

Simon’s Guide to Understanding Graphic Novels

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Just as novelists select words to **tell** stories, authors of graphic novels use illustrations to **show** stories. Written sound effects, dialogue, changes in **typeface** design, and texture in the piece provide clues to meaning.

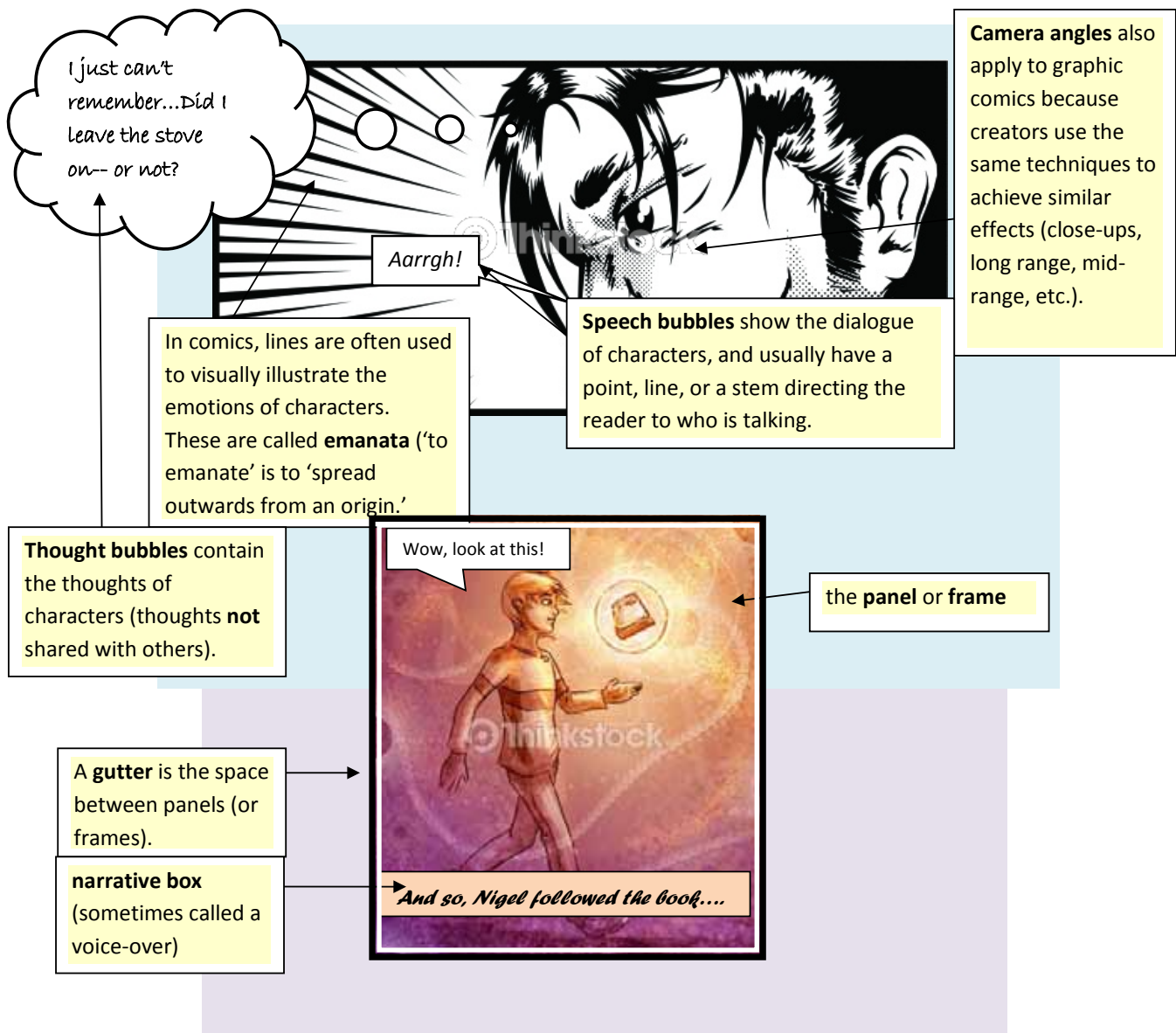
Typeface is the formal name for “fonts”. Typeface or typography refers to the appearance or design of lettering—and a lot of thought goes into this! If you are interested in seeing, using, or even designing your own typeface, check out www.dafont.com.



Written Sound Effects	Dialogue
Typeface Changes	Texture or Sensory Detail
<p>Jo: I'm sorry but you weren't successful.</p> <p>Leo: WHAT! I TRIED MY HARDEST! I DON'T KNOW WHAT I COULD HAVE DONE BETTER!</p> <p>THIS SUCKS!</p> <p>...oh, wait; I didn't really want to work in that career. I hated that job! Yehoo!</p> <p>Now I can be something I like - a mattress-tester!</p>	

Reading and Studying Graphic Novels

The use of elements of graphic design is discussed on the following pages.



Time and Action in Graphic Novels

Comics and Graphic novels share key characteristics unique to visual storytelling, like the way that time, events, and action occur from frame to frame, or in between gutters.



Frames

- Frames are distinct segments of the page that contain both text and visual information.
- Frames illustrate how the story progresses in the order they're read, in how they show events, characters, and action, or in how time has changed between each frame.
- Graphic novel or comic creators maintain the reader's focus in each frame by using **graphic weight**. Artists create graphic weight by alternating *light or dark shades*, using *dark-toned images*, *high contrast images*, *patterns*, *repeated symbols or shapes*, or *vibrant colours contrasting* with those on the rest of the page or frame.

Graphic Weight describes the way some images draw the eye more than others to create a definite focus because of various colours and shading.

Gutters

- The line or gap between frames, or the “magic space” where the reader's imagination and interpretive skills are put to work.
- The gutter creates an interruption or a jump from one scene to another, much the same way a movie jumps from shot type to shot type. Readers viewing visual stories have to put together the unseen visual information about changes occurring frame to frame to follow the story. Gutters highlight selective information that is valuable to the reader's understanding of the story.
- The comic creator's artistic considerations in frames on each page determine whether the reader has enough information to understand details of the story.



How is the **graphic weight** formed in this set of three frames? How does the reader know what the focus is?

What information is the gutter highlighting here? *The passage of time is emphasized in a couple of ways; can you see how?*

Sample Analysis of Illustrations

Comic Terminology:

Full-bleed: image runs off page on all sides

Speech bubble: text written beside a character of what he or she speaks

Borderless panel: no white space around frame

Splash page: "splash," is a full-page drawing in a comic book



A life-sized Lou represents the present, while the tiny boy on top symbolizes a past memory that dominates Lou's reality. Impossibly, Lou's tears are noticeable under water. Tears are connected to the ice, implying the ice and hockey caused Lou's drowning pain.

Essex County © Jeff Lemire (www.topshelfcomix.com). Excerpt used with permission.

Lou's back is to the viewer, implying that we see this incident through his perspective. The lady is taller and larger than Lou, suggesting she's more powerful.

Background colours show the difference between fantasy and reality. Even in light, Lou cannot escape his shadows (regrets?), which drape across his body. The caregiver is the voice of reality and encouragement.



The first landscape shot establishes the setting inside a modest home. Is Lou hiding in the dark? His caregiver certainly is not hiding!

Irregular spelling and mixed upper and lower case letters (typeface) suggest that Lou does not speak normally.

Panel: images laid out within borders

Gutter: space between frames and panels

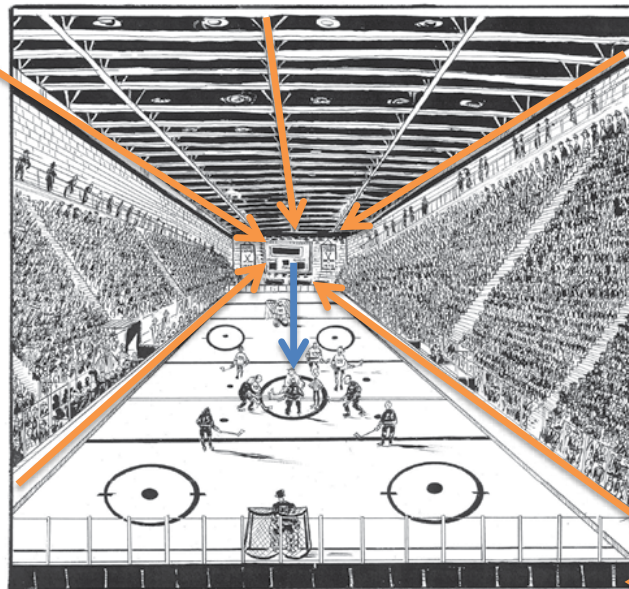
Frame: border or edge of a panel

In the final frame on this page, the caregiver has established her control over Lou.

Essex County © Jeff Lemire (www.topshelfcomix.com). Excerpt used with permission.

In the top frame, **diagonal lines** draw the eye from the edges to the centre back, emphasizing the huge size of the stadium. Then the eye focuses on the few players in and around the centre circle for a faceoff.

Texture is prominent in the gravelly look of seated fans, the horizontally spaced overhead beams, and the smooth ice surface.



Facing players, one in white, the other in black, with heads on **equal elevation**, suggest they are equal opponents. The referee's stripes (black & white) suggest neutrality and his elevation indicates his power over the players.

Note the natural **dividing line** between frames.



The uniform, colour, stick and puck, tell us which player won the faceoff.

Stick colour reinforces equality in the faceoff.

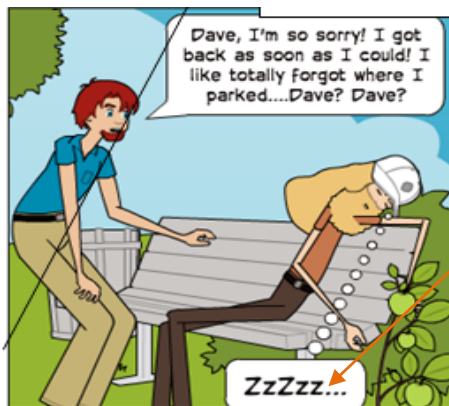
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Narrative box: (voice over) information about the plot, not directly stated by a character

These frames **contrast** life in the **city** (busy, cluttered, noisy, oppressive – tall buildings make people feel small, perhaps insignificant; dark section on right seems to be squeezing out space) with life in the **country** (open, expansive, bright, quiet) The bottom frame is larger, perhaps suggesting its preferred for the main character.

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Emanate: symbols in a thought bubble or around a character's head representing a message.

- Zzzzz = sleeping
- Lightbulb above head = idea
- EEEEEEEE = scream



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Notice how the graphic novelist shows **passage of time**: same characters wear different clothes, and grow increasing thinner, more slouched, wrinkled, and older in frames 1, 2, and 3. The sofa gets more worn from frame to frame. Characters' lifestyles haven't changed over time; they still gather around TV watching the hockey game. Viewers see Jimmy Lebeuf as the central figure in the middle of each frame. First, he's a young fan, then a teen watching hockey, then he's on the other side of the TV screen, finally a professional hockey player.

Character

A novel, graphic novel, or short story always has at least one character. Consider the following qualities when analyzing characters:

- A good writer creates believable characters who seem real and alive to the reader.
- Characters, like real people, have many character traits or qualities that make them distinctive, such as a combination of positive *and* negative qualities.
- Characters “experience” real life feelings, such as hope, despair, joy, sorrow, confusion and understanding.
- A well-written character has experiences that make the reader identify with, and even care, about what happens to the character.



Authors tell readers about qualities or traits of characters *through* a variety of ways: **what the character says, what the character does, what the character thinks, what other characters say about that character, and what the narrator says about the character.** This applies to both graphic and text-based novels.

Force here means anything that opposes the protagonist or causes them grief. That could be nature, themselves, or other people/things.



Protagonist: The main character who has a goal to accomplish. Protagonists are often “heroes” of a story, or they get the most attention—their character development, actions, and growth are the focus of the story.



Antagonist: The character or force that opposes the protagonist *or* causes trouble or conflict for the protagonist.

Other Common Character Types

Stock Characters: Readers easily “recognize” these characters because they are based on ideas, common stereotypes, or generalizations made of people or the roles people fulfill (these are very commonly used in commercials).



Flat or Static Characters: These characters are deliberately written to be uncomplicated, and usually serve a single purpose or role, such as adding depth to the protagonist (through the interactions they share, or shared events or incidents), or to enhance other story details. These characters seldom change in the duration of a story and have uncomplicated traits.

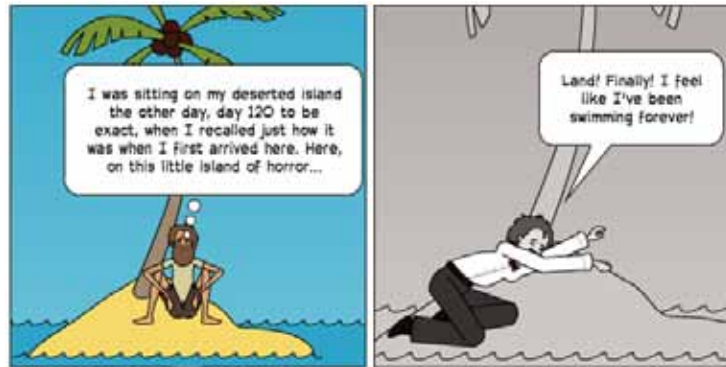


Round/Dynamic Characters are characters who are detailed and unique. Sometimes, they wear long underwear as part of their costume. Often these characters are **protagonists**, and will experience change or personal growth of some kind in the duration of a story,



Other Story Elements

Flashbacks: These occur when a text brings the reader or viewer “back” in time to revisit a certain time period, experience, or incident important to build interest in the story.



- In **graphic novels**, flashbacks can take many visual forms; usually a whole frame is used to help the viewer make the transition from the present to the “past”.
- Flashback frames can look surreal (abstract), or very simple, sometimes using a different shaped frame (wobbly instead of straight edge) or a different coloured gutter. Sometimes the colour of frame contents will be black and white, or done with softer lines or softer shades of color.
- In **text-based novels**, flashbacks are sometimes written in *Italics*, or the author will have writing leading up to the “jump” (sometimes an event or reflection of the protagonist will lead to a flashback that “reminds” him or her of the past).



Atmosphere & Mood: The **atmosphere** is the description of the character’s *environment*. Atmosphere can be physical or psychological and can change at any time in any text. Characters can *affect* or be *affected* by atmosphere (e.g.: A character may get scared by a dark forest and become fearful, or a character can cause the atmosphere that affects him, her, and others). **Mood** is the emotion the character feels because of the atmosphere or surroundings.

A character’s environment, which can change many times throughout a text, often offers more detail or complexity to the story.

- In **graphic novels**, colours, varying line thickness, shape, drawing style, character expressions, or emotions are used to indicate mood and atmosphere.
- In **novels** and **short stories**, authors use descriptive words, figurative language, or imagery to establish mood and atmosphere.
- In **film**, music often helps to create the mood (suspenseful, romantic, scary, or other states). **Atmosphere** is often shown in film *visually* or with *sound* as well.

Online Resources for Developing Original Comics

You may find the following sites useful for developing original comics or graphic novels:

- Pixton (www.pixton.com)
- Super Action Comic Maker
(<http://www.artisancam.org.uk/flashapps/superactioncomicmaker/>)
- Bit Strips comic creator (www.bitstrips.com)
- Strip Comic Generator (<http://stripgenerator.com/>)
- Comic Master (<http://www.comicmaster.org.uk/>)
- Make Beliefs Comix (<http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/>)
- Professor Garfield's Comics Lab (http://professorgarfield.org/pgf_comics_lab.html)
- Witty Comics (<http://www.wittycomics.com/>) (hilarious)
- ToonDoo (www.toondoo.com)