

Making a comic

Start with something you want to communicate. It might be an idea, or an image, or a whole story, or a cool scene, or a meaningful relationship, or something scary, or funny, or rude. When you have something you want to communicate, you need to decide how much you need to add to it for other people to think it's as interesting as you want them to. It might be a little. It might be a lot! What do you think the "whole story" should be?

When you know, you need to decide how that whole story is going to get made. Are you going to do it on your own? Some people do! They're called cartoonists. They might be newspaper cartoonists, or political cartoonists—they make very short stories, or very short pieces of story each time, that add up gradually. They might be cartoonists who make webtoons, or graphic novels, or monthly comic books.

What if you don't want to do it on your own? That might be because you feel it would take longer than you can bear, or because you don't like doing everything involved in making a comic. That's great! You can team up with someone who loves doing those parts! But what are the parts?

There are two things that might come first. One is an outline or a script: written words that describe what will happen in the story, on each page, and the kinds of things people will say. This outline has been done for your project—less work! Lucky you! But if you're going to make comics of each page, you'll need to pick words for those comics—to write dialogue and captions that suit the pages.

The other thing that comes very early, is design. Design is the process of deciding how objects within your story are going to look. The people, the accessories, the buildings, the landscapes. This can be easy or hard, but there are lots of ways to make it faster. It might seem so hard to imagine what a futuristic city skyline would look like. But a lot of artists who make these decisions have a trick: they line up a bunch of household items, and then use the shapes to inspire them! Maybe in the future all buildings will be shaped like nail varnish bottles, mugs and houseplants! Just add windows.

Design also comes into thinking about what things "outside" of your story look like: the page that tells the story. If you think of a comic as a window into another world, or into a story, then each panel is a pane of glass, and each space or line between those panels, which we call gutters, are the grilles of that window, then thinking about what the whole window looks like can be important too. Some houses have very regular windows, which don't distract from the view at all, and some houses have fantastically shaped ones

which are good to look *at*, as well as through, and can make a view seem more dramatic. Both are useful!

In comics, designing the window of your page is called “doing layouts.” Layouts also often include making the basic shapes that will appear in the panels, to make sure that the shapes of the panels aren’t distracting from the view through them. Some comic books are made with one person, who loves this type of design, doing layouts, and then other people filling in the rest.

So what comes next? The penciller!

A penciller’s job might seem pretty obvious: they draw with a pencil! Or at least, that used to be the norm—now it might be a digital pencil or a real one, or a digital pen in a lighter colour. Their job is to do the drawing inside of the panels: to begin to show us what’s happening inside of this story. They need to think about acting, and anatomy, and how to arrange the characters and objects so that they’re easiest to understand: a reader will need to know what’s happening, so the penciller needs to make sure that it looks like that thing is happening!. They also need to leave space for the words that will be in each panel—it’s very important not to forget that. Otherwise parts of their drawing will have to be covered up in the end!

When the penciller is done, the inker comes on board. They use ink, real or digital, to define the drawing’s most important lines, making sure that everything in the panel is clearly represented, that they’re not slapdash or careless, and making sure that they choose stylish and attractive applications of ink. Their job isn’t to change what the penciller has done, but to give strength to their drawing, and make it easier to colour. Not every comic uses an inker, but it is the norm.

A colourist comes next: they use colour to add drama, or beauty, or additional clarity or drama to the panels. If it’s sunset, they make sure it looks like sunset! If something very dramatic is happening, they might choose colours that have the right sort of feeling for that drama! They might also choose to add texture, and shadows.

Finally, the letterer takes the words in the script, and thinks about where to add them to the panels. They might be pieces of dialogue, or narrative captions that let the story speak directly to the reader, or sound effects. The letterer doesn’t only decide where they’ll look best on the page, and be easiest to read and understand on the page, but also what these words and speech bubbles and caption boxes will look like. They can be as dramatic as colouring, inking or pencilling, and they’re just as important. If you enjoy typography, this will be for you!

And of course, at every stage, there's an editor—who looks at what the maker is doing, and talks about it with them if anything is unclear or hard to read, or if there's an opportunity to do something a little differently. The editor makes sure that everyone is serving the story, and that everyone is working together well.

Start thinking about what sort of comics making sounds most appealing to you. Do you feel like a cartoonist? Do you feel like an inker? You don't have to know right away. You can try anything out! Lots of people do two or more of these roles, even when they aren't cartoonists. People who make comics LIKE making comics—we do it for our jobs, but we chose it because, as a job, it's fun. Hopefully while we work on this book, you'll find out which part of the process feels really satisfying!