



The word to panel limits listed above hold true for the majority of five and six panel layouts. The overall 150-180 words per page limit is a reliable benchmark, giving enough words to drive the narrative while allowing the art on the page to breathe.

Let's take a look at a couple of panels from "Harsh Times," a dystopian future, action-adventure sci-fi story I wrote for a video game earlier this year.

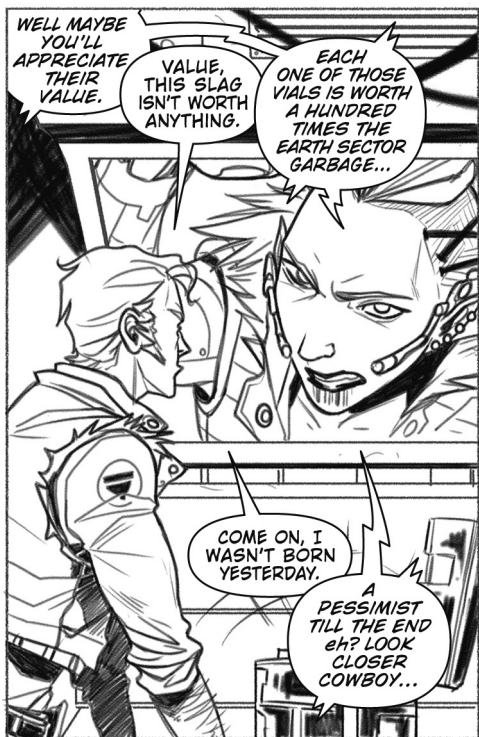
#4) KEEP BACK AND FORTH DIALOGUE WITHIN A SINGLE FRAME, MINIMAL.

Bubbles obscure comic real estate and the rent is too damn high! Somebody (if not yourself) is paying for that art, so as a writer don't go out of your way to cover it up.

Usually dialogue within a single frame is reflective of the basic three act story structure with a beginning, middle and end or *initial comment, reaction, follow up comment/conclusion*.

If you find your characters going back and forth like a professional ping pong match, it's time for another panel.

Back and Forth Dialogue: **ABOVE**-typical comment, reaction, conclusion exchange. **BELOW LEFT**-even keeping under our forty word/panel limit, the additional back and forth dialogue begins to smother the art. **RIGHT**-if you blow past forty words in multiple bubbles, even with a talented letterer like Taylor Esposito your panel is sinking fast. Art-Eleonora Carlini.



LEFT-Words per panel: Top to bottom, 26 words, 41 words, 52 words, 77 words. Even with a roomy panel and the focal point pushed right, the higher word counts quickly detract from the art.



Small set up Large: The close-up of fear in the Tabitha's eye gives way to the shocking visual of Constable Fitzpatrick wielding the knife. Notice the use of comictography (discussed later) or choice of framing and angle used to capture the scene. Also notice the movement lines used to bring dynamic energy to the panel (another essential panel element discussed shortly). Art-Drew Moss, *Convict Comic's Ned Kelly: Ironclad Alien Killer*.

Be specific in your word choices.

Describe the action taking place instead of relying on verbs as a crutch. And in general, stay away from ambiguous terms and flat verbs.

Instead of, “the MC calls the doctor...” use,

“The MC angrily punches the touchscreen keys. His eyes narrow, the tips of his fingers turn white as he grips the phone, anticipating the doctor’s answer.”

Where you use verbs, punch them up. Use colorful more direct choices that give a more distinct image.

The MC laughed... Did she chuckle, giggle, cackle, guffaw?

The MC called out... Did he shout, shriek, or howl?

Description gives the context, but word choice are the building blocks which give instant meaning and understanding.

Don’t be afraid to exploit imagery for deeper meaning and association to emotion and sensation. *Symbolism is a strong tool in comics.*

Skulls for example, can represent danger, death and poison. Cool color palettes can emphasize cool environments or abrasive moods. Rain is often symbolic of rebirth and new beginnings.

This list of meaningful associations with imagery is endless, make use of it.

Focus on revealing story through visual cues. Every detail you include in a panel description is an opportunity to reveal story and carry the narrative. *Take advantage of this.*

If your character is broke, don’t come out and say it in dialogue, show the character in his beat up forty year old car, held together with duct tape and construction adhesive. Show a pile of past due bills gathered at his front door...

While critical to the medium, I’m not going to spend extensive time on writing visually. There’s an abundance of books and websites analyzing visual storytelling. And as a working writer, you’re probably more than familiar with the concept.

If you’re not, after you finish this guide, spend a day re-watching some of your favorite movies and take notes. No, seriously do this. *Really analyze* each scene for all the elements we’re discussing and you’ll be surprised how much you learn and how quickly your visual writing technique and ability improves.

A “thin” panel description illustrated in frames 2-5 on the following page.

Panel 1

EXT. DESERT — DAY

Jack has succumbed to the harsh nature of the desert. He falls to the ground, crying out in despair.

JACK Not like this.

INT. THE TRITON

SIXX

So what did Corax have to say?

Harsh gives a look of disappointment.

HARSH

He said the odds were against me.

SIXX

What else is new?

Excerpt taken from
in-game script.

When it comes to dialogue, always keep it working for the narrative, while sounding true to the character speaking it.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Although basic to fiction writing, there are a few core writing principles worth repeating for the sake of being thorough. They are frequently used and/or particularly relevant in the comic medium.

ENTER LATE, LEAVE EARLY.

Following this guideline leads to trimmer, more efficient scenes. It tends to put the focus on the most relevant aspects of the scene. *Don't waste space focusing on setup that's only relative to the scene itself and not the overall narrative.*

For example: You're working on a story with a pair of detective cops. The beats of the scene are; "MCs get killer's whereabouts while driving" and "MCs race off to confront killer."

You decide to show some buddy-buddy action and open the scene with the detectives walking up to their undercover car with coffees in hand chatting about last night's ball game. The duo pulls out and drives down Main Street now talking about a drunk they arrested last week. As they sit at a red light, a call comes in over the radio, revealing the murderer they've been tracking has just shot someone downtown. The driving detective pulls a u-turn and hauls ass towards the scene.

The initial setup of the scene, walking to the car should most likely be cut. Picking up just before the detectives get the call on the radio, establishes the setting while bringing us closer to the action and the heart of the beats we're trying to express. The buddy-buddy connection can be revealed through the dialogue present in the scene and through other scenes in the story.

Don't waste space focusing on setup that's only relative to the scene itself.