blow-by-blow accounts of a character's movements.

Robert stepped out of the car, slammed the car door, walked toward the house, mounted the steps, opened the door, and called to his wife....

When we bring that paragraph back down to earth, we can focus on Tabitha's dilemma, not a bunch of highfalutin language.

Tabitha, sucked in short breaths and dug her nails into the balcony. "Calm down, girl. Think. What are your options?"

From her Dad's cabin, she could see the grassy fields and Old Man's Forest looming in the distance, taunting her. She shivered.
Excessive "stage directions" drive readers crazy. Readers are smart enough to fill in the gaps.

Robert slammed the car door and walked to the house. "Honey, I'm home."

Thank you! Gotcha.

Concise is nice, but style and other considerations are factors, too. As William Brohaugh puts it (concisely):

We seek concision to serve precision. And, ultimately, we seek concision to preserve clarity, flow, and readability. So, when wordy works, be wordy when long works, go long.

Modifier minimalists might not dig her style, but notice how she blends adjectives and adverbs with strong verbs and nouns? She's good.

One of my favorite modern authors is Arundhati Roy, who paints word pictures with her lush prose:

"Mayin Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks, and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute blue bellies hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes, and die, fatly baffled in the sun."

Tight writing goes hand in hand with diligent editing. The more you revise, the tighter your drafts will be. So, roll up your sleeves, pull that draft from the drawer, and keep Jodie Renner's advice in mind.

"Just cut the excess, blah-blah, and leave the gems behind."
Postface: The Graphic Thesis and Beyond

When I first came up with the idea of a graphic novel for my master’s thesis, I didn’t know what I was getting into. I had just learned about Nick Sousanis’s graphic dissertation and thought it sounded like a great idea. “I can draw,” I thought. “Sort of.”

Or blame it on Töpffer. The Swiss educator and serial doodler (who is now considered the Father of Comics) had an intriguing theory: anyone can create stories with words and art, regardless of artistic talent. I decided to test his theory – and I learned more about storytelling than I could have ever imagined.

Drawing comics is hard work, but it’s also a lot of fun. And it makes you think about storytelling on two levels: the verbal story and the visual one. Ideally, they work together, but thinking in images really sharpens your verbal acuity. You have to scrutinize the nuanced meanings of words and really think about how to present them effectively, both on their own and with visuals.

I created this novel for writers who want to learn more about crafting and editing fiction in a fun, nontraditional way. I think the graphic medium makes learning easier and more fun – and writing should always be fun.

Ultimately, I wrote this book because I’m a writing craft junkie and a graphic novel junkie, so why not combine my two obsessions? There isn’t a book like it on the market, so I wrote my own. Now that I have a decent draft, I would like to shop it around for publication. I love the idea of learning about fiction in a visual way, and I hope more graphic writing guides will follow (so I can buy them all).
RACHEL E. FRANK | refrank16@gmail.com | 404. 247.8602

EDUCATION

Master of Arts | Professional Writing
Spring 2018
Kennesaw State University | Kennesaw, GA

Bachelor of Arts | Spanish
1999-2004
Manchester University | North Manchester, IN

EXPERIENCE

GEORGIA WRITERS ASSOCIATION
Kennesaw, GA
Graduate Assistant/Volunteer
2016-present
- Help run monthly GWA workshops (setting up, cleaning up, and registration table).
- Co-manage registration table at GAYA and Red Clay Conference.
- Carry out miscellaneous GWA-related tasks.

EXIT 271 WRITERS MAGAZINE (SPONSORED BY GWA)
Kennesaw, GA
Intern/Volunteer/Graduate Assistant
2015-2016
- Collaborate with magazine contributors as a content and developmental editor.
- Copyedit and proofread magazine content before publication.
- Brainstorm magazine content and design with a small editorial team.
- Write/research articles and conduct interviews.

DISCOVERY COMMUNICATIONS | DIGITAL MEDIA DIVISION
Atlanta, GA
Staff Editor
2011-2012
- Edited and uploaded 300+ pieces of content to Discovery platforms.
- Served as content/copyeditor for a team of 7+ freelance writers.
- Selected, captioned, and uploaded more than 1,000 images/illustrations.
- Generated ideas for clickable digital content with large editorial team.

Video Content Developer
2008-2010
- Edited and wrote scripts and metadata descriptions for podcasts and videos.
- Developed, researched, and co-hosted 154 episodes of a video podcast.
- Co-developed a second video podcast and wrote 11 episodes.
- Co-managed podcast social media outreach for 2 years.
- Published 16 episodes of HSW podcasts weekly using CMS tools.