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Writing Tips

Writing for comics is a bit different than writing Alt-Text. Your job is to recreate the comic experience: a visual storytelling medium. This means that your work may be more creative than the standard description you would write for Alt-text.

If you want to learn more about the art of writing comics you should check out *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices* by the legendary cartoonist, Will Eisner([link to PDF](#)), as well as *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, by Scott McCloud([link to PDF](#)). They will help you understand the **Visual Language of Sequential Art**, and it can help you in your own work. There are also endless resources online, and remember your co-writers and editors are here to help you. We are all learning together.

The following is a growing list of tips to help you write and edit. This list will be edited and amended as we learn more about the process.

This type of writing is done best with a team of at least two people. One writes a few pages, the other edits and writes a few more, and so on. This can help with basic grammar and structure, as well as with description fatigue. Don't worry too much about getting it right the first time, and build a good relationship with your writing partner and editor. Don't be afraid to ask for help! Fresh eyes can really help with this type of writing. It may take more than one draft to get it right, and it gets easier with time.

The following outline template can be useful for setting up your panel descriptions:

- Panel (Square Panel, Wide Panel, Vertical Panel, etc.)
- View/Angle/Point-of-View of panel (Note: you often just have to say the view, i.e. wide view, mid-view, close up, etc.)
- How are the characters visible in the frame? (from the waist up, in full figure, etc.)
- Description of scene
- Sound/Words
- Description of action
- Last details (i.e. does the image bleed behind the other panels, are there any last details you think add to the narration that you did not already note...)

General Tips

- Readers with visual impairments want to have an authentic “comic book experience”, that matches as closely as possible the experience of a sighted reader. Creating a Described Comic Book/Assisted Reader that meets this expectation is our goal.
- The describer's intention should always be to state what they see, not their interpretation of what they see. ([National Disability Authority](#)) The reader should have the freedom for their own interpretation given all the necessary details.
- If you have access to the script, that can be a good place to start. It can also be a good place to go if you are stuck on how to describe something. It is important to remember that the writer and artist worked very hard to create the narration of the Comic, and we want to respect that as much as possible in our own writing.

Reading a Comic Script, along with the matching Comic, is very helpful to get a sense of how to describe a panel. They are not perfect because they are notes for illustrators, and there are some

changes between script to Comic. Even with these differences they can be very helpful. Even if you don't have the Script for the Comic you are editing you can find one with a similar tone in the [Comic Book Script Archive](#) to give you a good starting point.

Sometimes the script can be very sparse, since they are intended more as a guideline for the artist's work. In these cases, the script can act more as a guiding post, or a place to go if you are really stuck on a descriptive word. E.g. A motorhome can also be called an Recreational Vehicle (RV), or Winnebago. In these cases the script can help you see what the writer choose and help keep consistent with their original creative intent.

- Don't editorialize, interpret, or analyze the material. You are trying to recreate what is seen in the panel, not your opinion of what is seen.
- BE OBJECTIVE. You do not want to put your opinions of what is happening into the description, just what is literally in the panel. The reader should have the freedom for their own interpretation given all the necessary details.
- DON'T CENSOR. This goes with being objective. If you are uncomfortable describing a scene, whether it is violent, sexual, or something else that you feel you cannot objectively describe, ask another PA to describe this scene for you.
- Be clear and concise. It is important not to be too wordy or over describe a panel, since this can lead to confusion in the reader.

It can help to read what you have written out loud to see if it makes sense. You can read aloud to yourself, or to another person. Also, try rereading your description without looking at the panel. Ask yourself if you can envision the panel sufficiently.

- Choose words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative to convey visual images. Think about getting as much content into as few words as possible, as describers convey visual information that is either inaccessible or only partially accessible to a segment of the population.
- Use third-person narrative style to show neutrality and noninterference.
- Use active verbs in the present tense. This is very important to keeping the flow of the narration moving.
- Two good resources to help out if needed:
 - [Grammar Girl: Active vs Passive Voice](#)
 - [Owl: Purdue University Active Voice](#)
- Keep tone of your writing the same as the tone of the comic.

Here is another way the script can help with word choices. The tone of the script generally matches the tone of the comic. It can also help to read the entire comic before you start your description, which is especially helpful if the script is sparse. This will help you get immersed in the world the writer and artist have created and help you get a sense of the tone and rhythm of the piece.

- Do not give too much information, which can create an information overload. A good rule to follow is: *Does this help with the narration of the story?*
 - Remember, you don't have to describe **all** the details, but describe what is necessary for the narration. It is a balancing act.
 - First think about the story; What is in the panel that is important to the story?
 - Then think about what you personally see. Remember a person with a visual impairment wants to 'see' this too.

There are comics out there that put visual clues within the panels that foreshadow later events. These are the types of details you would want to include in your writing. Again, this is where reading the comic before writing can be beneficial.

- Be clear on action, place, and time so the reader does not become disorientated. It is important

- to know the where, when, and what of the panel.
 - What exactly are the characters doing?
 - Where is the location of the panel. Is it outdoors, inside, on a mountain top, in an office? Also, where are the characters located, are there any objects close to them.
 - When is it? Daytime, night time? Has time passed between each panel?
 - For more information see [Scene/Object Description](#), below
- Only describe the details of a scene or character if it is a new scene or if something important to the story has changed within the scene or to the character's appearance.
 - i.e. The character is watching a house burn down to ash. The scene has changed and that change is important to the story, so describe it.
- Sometimes in comics you will notice a detail that has already been established is emphasized again for the narrative. If this is the case you can mention it again, but in less detail.
- Pay attention to the pace of the comic. This can help you with how much description you need, or don't need.
 - i.e. Sometimes you will find a series of panels where the pace of the narration is very quick, it is okay to be more sparse in your description of these panels. Other times you will find that the pace is slow, and therefore more description is helpful.

There is more than one way to figure this one. One obvious way is the story itself. As you read the story do you feel a sense of urgency at a certain part? Or a sense of stillness? Another clue is the size of the panel itself. For more information please see [Meta-Terminology: Panels](#)

- Check spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Sometimes it is acceptable to break traditional grammar rules for brevity and clarity. However, it is important to be consistent in this practice.
- This type of writing develops with practice. Remember:
 - The details you describe should serve the narrative, and
 - Keep your writing active
- **You got this.**

Scene/Object Description

- When describing panel start big and then go small.
 - Start with the Big Picture: where we are, the time of day (if it has changed from the previous panel), etc. Sometimes, this information can be provided in the [Page Description](#).
- Then, you can describe the Medium Picture (fake patent pending on this term): where people and objects are in relation to each other, who/what is in the panel, what do they look like (broadly), are they holding something, etc.
 - Finally, describe the small details: facial expressions, subtle gestures, etc.

Sometimes you will find that this approach does not fit with the narration of a particular panel(s) or page. That is okay. You may need to move around how you describe a scene, or even omit scene descriptions depending on the narration of the panel. An example could be a scene that the characters are returning to, an object that is used often, or a panel where the narration calls for the more smaller parts of the picture to be described before the Big Picture. Use your judgement, and the feedback from your partner. Sometimes the script can also be helpful in these cases depending on how detailed the script is.

- When in doubt refer to the comic script (if it is available) for help with language and descriptions.
- When describing something, think about what it is and what is its purpose. Include this in your

description. This ties into being specific about description, avoiding generalities, and giving key details.

- Don't write Futuristic Car. Describe what about the car makes it a Futuristic Car.
 - i.e. "The car hovered over the ground. Instead of wheels there are small powerful jets that face down to the ground. The exterior appears seamless and smooth like chrome with large dark windows." You want your reader to experience what is seen on the page through words.
- Space is useful in describing:
 - How far away is something. People with perceptual disabilities understand their surroundings through space between and around objects. Try to be precise but not clinical when describing distance (e.g. It would be better to say "She was a few steps behind him" rather than "She appeared to be 3.5 feet behind him".)
- Use metaphor and simile when necessary.
 - Describe shapes, sizes, and other essential attributes of images by comparison to objects or items familiar to the intended audience. Use basic, simple objects, so the reader is not distracted by the image of the comparison object.
 - e.g. "The ball is the size of an apple."
 - Be sure to use metaphors that will be readily identifiable by a blind reader.
- Describe Colour.
 - Colour may have emotional connotations even for blind readers, and many readers may be partially or previously sighted; therefore including colour enhances their ability to better imagine a scene. Colour descriptions should therefore be included for most images.
 - e.g. The blue sky, or the green lizard.
 - You don't have to describe all colour, but remember the reader wants to have an authentic experience.
 - If it is important to the story then include it.
 - e.g. The character is known to wear a red scarf, or the sky is blue, or there are black and green storm clouds in the sky, etc.
 - If there is no colour, describe details that can help fill in this gap.
 - an overcast sky, a cloudless sky, a starry night, a starless night.

When a comic is fully black and white, avoid describing everything as "light grey" or "dark grey". Instead, say whether things are "darker-coloured" or "lighter-coloured". This is because shades of grey represent colours, and it would be misleading to say that someone's sweater is "dark grey" when it may actually be brown or purple - things that black and white comics cannot show. It is usually OK to use "black" and "white" if that is what is depicted.

Character Description

The physique of a character is very important in comics to convey who they are: strong, weak, funny, a hero, a villain, etc.

- In order to be objective, we suggest using the following terminology to describe skin tone:
 - Light Skin Tone
 - Medium-Light Skin Tone
 - Medium Skin Tone
 - Medium-Dark Skin Tone
 - Dark Skin Tone
 - This is the same system that is used to label emojis with different skin tones. You can also use terms such as Black, White, Asian, Middle Eastern, etc. but only if it can be determined in the surrounding text.

- You only have describe a character once, and just the key physical descriptions.
- If something changes with the character then describe the change.
 - The character has a cut on their face, they cut their hair, they changed their clothes, etc.
- Use pronouns only when it is clear to whom or what the pronoun refers.
 - You can identify the subject as male or female, man or woman, only if it can be clearly identified. Try to describe the physical characteristics and avoid using the terms “masculine” or “feminine” since it is more interpretive than descriptive. There is a delicate balance to strike between inclusive language and robust description; do your best, and ask for opinions from others if you need to.
- Avoid describing age by prescribing a number or the decade because someone could appear young but is in their fifties. Instead, use terms such as:
 - baby
 - toddler
 - teen
 - adult
 - middle aged
 - young
 - old, etc.

When you first come across a major character, check them out in a few other panels before giving the description. Depending on the angle, the character might look a little bit different, and it is important to not have conflicting descriptions.

Action/Emotion Description

Action

- Be creative and precise with your word choice.
- Don't just write 'walk', try a word that vividly describes the action: strolls, skips, stumbles, marches, etc.

If you get stuck trying to think of the most accurate and informative (but not leading) description, consider writing something simple and then moving on. Either you or your editor can look at it again later, when inspiration may strike. If you do leave something like this for the editor to look at, be sure to point it out.

- Remember to be consistent and keep with the tone of the comic.
 - e.g. “The zombie lurches forward.” vs “The zombie strolls forward.”
- For information on how to describe the directionality of a Character's movement please see [Scene Composition: Left and Right](#).

Emotion

- When it comes to describing emotion be concise and objective. Do not put your interpretation of what you think they are feeling.
- Ask yourself what is it you see that prompts you to think that she looks suspicious or furious.

If you are finding this difficult ask your editor to weigh in on what they think. There can be times when it seems unclear, but remember the narration of the page and panel will give you a clue to what the emotion is if you are stuck. Facial expressions in comics are often very clear as to avoid confusion. If you are interested in learning more you should read *Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narrative*, by Will Eisner([link to PDF](#)).

- When describing an emotion it can help to include a description of the facial features.
 - i.e. “Her lips were pulled tightly together in anger.” or “she raises her eyebrows in surprise.” But this is not always necessary.
- It can be enough to just state the emotion, especially when the look has been described over and over again.
 - i.e. “He had a look of shock on his face.” In *The Walking Dead*, the characters often have a look of shock on their face, and it is generally the same: wide eyes, raised eyebrows, mouth open wide. It can become quite repetitive to hear this description over and over, so simply describing the look as "shock", after the appearance of "shock" has been established, is a good approach.

It is okay to describe someone as angry, or afraid, etc. as long as it is clear that that is the correct emotion. Adding descriptions of how their face looks with the emotion can add an extra layer to the narration, but it is not always necessary. Always ask if the description of the facial features adds to the narration. If it does not, then you can just state the emotion and move on.

- Again, refer to the script if you are unsure, or ask your editor to weigh in.
- Use descriptive words that can convey details and emotions directly, i.e.:



He has a calm expression with soft round eyes. His mouth is a relaxed straight line as he tells Glenn...

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